

**Sentence**

‘I am the resurrection and the life’ says the Lord. ‘Those who believe in Me, even though they die, will live, and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die.’ *John 11: 25 – 26*

**Collect (a)**

Blessed Lord, Who has caused all holy scripture to be written for our learning; grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of Your holy word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which You have given us in our Saviour, Jesus Christ

**Amen**

**Collect (b)**

God of all the living, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, You have given us the promise of life which death itself cannot destroy; in the strength of this unshakeable promise, give us a new heart to live, even now, as Your new creation. We ask this through Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Haggai 1: 15b – 2:9**

On the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month, in the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, “Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.”

For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendour, says the LORD of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts. The latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts.

**Psalm**

**98**

O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvellous things;  
His right hand and his holy arm: they have got Him the victory  
The Lord has made known His salvation: He has revealed His just deliverance in the sight of the nations  
He has remembered His mercy and faithfulness towards the house of Israel: and all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God  
Shout with joy to the Lord, all the earth: break into singing and make melody.  
Make melody to the Lord upon the harp: upon the harp and with sounds of praise  
With trumpets and with horns: cry out in triumph before the Lord the King  
Let the sea roar, and all that fills it: the good earth and those who live upon it  
Let the rivers clap their hands: and let the mountains ring out together before the Lord  
For He comes to judge the earth: He shall judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity.

**Epistle**

**2 Thessalonians 2: 1 – 5 & 13 – 17**

As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you?

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But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord

Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.

## **GOSPEL**

### **Luke 20: 27 – 40**

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her."

Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.

And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive." Then some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well." They no longer dared to ask him another question.

## **NOTES ON THE READINGS .....**

### **Old Testament**

Put yourself in the shoes of this relatively unknown prophet: returned from exile in Babylon, with the enormous task of rebuilding Jerusalem, the Temple and in fact the entire country and community. It would have been one thing to have received the promise of return from Babylon; it must have been exhausting merely to think about all that lay ahead of them in the rebuilding. As a previous Bishop of mine once said to me, "Ron, any fool can start something; it takes rather more to bring the idea to fruition."

I would be rude enough to ask you to see that there may well have been something in the way of what we would call spin or propaganda in the expectation of great wealth and treasure. The real point of Haggai's words were to encourage people to take the long view, and persist faithfully until the job was done. That is the sort of challenge that shows of what stuff people are really made!

### **Psalm**

This Psalm is one which has been familiar to me since my youth as a choir boy – 60 and more years ago. Behind this psalm lies the author's certainty that God is ever there and reliable, encouraging His people to move forward and get on with the job. In fact, it has always been Israel's great contribution to the understanding of God that their perception and understanding of Him stemmed not from some theory, but from harsh and fiery experience in life's harsh realities.

### **Epistle**

I mentioned earlier that this couple of letters to Thessalonian Christians came early in the Apostle's life, and much of his thoughts about the Second Coming and Judgement underwent quite something in the way of modification. (Read the verses omitted in this passage, to get that message.) In fact, it is strange to report that these Thessalonians reacted somewhat oddly in response to the news of the Parousia. Some decided to sit back and wait for it, doing no work and requiring to be supported by others. Paul's reaction to that was short and simple. No work = no eating! I guess Paul needed only to refer to the OT situation to get his readers to realize that they had quite a role in front of them still.

## **GOSPEL**

It may be a little obscure for some, but even this passage about Sadducees and resurrection has to do with the same subject. It seems to me that what Jesus was really saying to His antagonists was 'join the real world and get on with it!' To argue as did they from an hypothetical position to undermine a situation which was incredible to them was a foolish attempt for them to make. I could never understand how so many people still argue from a ridiculous angle to disprove something about which they understand rather little. Still, it goes on does it not!

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

If ever you were asked to choose a phrase that comes to you in a familiar way from the Scriptures, I wonder what it might be. One that I find is a constant, and an encouraging one at that is variously translated, but most commonly known as 'Fear not!' It comes from the pens of the prophets, and from the lips of our Lord. It is reiterated in Epistles, and even turns up in Revelation. Fear not.

Fear not. And here it is in one of the most difficult and even fearful situations in which Israel found itself, on the return from the Exile. (I read, quite recently, a book by a British war correspondent who was in Iraq in 1991, and he told of the long dry flat highway between Amman, Jordan and Baghdad. He travelled it several times by motor vehicle.) The Jews would have had to walk it – both ways! Mind you, there would not have been too many who did both ways, for there was a gap of 70 years between one and the other.)

