

Sentence

Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles.

Isaiah 40:31

Collect

Saving God, Whose Son, Jesus Christ, healed the sick and brought them wholeness of body and mind; inspire us, His disciples, so that we may constantly proclaim His gospel by our words and by the dedication and integrity of our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 40: 21- 31

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is He Who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God"? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Psalm

147: 1 – 11

O praise the Lord, for it is a good thing to sing praises to our God: and to praise Him is joyful and right
The Lord is rebuilding Jerusalem: He is gathering together the scattered outcasts of Israel
He heals the broken in spirit: and binds up their wounds
He counts the number of the stars: and calls them all by name
Great is our Lord and great is His power: there is no measuring His understanding
The Lord restores the humble: but He brings down the wicked to the dust
O sing to the Lord a song of thanksgiving: sing praises to our God upon the harp
He covers the heaven with a cloud and prepares rain for the earth: and makes the grass to sprout upon the mountains
He gives the cattle their food: and feeds the young ravens that call to Him
He takes no pleasure in the strength of a horse: nor does He delight in anyone's legs
But the Lord's delight is in them that fear Him: who wait in hope for His mercy.

Epistle

1 Corinthians 9: 16 – 23

If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.

Though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

How I long to take people on a study tour of (Second) Isaiah to enter into the enormous and broad vision that this prophet has of JHWH. When I first discovered this book, it took me on so steep a learning curve that it has stayed with me ever since – and that is something like 55 years.

Stop and realize, first and foremost, that this prophet was writing from harsh and total exile in Babylon. Hundreds of miles away from home; nation, city and Temple destroyed – and to all intents and purposes God was dead, Kaput. Zilch. Zero. Ask indigenous people how it feels when all the old and reliable certainties are gone. That is how the exiles felt, an attitude underlined by (then) popular 'theology,' that taught that if a god's temple has been destroyed, then it is obvious that that particular god was powerless – therefore non-existent.

So how in the name of all that is wonderful did Isaiah go so strikingly against then current trends. Was he off with the fairies, or did he really have something to offer?

One can make an assumption that Isaiah's contribution to the rationale behind the Exile experience first of all required a far wider, broader perception of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It would appear that the prophet gained an understanding of where JHWH was taking His people by looking back to see from where God had so far brought Israel. It was a long-term vision with which Isaiah was able to point to a rather more sure and settled future, and in fact to understand the Faith far more clearly and precisely. It is part of the genius of (Second) Isaiah that he was able to point his people to a far more certain future because he could also point them to a far more significant vision of God.

All too readily, people of all ages and stages present themselves with an image of God that they can manage; a sort of comfort blanket but it will last only as long as the issues they face can be explained by that 'blanket.' Anything beyond that leads to loss of faith. That assumption is that they lose faith in God; the reality is that they have lost faith in their blanket. *And that has to be a good thing, do you see?*

The prophet's answer was to dilate Israel's picture of JHWH, not only in terms of His capacity to cope, but in illustrating Who God is by what surrounds them. If the cosmos is huge, the God is huger. In fact if you were to imagine looking at humans from God's perspective, so to speak, then you begin to see humans in proper size. *Grasshoppers!*

And it is not only from a cosmos perspective: Isaiah takes people on a history lesson, pointing out how short and shallow are tyrants' turns as boss of the chook house. One of the failings we humans have is to look only from where we sit. From what affects us. A moment's look at the wider picture offers a far more significant approach to all manner of things. In other words, Isaiah takes quite a swipe at poor, snivelling Israel and suggests a burst of maturity. It really is a kick in the pants for Israel, well-deserved and well-aimed. Self pity is a very destructive element in human thought; get real is what the prophet points to.

Psalm

This psalm is quite obviously post-exilic, written quite some time after the words of the Old Testament lesson, and it looks as if the psalmist is standing on the shoulders of the prophet, so to speak, and offering the same 'get on with it' message. I long remember almost exploding, as a little choir boy, on singing this psalm way back in the '40s and '50s, and echoing those words about the Lord not taking delight in any man's legs. It is a lovely touch of humour.

Epistle

The Apostle must have been a delightful mixture of human and saint. He would have been most difficult to live with, as we have seen earlier. But he also had a mind as sharp as steel. Like many prophets before him, he was painfully aware of the drive within to preach the Gospel; and he was just as painfully aware of the fact that what he preached and taught needed to be relevant, needed to be clearly tangible to his listeners and readers, and needed to fit them, individually if necessary, for all we humans are so wonderfully different. 'All things to all men' – the AV reading of this passage – is a process that all Christians need to embrace, for any short-cut that tries to 'technique' people into faith is as useless as it is foolish. Meet people where they are; not where you would like them to be.

GOSPEL

Who would or could taken on the role of being Jesus? Such a demanding situation for anyone to be in, and yet He took it all in His stride; but He also needed some space and time for Himself. It is a fascinating picture of Peter and his mother-in-law, a picture avoided by part of the Christian Church which requires celibacy from its clergy! Actually that pressure came, not from the Christian Faith, but from a rather sad diversion of around that time, the Gnostics.

But as from the outset, Jesus was concerned by people whose life-experiences had reduced their humanity, reduced their capacity to reach the personhood they were designed to express. And that is quite a significant part of what the Gospel points us to constantly. And never forget it. Salvation is not just 'getting to heaven.' Salvation (Greek *soteria*) has to do with completeness of person, room to move, freedom from imposed power-structures. Health!

NOTES FOR A SERMON

If ever you feel concern that a preacher is asking you to stretch beyond where you are now, please do see that this should be a constant experience for Christians. While the Almighty does not change, it is **imperative** that each Christian's perception needs to be on a learning curve, right up to the end of one's life.

I well remember the experience when, as a theological student I was confronted with the stunning vision of God vouchsafed to Isaiah. What struck me most of all was not so much the enormous picture of the Creator, but that God was using the vicissitudes of history to get a significant if severe message across to His people. God at work in history was a complete new possibility to me, who thought he had known a fair bit about Scripture. And the point is that this aspect of God-at-work did not end with Isaiah or even with John's Revelation. Once I can see where and how God works in Isaiah's time, I can begin to see how He works in my own period. What is most stunning to me is that, in spite of Israel's constant rebellion and failure, God remained true to His covenant, and 'hung in there.' Not a bad lesson for moderns to catch sight of, either.

The simple exercise of working your way through Isaiah 40 onwards, to Chapter 66 if you dare, is well worth the effort. It helps to be aware of the severe hardship for Israel at that time, slaves under house arrest in a strange and alien land. There was no chance of raising an army to break and return home, and there was no chance of building a Temple in Babylon nor of carrying on the old forms of worship. It was not just a matter of losing their Book of Common Prayer – it was a matter of giving up entirely, or of finding new and relevant methods of worship and of retaining culture and faith. Powerless, futureless, hopeless.

But not from where Isaiah sat! We have long been used to the lack of statesmen in our country; fortunately Israel had three people of Isaiah status – there was also Jeremiah and Ezekiel. And nothing but encouraging words and actions sprang from those gems, and most of it had to do with getting a clearer picture of Yahweh. Not just their tribal god; not just one of the great gods of the time. But the only one there is, and there in the pooh with them.

It would be worthwhile taking long hard looks at Isaiah's word pictures of the same God you worship; being compared to the gods and goddesses of the Babylonians, in huge mockery actually. As Babylon itself was threatened by an upstart king from the north east, Cyrus by name, Isaiah mocked the living daylights out of those idols. Here was Yahweh carrying Israel, and all the Babylonians could do was to load their idols onto donkeys to cart them off to some sort of safety. 'Bow down to wood and stone? What sort of idiocy is that?

History proved the prophet correct; not because of some sort of star-gazing, but because Isaiah caught sight of what God was doing and how and why! Here was no cottonwool protection for Israel, but a going through the fires of purification, so that the precious metal of the nation would be produced. No pain, no gain! It is true in Football; it is true in real life.

Sunday 12th February, 2012

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Sentence

A great prophet has arisen among us! God has visited His people

Luke 7: 16

Collect

Ever-living God, Your Son Jesus Christ healed the lepers and brought good news to the despised and outcast, grant us Your gifts of compassion and self-control, that in serving others in their need, we may strive for the imperishable wreath that You bestow on all who truly love You; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

2 Kings 5: 1 – 14

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy."