'Fear not' says the prophet, although if you read from Ezra and Nehemiah, a rather ghastly picture is painted, of those resisting the efforts of the newly arrived. Anyhow, how hard is it to rebuild from ruins that have been open to the elements for decades? Fear not? How could you not be otherwise?

The answer is not all that tangible. The answer is that God is with you, and while that may urge along a few, surely there were sceptics enough to put off the rest. On the other hand, there was that remarkable fact that several of the prophets, Isaiah amongst them, who expressed his certainty not only that a Return was on the way, but even more surprising, the Cyrus, threat to everyone around, would be the Lord's messiah (and that is the word Isaiah used, pardon me,) and instrument, "even though he knows Me not!" It must have been stirring times, as well as providing a stunning platform for the faithful, regardless of the opposition facing them.

That strikes me as hugely significant, even in our own day and age. Our God is not one to be defeated by anything, if it comes to that, and His remarkable precedent has been set time and time again in the ordinary normal course of Israel's history. **Actual history, pardon me**, not some sort of ephemeral myth.

Ponder this, if you will. If ever you look closely at the history of the Christian Church, surely you are left wondering how the hell the Church survived. There is so much rubbish and discord, and total disregard for Gospel and people in so many times and places and events. By all the canons of life and history, the Church should have died on the vine centuries, even millennia ago. But here it is still, in spite of all the garbage and disloyalty and apostasy. And the only reason for that, surely, is the God is behind it all somewhere. Even after the collapse of Soviet Russia, the Church emerged, mainly because the underground Christians remained faithful in spite of enormous contrary pressure.

So wherever you are living, under whatever circumstance or threat, this word comes to you from the King of the Kingdom: Fear not. And get on with the job.

**Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2010**

**Twenty Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Sentence**

May the Lord of peace Himself give you peace at all times and in all ways

*2 Thess 3:16*

**Collect**

Lord God of all the ages, the One Who is, Who was and Who is to come: stir up within us a longing for Your kingdom, keep our hearts steady in times of trial, and grant us patient endurance until the Sun of justice dawns. We make our prayer through Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Isaiah 65: 17 – 25**

I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.

No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labour in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD-- and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent--its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

**FOR THE PSALM**

**The Song of Isaiah**

Behold, God is my salvation: I will trust and will not be afraid  
For the Lord God is my strength and my song: and has become my salvation  
With joy you will draw water: from the wells of salvation  
On that day you will say: "Give thanks to the Lord, call upon His name  
Make known His deeds among the nations: proclaim that His name is exalted.  
Sing God's praises Who has triumphed gloriously: let this be known in all the world  
Shout and sing for joy, you that dwell in Zion: for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel

**Epistle**

**2 Thessalonians 3: 6 – 13**

Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate.

For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

**GOSPEL**

**Luke 21: 5 – 19**

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them. "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately."

Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

## NOTES ON THE READINGS

A slight word of caution:

When the old Jewish writers became excited, they indulged in what we may well call hyperbole. Sometimes they did it fairly simply, by 'going over the top.' Sometimes they used a peculiarly Hebrew form of expression, apocalyptic. In either case, the modern reader needs to be aware of what is being said and *how* it is being expressed. So you may well find it difficult to follow just what is being said in these notes. I do not claim all wisdom and knowledge, but I am very aware of how some folk tend to be very literal – and they end up in a mess. On the other hand, if I call someone a goat, **you** know what I am saying, but people from other languages and cultures would not. Careful, or I will tell you a story ..... true and calamitous.

May I remind you, also, that the re-appearance of apocalyptic sections of Biblical texts are the clear indication of the return of Advent, the annual commencement of the Church's liturgical year.

### Old Testament

Although the language may be a little over the top to us, the excitement of the New Start for Israel and Jerusalem was enough to get hearts beating faster. After the purging of the Exile experience, new hope filled the air. Isaiah was not anticipating an actual 'new heaven and new earth' but he was expecting a renewal of Israel's life and worship and theology.

As history shows, that new beginning tended to fall on deaf ears with the majority of people. However, as in most similar situations, there were always the faithful ones who carried the faith forward and learned the lessons from the past. Amongst other things, out of that Exile came the synagogue, a modified form of worship because of the lack of Temple. Both Temple and synagogue continued for the next few centuries until the last destruction of Herod's Temple after the Roman re-invasion of Israel around AD 70.