When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean."

But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Psalm

30

I will exalt You O Lord, for You have drawn me up from the depths: and have not suffered my foes to triumph over me

O Lord my God I cried to You: and You have made me whole

You have brought me back, O Lord, from the land of silence: You saved my life from among those that go down to the Pit

Sing praises to the Lord, all you His faithful ones: and give thanks to His holy name

For if in His anger is havoc, in His good favour is life: heaviness may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning

In my prosperity I said, 'I shall never be moved: Your goodness O Lord, has set me on so firm a hill.'

Then You hid Your face from me: and I was greatly dismayed

I cried to You O God: and made my petition humbly to my Lord

'What profit is there in my blood if I go down to the Pit: can the dust give You thanks, or declare Your faithfulness?

Hear, O Lord, and be merciful: O Lord be my helper

You have turned my lamentation into dancing: You have put off my sackcloth and girded me with joy

That my heart may sing Your praise and never be silent: O Lord my God, I will give You thanks for ever.

Epistle

1 Corinthians 9: 24 – 27

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

GOSPEL

Mark 1: 40 – 45

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

The story of Naaman should be well-known, albeit only to those who had a Sunday School in their youth. It is a odd cameo, for Aramaeans were never the flavour of the month for Israel. In Israel's terms, Naaman was not only enemy but outcast because of leprosy. Mind you, it is to be imagined that he had to keep his infection to himself, for leprosy was feared by most cultures back then --- and for centuries to come.

Of greater interest is the intervention of the little Jewish slave girl, a nonentity to Naaman and his family, who offered an answer to the illness. Pride and ego looked likely to keep the General from relief, until one of his underlings dares to suggest a little humility.

One needs to read on in 2 Kings 5, for while the prophet was not interested in any recompense for the healing, someone else was – and brought a bitter taste to everyone's mouth. This is a fascinating picture into the way in which something good can be destroyed by veniality of people. So easily is some good thing rendered evil by sheer and utter selfishness.

Psalm

Psalms are often a great source of advice in how to respond to life's disasters; and here is just one of those. It appears that the author found enormous difficulties in front of him, and through prayer sought significant answers. I find it interesting that the author almost debated with God, wondering how God could be glorified if he was consigned to the Pit! Who would be around to point to God then? Whatever, the situation was improved for the person, and his rejoicing was a result. *It is not always so, one must remark – but there will be answers to those who look for them, even these days.*

Epistle

Quite clearly, the Apostle underlined the need for discipline ... in being a disciple! (Same root for each word, obviously.) In our own day and age, discipline tends to be a dirty word, but one is left having to point to the need for it. Lack of discipline, even among Christian disciples, tends to be a mark of the present.

GOSPEL

Both first and last lessons today refer to lepers – but in a way the medicine of today has demolished so much of the fear of this disease that we tend to have lost quite something of the impact of the tales.

Isn't it a little strange that this leper raised the question of Jesus' willingness to heal? I wonder why that was, **except** that any contact by any healthy person with any leper would have resulted in strict isolation of the person in contact. Whilst there were reasons for that, it is very touching to notice how Jesus stepped over such boundaries for the sake of the infected person. Leprosy was a long-term ailment at that time, which resulted in long-term isolation. No one to talk to; no one to embrace; it is easy to feel your way into the sterility of the isolation, is it not. What a stark and sterile life those people lived; until Jesus came along.

One can only feel for the man who raced off to tell the world. Jesus' problem was, simply put, that He was not there to be ogled at, or lionised – He was there to point to life as it was meant to be. Humans have a stupid capacity to embrace the stunning, and miss the reality.

Anyone involved in the Faith will know the extent to which that is true.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I wonder if it is as much a shock to you as it is to me to find that many people who profess and call themselves Christian have little or no regard for the challenges that such a profession calls them to. How often I have found a clear and deliberate determination to be remarkably self-centred or just as determined to avoid the reality of the Faith. Small wonder that people turn from the Church when such ill-considered choices become clear, or such closed-mind pigheadedness is on display.