### For the Psalm

### The Song of Isaiah

It may be a little confusing for the modern reader to get excited about the contents of this song, but a couple of observations may help a little. This passage comes from Isaiah 12, - first Isaiah if that does not put off some people! – who was active before the fall of the Northern Kingdom. This prophet was concerned initially at the failure of Israel to be the People of God in spite of all care and attention from JHWH. Here is rejoicing in what God does give, and if you are surprised at the delight in water, just try being a South Australian in these dry years. (Driest State in the driest Continent, and in the end; hopefully of years of drought.) For Israel, water was absolutely essential for life, so it became a focus of more than simply human physical need. Relate that, if you will, to the constant reference to water of life in Old Testament and New. (And then join in the song!!!!!!!!!!!!)

### Epistle

I often wonder why so many modern Christian people seem to get carried away by St. Paul's extravagant greetings in his letters, and it may be because it all seems so holy and spiritual. I suspect that it was simply the pattern of the day, actually. But here it is evened out somewhat by what is really down-to-earth and no-mucking-around treatment of an issue that was very current at that time.

Most of the Infant Church expected the Lord's Return not only in their lifetimes, but perhaps in the next three months or three years. (I have mentioned elsewhere a couple of times that it is worth the effort to read Paul's letters, **in order of date of writing**, and see the evolution of his perception of when that return was likely to be. As time passed, so did his realization that it was still a long way off. (Even John in his Revelation talked about the *thousand years* in his attempt to make people see that the Parousia was not immanent.

But the main point of these comments is to underline the sheer and utter normality of what Paul was conveying. No Second Coming justifies taking one's foot off the pedal, so to speak. No work, no tucker is leaving no room for malingerers nor lazybones. There is always a task to be done so get on with it. Paul was quite unapologetic .... in spite of some in that congregation deciding on the lazy course. He used his own example of

getting on with it and paying his own way, and you will recall that Paul was employed in his trade as tentmaker. It is a firm answer to those who would lose themselves in spirituality without connection to the real world.

## GOSPEL

And yet there is a clear balance, is there not?

As mentioned above, whenever you encounter apocalyptic passages in Sunday readings, know that Advent is not far off. But also take notice both of the situation of the reading, and its content and method.

As He drew closer to the Cross, Jesus focussed more on present and permanent realities, and less on merely mortal ones, so to speak. You can imagine the hayseed disciples wandering down the streets and alleys of Jerusalem eyes focussed upwards, admiring the size and height of buildings such as they may never have seen before. (Even been to New York?) As the men were stunned somewhat at the beauty and apparent permanence of the buildings and human skills that produced them. It is something that most humans seem to admire, and the fact that so many (more recent) buildings tend to be seen as phallic symbols or status symbols underlines the human pride in their erection.

However, Jesus' vision of things was rather more far-reaching. Aware of the political undertones of Jewish life, and the likelihood of another invasion from Rome, our Lord knew that what **looked** permanent may well be nothing of the sort, and so He discouraged any sense of trust in whatever is made from human hands.<sup>1</sup>

One might have expected, and most people do, that any conversation from here on has to do with the end of the world, and little could be further from the truth. Whenever Scripture talks about matters cataclysmic, earthquakes and so on, it is not talking natural phenomena but rather political ones and such. It has reference to the collapse of cultures, countries or even civilisations. In this case, of course, Jesus was pointing to the likely collapse of the Jewish State under pressure from Rome.

No one who has never been affected by war or even natural disaster, can not know the appalling impact of such events. All stability is lost, and that is very threatening to ordinary people. As such, it leaves them very vulnerable to all manner of pressure and temptation, **In fact, it is precisely such 'time of trial' to which the Lord's Prayer refers.** Small wonder the petition is to 'save us from' such dangers.

It seems to be so easy, in such periods of strife, for all manner of manipulators and other vermin is prey on vulnerable people, to their great cost. **Beware** said Jesus, and with solid reason. And that is why, simply because that whilst the Gospel is Good News, it is only so for those who take the whole package, so to speak. Jesus was crucified because those in power would have nothing to do with His sort of leadership. They preferred power and repression. The Gospel points in the opposite direction.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

One of the things that dismays me somewhat, when people of faith wonder and are concerned about the future of the Church, it strikes me that they may well be taking a short-range view of something that is rather more long-range. Perhaps I have been fortunate in study both of Scripture and in life.

When I had to go back to night school to obtain the Leaving Certificate (as HSC was then titled) I chose Modern History as one subject, because it would be easy and undemanding. However the tutor we had very soon disabused us of any expectation of an easy subject. The range of history we undertook was from the French Revolution in 1789 to the end of World War I. The experience was totally stunning: that man my perception of the subject of history from a series of dates, unconnected and unreal, to a series of processes acting on each other, and being led and prodded by various people of often questionable wisdom and unquestioned ego. We discovered, amongst other things, that the presentation of ideas, for instance, took generations to impact sometimes, as did Darwin's Origin of Species. Philosophers' ideas also permeated slowly, as did most 'new' ideas. And it took just as long for fresh developments on Biblical research and understanding to reach the general public.

This may or may not help. In recent months I have wondered if a couple of local clergy of different denominations had ever pursued their understanding of the Creation Stories beyond the traditional and literal, in order to understand from a Jewish perspective what those tales really convey. In the process I referred to a book by Griffith Thomas, printed exactly a hundred years ago, as he tried to get people to see past the ridiculous debate of the time, when Bishops were choosing between having descended from apes or from God. My point is that, even after a century since such a revered preacher as Griffith Thomas had argued for a far more reasoned, rational **and Biblical** approach to the problem, people have still to follow. Mind you, I had to find the same path about 60 years ago, most grateful that it enhanced, **not threatened**, the Biblical stories.

It seems to me that the same sort of thing is happening in the normal world also. Recent tsunamis and earthquakes around the Ring of Fire have encouraged all manner of doomsayers to come up with theories. That, in

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<sup>1</sup> Biblical students will be aware already of 'human hands' as being symbols of impermanence.

spite of the fact that scientists have made it quite clear that this sort of thing is cyclic over a period of 200 years or so, asking people to remember Karakatoa. Whilst this does nothing to reduce the damage, it does remove the scaremongering. And that is important, seems to me.

You may think that I have been wandering, but I am simply trying to convey the message that, before any ridiculous response to events is considered, the wider and more reliable factors of the case be employed to produce balance.<sup>2</sup>

So this all brings us back to the reality of today's readings. They are not pointing to some Doomsday scenario of the End of the World. They are pointing us to the greater reality that life which is not meant to be easy, will on occasion erupt in the most dangerous and unpleasant directions, for reasons that may not be immediately visible. And our Lord was careful to warn His followers, even in their embryonic states, that they may well face challenges beyond their capacity to understand. Warfare is extremely ugly and omnivorous. But no one needs to tell you that!

There may well be times and challenges for you, even in this most stable of all countries, as crises of various sorts emerge. The recent Global Financial Crisis produced some uncomfortable outcomes for many people in terms of employment and superannuation resources. For others the outcomes were far more drastic. But try being a Sri Lankan trying to get to Australia, with little hope of support.

I think it has to be said that we in this country seem so long to have been protected from harm that any sign of damage comes as a shock. It can be a huge thing or a minor one, but it seems that the first reaction is to lay the blame at God's feet, which must drive Him somewhat slightly mad. Even Elizabeth Taylor is reputed to have said that no one has a mortgage on tomorrow. And she is quite right. Nor have we any mortgage on the peaceful life. We have, in fact, to respond sensibly and creatively as Paul underlined in today's Epistle. 'Get on with it' was always the word of my parents whenever any boat at the time was rocking. Respond as to real life, not to some imagined Nirvana. If God protected us from every damn thing, we would end up as the weakest and most pathetic of humans that one could imagine. Maturity is part of the goal of Christian living, **not safety,**

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<sup>2</sup> I may be a minority of one, but I am yet to be convinced of the Global Warming thing. Mind you, I have never heard the fact that 5 billion humans on the planet (and millions of animals) means that one hell of a lot of water is taken up in those bodies, which are composed of 80% water.

**Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> November, 2010**

**Sunday next before Advent  
Christ the King**

**Sentence**

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud O daughter of Jerusalem. Lo, your King comes to you, triumphant and victorious is He, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey.

**Zechariah 9:9**

**Collect**

Stir up, we pray, O Lord, the wills of Your faithful people, that they plenteously bringing forth the fruits of good works may by You be plenteously rewarded, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**(or)**

Eternal God, You exalted Jesus Christ to rule over all things, and have made us instruments of His kingdom; by Your Spirit empower us to love the unloved, and to minister to all in need, then at the last, bring us to Your eternal realm where we may be welcomed into Your everlasting joy and may worship and adore You for ever; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Jeremiah 23: 1 – 6**

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord, Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.