It was naive of me, I confess, but when newly ordained, I was sure that people in congregations would respond with joy and commitment as soon as they understood the dimensions and directions of the Faith. *Silly me!* Most of the time, the only response from people was that they buried their heads in the sand so to speak.

One should not have been at all surprised at this! First of all, a close look at the history of Israel and its clear and wilful determination to head in its own direction runs right through the story from beginning to end. It drove the prophets up the wall, and must have done much of the same to Israel's Lord. In more recent times, I remain convinced that part of our more recent problem is that the Faith is presented, far *far* too often as one's God-given escape from 'future punishment' – and if you stop to think about it, that is the most impoverished reason for 'believing' anyhow. Very poor theology gushes from far too many pulpits these days; and what scares me even more, is the way in which that populist rubbish seems to be overtaking even some of the more 'sensible' denominations.

Miracle-focus does not help much either. And that can so often be the response from readings such as today. Healing of lepers! And why do not **we** have the gift of waving magic wands over people? The answer is obvious immediately. The focus of people would be on 'me' instead of on Christ. *And how often does that occur these days?*

Forget miracle, I often say to people: focus on what is being pointed out to you. And what is that?

The focus is on lepers in that day and age. Lepers were outcast, unclean, untouchable, out-of-sight and out-of-mind. **That** is the focus. There are great mobs of people in every day and age who live – or is that survive? – on the edges of society – or fall through the net so that they are invisible. *And those are the sorts of people whom Jesus cared for in so much of His ministry. And calls us to head in the same path.*

Now do you see why so many 'Christians' rather hide behind a sort of religiosity and conservatism instead of sticking their necks out for other less fortunate people?

We have a Lord Who went out of His way for those on the edges. Pretty people were never His focus because they tend to see no further than their noses. Of course, it is a rather uncomfortable path to travel, and disconcerting, and pretty people tend to be concerned about appearances. Not so with Jesus.

What an uncomfortable start for a sermon, but I bet you can explore further than this from such readings. How about having a go at it!

Sunday 19th February, 2012

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

N.B: These readings are for the alternative for this Sunday – The Transfiguration – but the Readings used in the Diocese of Willochra are for the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany.

Father Ron Keynes is away interstate and so it wasn't possible to get the sermon outline for Seventh Sunday after Epiphany in time for the website.

Sentence

It is the God Who said 'Let light shine out of darkness,' Who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. **2 Cor. 4:6**

Collect

Almighty God, You have given Your only Son to be for us both a sacrifice for sin and also an example of godly life; give us grace that we may always thankfully receive the benefits of His sacrifice and also daily endeavour to follow the blessed steps of His most holy life, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. **Amen**

Old Testament Lesson

2 Kings 2: 1 – 12

Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent."

Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent."

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

Psalm

50: 1 – 6

The Lord our God, the Mighty One has spoken: and summoned the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting in the west

From Zion, perfect in beauty: God has shone out in glory

Our God is coming, He will not keep silent: before Him is devouring fire, and tempest whirl about Him

He calls to the heavens above: and so to the earth, so that He may judge His people.

'Gather to Me My faithful ones: those who by sacrifice made a covenant with Me

The heavens shall proclaim His righteousness: for God Himself is judge

Epistle

2 Corinthians 4: 3 – 12

If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the

light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Gospel

Mark 9: 2 – 9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

I would have mentioned before that the phrase about 'handing on the mantle' – passing on the responsibility and privilege – comes from this old story from Kings. It is an interesting one, marked heavily by the views and perceptions of the time, but showing just as clearly the sense of calling (and of need) of Elisha. It is no easy position to stand in the shoes of a predecessor especially when that person is of great significance.

So the successor followed wherever was necessary, and pleaded for the capacity to fulfil the responsibility for which he had been chosen. There is a great doggedness in Elisha, *And thank heaven for that!*

Psalm

I wonder how many readers will catch sight of the irony in this psalm. God will come with fire and whirlwind, it says – and Elisha's predecessor found out exactly the opposite. Remember that retreat of Elijah from Carmel to Horeb?

In other words, one needs to read Scripture with one's antenna very much raised, ready to learn from (have one's perceptions transfigured by the experience of those ancient worthies.)

Epistle

Mention was made in last week's notes about people who became quite myopic about the Faith and their response to it. The Apostle was quite aware of that shortcoming in people, and points to its source. For heaven's sake do not imagine that when Paul refers to the god of this world blinding people that he was talking about 'Satan' unless you understand 'who' Satan is Biblically speaking. Here is no force outside of you over which you have no control. He is referring to all the temptations to avoid real issues, in life as much as in faith. No one 'tempts' a person except themselves unless perhaps such a person is exceptionally weak indeed.

GOSPEL

The real point of transfiguration (metamorphosis if you like) is not to assure Jesus – it was in fact something Jesus needed to do to get that silly trio off their mental backsides, and to understand what was happening around them. Here was a real kick in the duds, so to speak. A short time before this, Jesus asked the disciples what they had heard people saying about Him. That was no ego-trip on the part of the Lord, but a gentler kick to get the Twelve to face harsh reality.

Transfiguration is the dawning awareness of what was right in front of you which you missed seeing because you were not thinking about what was going on. It is a flash of light, a blast of sound, a sudden shock that brings you back to earth. *Read on and see that this was what happened – precisely – to the disciples. No ivory tower existence was available for followers of Jesus!*

NOTES FOR A SERMON

The more I encounter the debate about the truth or otherwise of the Christian Faith, the more I wonder about the need for *transfiguration* amongst those who turn their backs on the Biblical Faith – or any other, come to that. Part of my unease lies in the level of debate carried out by such folk, mostly setting up a caricature of the Faith and then demolishing their own folly; the other part of unease lies in the apparent inability or unwillingness to see what the Faith is really about.

Recently (New Year, 2011) I have been re-reading Manning Clark's *A Shorter History of Australia* which was written in 1963 and revised several times in the next 20 years. The author shows his clear background as the son of an Anglican clergyman in his constant quotes from the Book of Common Prayer, whilst despising the very faith in which he was brought up. One is left suspecting that his critique of what he calls 'Protestantism' comes somewhat under the same category of partial understanding opposed by larger discarding of the Faith. Now any person is free to accept or reject the Faith, but surely it needs to be on solid bases. What is rather more interesting to me is to learn that, in the period before his death, Manning Clark embraced the very Faith he had long despised. And one can be certain that this change stemmed not from any fear of 'eternal punishment,' but rather of from the recognition that rather more truth was involved than he had perceived before.

Lest you consider me to be wandering from the Gospel reading, may I ask you to see that what the story of the Transfiguration underlines in the progress and process of faith development on the part of Peter, James and John. I am rude enough to draw people's attention to the increasing impatience on the part of our Lord at the very slow progress portrayed by the Twelve. They seemed quite content to go along for the ride as Jesus exercised His ministry, content too, to bask in the warmth of being associated with this great yet humble man. Those disciples – certainly! – were products of their own day and time, with all the sense and all the misunderstandings of their time. Expecting a Messiah to solve all their problems, as was the case with most of Israel of the time, no doubt the Twelve operated under the delusion that all they had to do was to sit and watch and wait for what *denouement* was going to arise. The Messianic hope stemmed from the time of King David, 1000 years before, with the expectation of some sort of military-style victory, overcoming enemies and establishing Israel as – well I guess some sort of Super Power.

This is an expectation of God remarkably constant throughout history: it was reflected in the sad and terribly destructive business of the First World War. So many people lost faith in the God they expected, **if He existed at all**, to step in and stop the destruction. When the Almighty did not, the only response considered by most was that either God was not Almighty, or that He was not God at all and that we are all alone.

Please step back to the time of the Gospel for today: a week before Jesus had begun the process of urging the Twelve to see past their noses; 'who do people say that I am?' Here was no egotistical exercise on the part of Jesus, but an attempt to get that rabble of Twelve to **stop and think**. What is really going on? Who is this Jesus and what is He really on about? While Peter began to see just a little of the answer, he was left with a very long way to go. What was needed, as it is for most of us, is something that set the grey cells pondering, in order to see past the familiar to something rather more profound. Peter's confession that he saw Jesus as 'Son of God' may have been a first step – but what does that mean? Sadly, much of what we Christians say and think tends to be done in some sort of vacuum, of spirituality perhaps, that bears little or no connection with anything real in life. Transfiguration needs to happen here, too.