I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD. The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

**FOR THE PSALM**

**Song of Zechariah**

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel: Who has come to His people and set them free  
The Lord has raised up for us a mighty Saviour: born of the house of His servant David  
Through the holy prophets, God promised of old: to save us from our enemies, from the hands of all who hate us  
To show mercy to our forebears: and to remember His holy covenant  
This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham: to set us free from the hands of our enemies  
Free to worship Him without fear: holy and righteous before Him, all the days of our life  
And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High: for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways  
To give His people knowledge of salvation: by the forgiveness of their sins  
In the tender compassion of our God: the dawn from on high shall break upon us  
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death: and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

**Epistle**

**Colossians 1: 11 - 20**

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him.

He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"

The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

## NOTES ON THE READINGS

A few comments before we start may be of some help. If you are wondering at the apparent disconnection between today's readings, it may be of use to ponder the title for the day. **Christ the King.**

It is obvious that these days requires almost a re-translation of 'King' anyhow, even whilst wondering why we retain such an obsolete title. The real problem, in Jesus' day as well as ours, lies in the perception of what makes a King and what is the role. Humans would point to power and control! *And that is where our Lord would part company. David was the icon of king, and he began as shepherd, and that view has never left the Biblical outlook. SHEPHERD.* And if you were wondering, John in Revelation makes it quite clear that Jesus' Kingship is expressed most fully and completely when **He is on the Cross. Here is Shepherd-King par excellence.** Neither priest nor prophet nor king of any sort is of any value to other than himself or herself unless he/she is patterned on Christ. Don't get all religious and gooey about this! The only way to rule is as a servant. Like Jesus. And that applies in any realm of human activity, *for believers or for unbelievers.* Ponder that if you would please.

### Old Testament Lesson

So now it is clear why this 'shepherd passage' is set for today. The great tragedy of Israel is that whilst it was well set up to operate in the line of servanthood, it rarely reached the ideal because humans are not all that aligned to altruism. If I am in charge, then it is not long before I am likely to turn that into control. (How many control-freak clergy -- or lay people! -- do you know?) Israel was little different.

Yet the prophet was quite clear that things needed to change and to that he pointed.

Whilst it seems that most of the attention of Christian readers of such passages is to recognize the focus on Jesus and His ministry, **it is important to note that the servanthood of Israel had always been the prophets' focus. That is saying, in effect, that Jesus ministry of reconciliation (vertical and horizontal) is the Christians' ministry as it was for our Lord.**

### For the Psalm

Here is another of the canticles that we used to sing in the choir many decades ago in my home Church. Even then both the music and the words conveyed the confidence its authors held in the God Who wrought great things for them --- and us. That confidence stemmed from generations, centuries, millennia of history of the God Who gathered His people together and supported them. That support continued in spite of rugged disobedience and failure: thank heaven!

### Epistle

And the Epistle carries through the challenge to continue to be the People of God in spite of failure and contrary pressure. But there is more in this than that: as it was something I missed in my early years I thought it wise to underline it all here.

Look at what St. Paul writes concerning Jesus. It is staggering stuff, and concerns every human on the planet if it is true. Most Christians see Jesus as their Saviour, and that He certainly is. But still these days many people miss the impact of the **Lord** part of the equation. And what it all means. GO back over those words again and ponder, please. 'He has rescued us from the power of darkness is no vague business but something totally significant. Darkness is not knowing where you are going and what life is all about. Now you know. Look at the stunning statements continuing to be made about Jesus here, in terms of creation (and that also means point and purpose.) In Him all things hold together is another way of saying that if Jesus is rejected, then all that is left is

nonsense. No point, no purpose, no direction. And that applies not just to Christians but to all humans.

This is not some sort of exclusivist statement: it is actually getting across the message that all we have been commenting on over the years is that Jesus, Lord, is guarantor of those important if less tangible aspects of life will outlast everything else. Justice and truth and integrity; compassion and love and caring. Self-giving not getting. So that wherever you encounter such aspects of life you can be certain that the Lord of all is there even before you. You can also be certain that, regardless of the events of any given time in history, evil and sin and death will be overcome. In fact, in Biblical terms, evil is overcome **when it is shown up for what it is. When it is visible, incarnated.**

It is remarkably powerful stuff, and in a way it is not proven! It is spread out before you as an offer, a direction to take, a path to follow. As I have often said, I follow Christ because He is the only One I have found Who makes such sense in life and about life. If there is no resurrection I must follow Him still, because nowhere else have I encountered such truth and reality.

## GOSPEL

Show me anyone anywhere else where forgiveness of perpetrators is so readily offered in spite of the heinous injustice and damage caused to a person. The Cross is the symbol of reconciliation, both vertical (between God and us) and horizontal (between us and others.) And the process and the manner of operation is exactly the same. (Give a yell for more information if that is too brief a statement for you to follow.)