An illustration if I may dare: many moons ago now, in the parish where we then lived, we ran a Bible Study group on Wednesdays on one of the local farms. We happened to be studying John's Revelation at the time, and that invoked the interest of several local Lutheran folk, two men and a lady. Revelation is not the easiest book to understand, but stunning when the real issues are uncovered. Nothing 'end of the world' is there, in spite of most people's expectations, but very much a more immediate life issue. As we read, discussed and talked about the passages, I would ask people what they understood the passage to be expressing. Eager responses from the Lutheran folk were rather limited to what I rudely call 'holy talk' or some sort of retranslation into Christian jargon that really meant very little indeed even to those who used the argot. 'What does that mean?' I would ask them, to be offered a sort of replacement 'holy comment.' Even when I asked those folk how they would express it if they were in the front bar of the local pub, they could tender no variation. My point was that if the Faith cannot stand up to ordinary local people, it can stand up for no one. That was somewhat of a shock to the Study Group, although it was not long before they got the clear and present point.

What does 'Son of God' mean? The Transfiguration was a steep learning curve for the selected three of the Twelve. It is not possible to describe the actual, literal situation they confronted: what the whole point was that this Jesus of theirs was far more than met the eye. It must have been somewhat of a huge shock to be confronted with this Person, their mentor, as not just equal to but superior to the Sacred Law and Prophets of the Old Testament Faith. That explosion must have resonated for a very long time in the minds of Peter, James and John. Also it must have taken quite some time to resolve, for it must have stretched their perceptions of the Faith, let alone Jesus, mightily far beyond where they had reached heretofore.

Transfiguration, you see, was not something to reassure Jesus! It was very much a matter of something blowing up in the minds of the disciples. It – as usual with such experiences – espied something remarkable, explosive, expansive in what had appeared to be quite normal natural and expected. And whilst Peter, at least, had decided that such an elevated experience was something to hang on to, our Lord made it perfectly and powerfully clear, that such exalted experience was of no use to anyone unless it could be employed in the real world for the betterment of ordinary people in ordinary life. *It is no mistake that the episode of the Transfiguration was followed by the dealing with a faith and medical tragedy at the foot of the mountain.*

One of the greatest follies of the Faith over the centuries, seems to me, has been the demand to accept and adhere to doctrines, tenets and isms that have been regarded as sacrosanct; the reality has been that such an approach has done nothing other than remove people from any possibility of growth, exploration and discovery. It has held the Christian Church in such a thrall that it took 18 centuries before slavery was perceived to be evil, and another 150 years to embrace the equality of the sexes. There should never be any constraint against questioning, exploration and discovery in any aspect of life, and the Faith must be included in that freedom.

Sentence

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.

Mark 1: 15

Collect

O Lord, Who for our sake fasted forty days and forty nights; give us grace to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued to the spirit, we may ever obey Your godly will in righteousness and true holiness, to Your honour and glory, Who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Genesis 9: 8 – 17

God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

Psalm

25: 1 – 10

In You O Lord, have I put my hope: in You have I trusted, let me not be ashamed, nor let my enemies triumph over me.

Let none who wait for You be put to shame: but let those who break faith be confounded and gain nothing.

Show me Your ways, O Lord: and teach me Your paths

Lead me in the way of Your truth and teach me: for You are the God of my salvation.

In You have I hoped all the day long: because of Your goodness O Lord.

Call to mind Your compassion and Your loving-kindness: for they are from of old.

Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions: but according to Your mercy, think on me

Good and upright is the Lord: therefore will He direct sinners in the way

The meek He will guide in the path of justice: and teach the humble His ways.

All the paths of the Lord are faithful and true: for those who keep His covenant and His commandments.