I remember when I first read<sup>3</sup> the statement that hit me between the eyes, that John in his Revelation shows that the Kingship of Jesus is most evident when He was on the Cross. That was no blithe statement, but one of fact. Here most clearly is seen the nature of His Kingship: the total giving of Himself for others, out of profound love for them. Some Kings used to make propaganda sorts of statements along such lines, but their actions and attitudes were totally distant from any such reality. SO when we talk 'King' we really do need to convey precisely the nature of that Kingdom and Kingship.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

It may seem a little strange to you, but if ever you wondered why the early Apostles saw the need to write the various books that later made up the New Testament, there were two basic reasons. The first was to provide wider information about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and also of His teaching which is a significant part of the Gospel. As time went by, and the expected Parousia<sup>4</sup> did not appear, several other matters came to the attention of the Apostles, including the need to provide clear and clearer teaching about Who Christ is. In fact one of the greatest misunderstandings of those post-Biblical times was the threat of false teaching from all manner of ordinary and weird and wonderful sects and other groups. Of these probably the Gnostics were the most dangerous. (It has to be said that much of the distortion of Christian Faith of that period stemmed from those people. John's Gospel, and its prologue in particular, was written to combat such nonsense.)

Less well known is the fact that Revelation was written, **not to warn people of the end of the world, but to challenge the Church of the time to understand the breadth of the Faith far more clearly so that they could combat the rising perception that the Caesar was rather more obviously Lord than Jesus.** You may well know that Roman citizens were expected (no it was demanded of them) to vow their allegiance to Caesar in one of the multitudes of temples in order to retain their status. Their vow consisted of two words, in Latin – Caesar Lord. And that ran contrary to the short Christian creed that Christ is Lord:  $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma\ \kappa\upsilon\rho\iota\omicron\varsigma$ . As Roman power increased, that Christian creed looked less and less tenable.

Hence the writing of the Apocalypse.<sup>5</sup> In very traditional Jewish style, John's stunning book provides all the evidence necessary to provide people with solid grounds for understanding not only that Jesus is Lord or King, but also the clear and remarkable nature of that Kingship. In those days the concept of kingship was a powerful one, and all the evidence was there as people were confronted with the irresistible power of empire. The King's word was law, and in his hands lay all power of life and death. No one could gainsay the King. And that had been the case over thousands of years in numbers of empires stretching back further than people's memories.

But there was none of that sort of power and prestige in Jesus' little pretend kingdom, so where does the truth lie? John's well-thought out book drew constant and powerful contrasts between the 'kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of our Christ.' And the contrast is really devastating. It is a contrast between force, demand, propaganda and control .... and love and compassion and truth. And two fascinating areas of the difference are illustrated. The first is the fatal disparity between the two and the demand of the first to destroy the second; and the

<sup>3</sup> In GB Caird's Commentary on Revelation

<sup>4</sup> The Expected Return of Christ

<sup>5</sup> It has been written here previously: Apocalypse is not sudden denouement; it is 'something once hidden now revealed.'

second area has to do with the relative effectiveness of the latter. You do not need any proof to realize that force and war corrects no issue but only aggravates existing ones and produces new areas of conflict. And you may well have first-hand experience of how the slower-working method of the real Kingdom has far more lasting and peaceful outcomes for good for everyone involved.

It may well be hard for modern readers to espy all that is being said in this most remarkable book, but one certainly needs to be aware of the development of concepts and ideas over many hundreds of years. One of the big hurdles for old Jewish thinkers was the focus of King David and Messiahship, a hurdle that seems not to have been looked at up to Jesus' own time. That view was triumphalist and powerful, leaving Israel with the expectation that God would solve all problems and issues by His powerful Messiah, whoever that should be. Even John the Baptist's expectation was one of power and correction and punishment, and you will recall John's dismay that Jesus was not fulfilling his expectations at all!

But read the prophets, especially Isaiah and his series of cameos on the Servant of the Lord, and Jeremiah and Ezekiel who looked for a shepherd's shepherd, still somewhat Davidic but radically different. And look to see your own expectation of who it might be who could solve this world's ills, and whether you expect them to use force and power, military or whatever, or whether you see a rather more effective way. And then go on to see that it is not just the Servant of the Lord who is to deal with issues, **but also you who are His followers. I am where the trouble starts; small wonder then that the Lord of Hosts sees the necessity of a human response to the human problem.**

Incarnation and sacrifice. This is why GB Caird iterated often that the Kingship of Jesus is visible most strongly when He was on the Cross. Self-giving (as opposed to self-obsession.) Refusing to retaliate to human evil because that would multiply the evil, not reduce it. Absorbing all the hate and fear and anger rather than retaliating. Here is what looks like weakness being the very opposite of weakness, but only to those who see and understand what He was doing. *Except a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it lives alone.*

***Thank God that, in Jesus of Nazareth you have a King worthy of the name, not just for Himself but for all humanity who understands and follows and puts their trust in Him***

**From today, the Readings are for YEAR A**

**Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2010**

**FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT**

**Sentence**

Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob that He may teach us His ways and that we may walk in His paths

*Isaiah 2:3*

**Collect**

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which Your Son Jesus Christ came among us in great humility, that on the last day, when He shall come again in His glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal: through Him Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Isaiah 2: 1 – 5**

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

**Psalm**

**122**

I was glad when they said to me: "Let us go to the house of the Lord"

And now our feet are standing: within your gates, O Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is built as a city: where the pilgrims gather in unity.

There the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord: as He commanded Israel, to give thanks to the Name of the Lord

There are set thrones of judgement: the thrones of the house of David.

O pray for the peace of Jerusalem: may those who love you prosper.

Peace be within your walls: and prosperity in your palaces.

For the sake of my kindred and companions: I will pray that peace be with you

For the sake of the house of the Lord our God: I will seek for your good.

**Epistle**

**Romans 13: 9 – 14**

The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 24: 36 – 44**

*Jesus said,* "About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

## **NOTES ON THE READINGS .....**

Before we quite get there:

This Sunday marks the beginning of a new Church Year, and a new Advent. This Season is preparation for Christmas as Lent is for Easter, and all the readings will offer both a sense of urgency, as well as a clear sense of direction, not just for faith but for life.

The focus of that direction is the Lord of course, but in a rather wider sense than is generally perceived by most of us Christians. The pattern pointed to and lived out by Jesus – as Servant King – is the clear pattern of reconciliation, forgiveness and love for all humans. It needs to be seen that the Faith, Hebrew and Christian, is actually rooted firmly in the ‘now,’ and offers serious solutions to the ‘human dilemma’ of tensions and hatreds.

So, please see that this is not some sort of unique and different faith that excludes all others; rather it is something so effective and emphasised for the entire world to see. Whilst it could be said that much of the clarity of this Faith was perhaps not as clear and visible in Old Testament times as later, it is all there in seed and potential. Why has this not been underlined by Christians ... and all others interested in coping with the human dilemma? I have more than a sneaky suspicion that the answer to that lies in the very human dilemma that this Faith sets out to resolve! Evil is never so dangerous as when it poses as the opposite.

### **Old Testament**

If you think that Isaiah was having himself on when he wrote all this, then I would ask you to think again. In fact I ask you to take a deep breath and ponder the Old Testament Faith most Christians tend to be cynical about. The reality is, and always has been, that if and when old Israel (or ‘new’ Church) took their faith seriously, then all that Isaiah looked for was in line for completion. I kid you not. (Paul may well have sounded off about the incapacity of the Mosaic Law to change anything much, but there is another clear and powerful side to Hebrew Faith.)

That Faith, as with Christianity, was designed to bring about reconciliation and peace. And it still is. *Here and now*. So the prophet was not ‘off with the fairies,’ but dealing with Biblical realities. From Genesis on, those ancient worthies perceived the point and purpose of the Faith in precisely this direction, and when we do, a whole new ball-game opens up in front of me, and you, and the entire world. Irrelevant this Faith IS NOT!

### **Psalm**

As a choirboy back in the ‘40s and ‘50s, and we sang this Psalm in Church, I found it difficult even to consider the possibility of being glad when they said to me ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’ Actually, even at my call to the priesthood, my great fear was the expectation of sheer and utter boredom. I kid you not yet again! And it took quite a few years for me to get past such a view. I am not all that good at being religious, preferring to be fair dinkum and honest.

However, life is quite a learning curve, and it must be many decades now since my discovery that boredom was never part of the equation, and that the Faith continues to make the greatest sense and offers (to my knowledge) the only positive hope for peace and life in a world gone more than slightly mad. The reason for the author’s rejoicing was that remarkable rarity in early Biblical times, peace, justice (consider the outcome of ‘judgement, not in terms of punishment but in terms of balance of truth,) and responsibility. OK, some of those words are not there, but the realities are. Think about it.

### **Epistle**

If you had not caught sight of it so far, now look again. OK, this is New Testament, but it all stands on the shoulders of the Old, and while you might see ‘commandments,’ do stop and realize this as ‘direction and purpose.’ Love is the fulfilling of the Law. And you cannot gainsay that, now can you?