Epistle

1 Peter 3: 18 – 22

Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you--not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Gospel

Mark 1: 9 – 15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good

news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

While there remain many people who tend to look down the nose at the tales and sagas of the Old Testament, it remains an interesting source of understanding quite something of the development of the early Hebrew Faith. Never forget that the 'faith once delivered' was never set in concrete for the ancient worthies appeared to be quite clear. The Biblical record shows the obvious marks of development in the understanding of God and of life.

The Flood narratives are particularly interesting for several reasons. First of all, here is no coherent account of the tale, but a conglomeration of several previously edited stories from different sources. What is particularly obvious is that the inclusion of this saga series underlined a marked move away from the perception of God as punitive to one of restoration however difficult the process. The reiteration of the story is surely the clear and positive statement that the early Hebrew Faith saw past a destructive divinity to one who determined – so to speak! - not to follow such a path.

A great deal could be said about this passage, indeed of the entire Flood saga. What needs to be understood most of all about the first 11 Chapters of Genesis, is that no Jew to my knowledge has ever understood these tales as other than parable, myth, or if you prefer, imaginative use of widespread stories to convey a particular conviction about what it means to be human and alive on this planet.

Psalm

I find it interesting that the authors of the Lectionary, when choosing passages for this First Sunday in Lent, offer a choice of following faith or turning one's back on it. Basically the Flood Narrative has to do with choice as much as what I have written above; and here the ancient psalmist ponders the outcomes of a choice for or against the Lord.

Fairly obviously, Psalm 26 must come early in the history of psalmody, but even so the aspects of God's faithfulness, justice and truth come with firm statement. To my knowledge, no contemporary 'divinity' ever had such an emphasis. But here it is, and it is a remarkably redemptive vision.

Epistle

I do not know how this rather enigmatic passage strikes you – for it has provided a great amount of confusion for most commentators that I have read. Apart from the emphasis on the atonement, there is that rather fascinating comment about the 'spirits in prison' that seems designed to meet the concern of people at that time about the chances of resurrection for any who had died before the time of the Crucifixion. As you might imagine, it must have been quite an issue for contemporary people, and here is the answer.

Moderns would have expressed it rather differently, one suspects. As most people would see it nowadays, the Cross, indeed the entire Christ event, was never something limited in time and space, but rather is the expression of God's eternal approach and care for people of all ages, times, cultures and situations.

Gospel

Mark's Gospel always bears the marks of shorthand and some speed in creation. Here in a brief passage the entire business of Jesus' baptism and temptations are focussed. In Years A and C it is possible to explore the nature of Jesus' temptations and the reasons behind it. Here the simple bald statement seems to hold a slightly different aspect.

Do you follow me when I suggest that here, in brevity, is embedded the matter of call and commissioning of Jesus, and its immediate connection to the harsh realities of life. Whilst one may have thought that the calling to be Son of God would be accompanied by all manner of protection and benefit, Mark made it quite clear that no such benefits would occur. It was a matter of Jesus being 'dropped in the deep end,' with Mark's added emphasis about wild animals. That illustration has more to do with human wild animals than it does with the usual feral ones.

As you and I are most aware, it never was an easy path or sinecure for our Lord. Not only did He have the awful responsibility of pointing to the only real answer to the human dilemma, the only real means of reconciliation and hope, but also had to live through the most awful of experiences to express it all in the events of His life – and death – and resurrection.

Never imagine for one moment that Jesus was some sort of puppet-on-a-string Who had to endure everything because it was God's will. Even the period of temptation (echoed as it was from time to time in the ordinary processes of His life and ministry) makes it clear that Jesus could have opted out at any time. He had no more superhuman recourses to call on than you and me. The profundity of His commitment is all the more memorable because it was so totally human.

We misunderstand the entire Judaic-Christian Faith if we ever assume otherwise.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I was saddened enormously recently when I heard a member of our congregation comment that 'how could our children understand the Faith, when we parents do not?' One wonders from what direction such a comment came, and then one goes on to see that if that is the faith being offered, then it is small wonder that so many today reject the convictions of Christians. While today's readings, to my mind at least, offer a choice to follow or refuse to follow, the direction offered is certainly not to some sort of cloud-cuckoo land.