### **GOSPEL**

Even this Gospel has its word to say about the likely outcome of human refusal to act with justice and fairness. Here is no end of the world scenario, but the result of human greed, lack of integrity and self-obsession. Pardon the shot, but are you aware that those who talk about ‘rapture’ in response to this passage have their facts rather upside down. Those taken are not the blessed but their opposites. The Flood swept the naughty ones away, it was the Ark that saved the righteous from raging torrents. There is a great deal to be commented on here, but unless I stop now it may well go on for many paragraphs.

Obviously, the main impact of Jesus' words was to warn His hearers that such times are critical and demand action and decision. Any time of crisis provides that challenge, and the real threat to the Church – of any age let alone our own! – is only our complacency and apathy. There is nothing wrong with the Faith; our problem is with our understanding and commitment to it.

### NOTES FOR A SERMON

You may well have heard the story before: of a Primary School RI Class of a number of years ago. The subject was the Ten Commandments and the Year 7 kids were not impressed with any idea of rules and regulations. Mind you, they were mad keen on sports. Football, netball, basketball, cricket.

So I wondered out aloud with them how it would be to play tennis on a football ground, using no rules whatever, no umpires, no limits. They looked at me quite oddly as if I had gone mad, signing to each other that they were sure I was! So I asked them the reason for their reactions. 'How could anyone have a game out of that?' they asked. 'Nothing would be fair, and no one could keep a score or anything.' So as we pondered the stupid situation, they began to see that no rules, no boundaries, no umpires meant not only no fairness, but also no shape to any game. All would be chaos. *All would be chaos*. It was a steep learning curve for those kids, who had decided that no rules was the way to go until they began to ponder the almost immediate outcome of such a course of action.

It may be some surprise to you, but in all my study of faith and faiths, I have yet to find any religion that developed along the lines that Judaism did. Certainly other cultures had their laws and even the Ten Commandments had precedent in the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi. But law and religion tended to be rather separate issues, and justice and truth and integrity were certainly not normally part of any religious scene. Except in Israel. In fact, the Hebrew faith developed some remarkably just and fair ways of operating. Those who are still very critical of religious superstition may have a case in rather early Old Testament views, but the passage of time brought some great maturity. Even the early minor prophets had some powerful things to say about unfairness and rapacity, about abuse of wealth and privilege, and about the even-then increasing gap between rich and poor. Read Amos, for instance, and take on board his very caustic response to the profound unfairnesses of his own day – and his clear recognition that such actions and attitudes as reflected by people around him not only displeased God, but were very likely (and did!) bring about the collapse of the nation from within.

I have noted elsewhere, often enough, that we who grew up with the Biblical repetition of 'righteousness' had it drummed into us that this meant keeping oneself 'pure.' That inverted view of the meaning of the word led to all manner of priggishness – little removed from Pharisism. That was a singularly unpretty path to travel, and far from the Biblical reality. Righteousness = not priggishness but justice. Δικαιοσύνη — justice. In Biblical terms, justice has nothing to do with retribution and punishment, but rather taking all the related issues into account in understanding people's reasons for acting in certain ways. The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The outcome of travelling that road is far more likely to produce acceptance and understanding; and it reduces any resort to violence as almost impossible.

Now that great antagonist of the Mosaic Law, the Apostle Paul, clearly understood that, as he wrote that passage to the Romans. Paul, also, would have been very aware of the general human fear of chaos, brought very near if ever the fearful tribes from the far north east ever invaded; Genghis Khan and his ilk were a huge threat to anyone's security. And in this passage Paul saw the value of caring and loving and truth and integrity. Love, he said, is the fulfilling of the Law.

Time and again, when people in Church have felt led to pray for peace, I have asked them to see that there can never be peace until there is first justice. There can never be reconciliation until there is justice. And there can never be reconciliation until there is forgiveness. And none of those directions can be followed unless and until I am so affected by such needs as to bend all my will and effort to head in such a way. It calls for utter honesty, it calls for utter commitment, and it calls for following my Lord and yours wherever that may take us.

And that is where the Advent bit shows up loud and clear. Advent is the annual reminder of the Lord Who comes to us: has come in the Incarnation; does come to us in the vicissitudes of ordinary life – if we are aware of His presence in crises. And will come again as guarantor of all that is true and worthy and genuine.

In other words, Advent is our reminder to keep our eyes open to His visitation, almost always in the guise of someone else, unremarkable but valuable.