It must have been something like 40 years ago that I suggested to congregations when I preached about the Temptations of Jesus that the complete reality of choice **had** to lie in front of our Lord. In other words, that there was always the possibility that He would, like most of His human colleagues, surrender to the pressure and give in. The very nature of the temptations, described by Matthew and Luke, indicate that He was facing a choice of leadership styles, how to gain a following. Jesus rejected each of the other paths – miracle, bread and circuses, and falling down and worshipping Satan. Obviously this latter path towards leadership is one still used often – turning the truth into a lie and vice versa. Here was no 'spiritual' test of direction, but one that should be the test of anyone human. Caring, not control is the issue; self-giving, not egotism is the aim.

Had Jesus failed in this, the Gospel would have been emasculated, as rather too often it is by preachers who know not of what they speak. Once one begins to see that the faith once delivered has far more to offer in terms of life here and now rather than the life to come, then a far wider context and relevance of the Faith emerges.

Before anyone looks down the nose at those ancient Creation Stories, myths if you dare, of Israel, please do stop and see what is being offered here. Never fall into the trap of thinking that Israel began by seeing JHWH as sole God and Creator. These stories did not reach their final editing until at least the 8th Century BC, at least 1,200 years after Abraham. In other words, Abraham and his heirs and successors were still under the perception that the God Who called Abraham was only one of who knew how many – and the fascinating thing is that the first encounter with this God was not from nature but from encounter in ordinary life. (It seems fairly clear to me that old Abe had long been dissatisfied with the cultus where he lived, and looked for something more relevant.)

I ask you to take a long step from that background¹ to the tale of the Flood, to notice a couple of issues worth absorbing. The first is that, when one takes a step back, this story is a refutation of the concept that the gods, including JHWH, are punitive. This section of the story, with the promise of the rainbow, underlines – it you like to put it this way – that God Himself sees the pointlessness of a punitive response to humanity. 'Tis a pity that Correctional Services does not follow this path towards restoration. Also, the entire story, rather oddly edited as it is, underlines the whole matter of choice. From the beginning of the tale, all people in the story had the chance to find the way of escape. They were not forced to ignore the warnings.

Choice: one of the very great gifts of being human. I can choose to be stupid, or to be sensible. I can choose to follow wherever truth indicates, or to turn a blind eye. Earlier last year² I responded to a series of barrages from atheists who expressed their anger that Christians isolated them from the Gospel. My response was to remind them that they were completely free to choose their atheism, even if it ran against the evidence from which they manage to hide themselves. Anyone is free to do anything, and the result of that is fairly obvious whenever you open your newspaper, watch TV news or see news items on the Internet. Freedom of choice is surely

¹ Look for a serious commentary on the creation stories to see past any literalist view you may have. No Jew, to my knowledge, has ever held to a literal view – and it is their Scriptures let's face it.

² It is New Year's Day 2011 as I write this!

one of the liberties that should be available to everyone on the planet. Lack of it is one of the factors that produce so much unrest, hatred and war.

As the readings unfold, it becomes quite clear that all of today's readings underline the freedom of choice, for believer and unbeliever alike. The Psalmist is aware, quite obviously, of the sensible direction to choose, and the Epistle underlines that same freedom in Jesus – and thank heaven He chose the way He did. (If you can handle this, one wonders how many people may have been called as was Jesus and failed to choose truly. If that concept bothers you, don't worry: I have often wondered how many 'Abrahams' were called before the actual one 'stood up and was counted.)

And then Jesus' Baptism and Testing. The former was as much a statement of God's support of Jesus as it was of Jesus' commitment to His sacred calling. But the next item on the agenda was to present both a choice of directions to leadership and a choice to remain true to the calling and Divine agenda. (See notes on Lent I in Year A and C to follow through that series of readings.)

Choice brings responsibility. And that is where rather too many people part company with the Faith. Just as Jesus knew that His calling brought enormous responsibility – **and dared to uphold that right through all the vicissitudes of His life,** - so a similar challenge falls at our own feet. And part of that challenge, seems to me, is to look past so much of the populist 'theology' of today to see where the real truth and real challenge lies.