

**Sentence**

'Who is greater, the one who is at table, or the one who serves? But I am among you as one who serves,' says the Lord

*Luke 22:27*

**Collect**

Faithful God, have mercy on us Your unworthy servants, and increase our faith that, trusting in Your Spirit's power to work in us and through us, we may never be ashamed to witness to our Lord, and may obediently serve Him all our days, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Lamentations 1: 1 – 6**

How deserted lies the city, once thronging with people! Once great among nations, now become a widow; once queen among provinces, now put to forced labour! She weeps bitterly in the night; tears run down her cheeks. Among all who loved her she has no one to bring her comfort. Her friends have all betrayed her; they have become her enemies. Judah has wasted away through affliction and endless servitude. Living among the nations, she has found no resting-place; her persecutors all fell on her in her sore distress. The approaches to Zion mourn, for no pilgrims attend her sacred feasts; all her gates are desolate. Her priests groan, her maidens are made to suffer. How bitter is her fate! Her adversaries have become her masters, her enemies take their ease, for the Lord has made her suffer because of her countless sins. Her young children are gone, taken captive by an adversary. All splendour has vanished from the daughter of Zion. Her princes have become like deer that can find no pasture. They run on, their strength spent, pursued by the hunter.

**Psalm**

**37: 1 – 9**

Do not vie with the wicked: or envy those that do wrong  
For they will soon wither like the grass: and fade away like the green leaf.  
Trust in the Lord and do good: and you shall dwell in the land and feed in safe pastures  
Let the Lord be your delight: and He will grant you your heart's desire  
Commit your way to the Lord: trust Him and He will act  
He will make your righteousness shine as clear as the light: and your innocence as the noonday  
Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for Him: do not be vexed when someone prospers, when they put their evil purposes to work  
Let go of anger and abandon wrath: let not envy move you to do evil  
For the wicked shall be cut down: but those who wait for the Lord shall possess the land

**EPISTLE**

**2 Timothy 1: 1 – 14**

From Paul, apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, whose promise of life is fulfilled in Christ Jesus, to Timothy his dear son. Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I give thanks to the God of my forefathers, whom I worship with a clear conscience, when I mention you in my prayers as I do constantly night and day; when I remember the tears you shed, I long to see you again and so make my happiness complete. I am reminded of the sincerity of your faith, a faith which was alive in Lois your grandmother and Eunice your mother before you, and which, I am confident, now lives in you. That is why I remind you to stir into flame the gift from God which is yours through the laying on of my hands. For the spirit that God gave us is no cowardly spirit, but one to inspire power, love, and self-discipline.

So never be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord, nor of me imprisoned for his sake, but through the power that comes from God accept your share of suffering for the sake of the gospel. It is he who has brought us salvation and called us to a dedicated life, not for any merit of ours but for his own purpose and of his own grace, granted to us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, and now at length disclosed by the appearance on earth of our Saviour Jesus Christ. He has broken the power of death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. Of this gospel I have been appointed herald, apostle, and teacher. That is the reason for my present plight; but I am not ashamed of it, because I know whom I have trusted, and am confident of his power to keep safe what he has put into my charge until the great day. Hold to the outline of sound teaching which you heard from me, living by the faith and love which are ours in Christ Jesus. Keep safe the treasure put into our charge, with the help of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us.

**GOSPEL**

**Luke 17: 5 – 10**

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith"; and the Lord replied, "If you had faith no bigger than a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, "Be rooted up and planted in the sea"; and it would obey you.

Suppose one of you has a servant ploughing or minding sheep. When he comes in from the fields, will the master say, "Come and sit down straight away"? Will he not rather say, "Prepare my supper; hitch up your robe, and wait on me while I have my meal. You can have yours afterwards?" Is he grateful to the servant for carrying out his orders? So with you: when you have carried out all you have been ordered to do, you should say, "We are servants and deserve no credit; we have only done our duty."

## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### Old Testament Lesson

It would not be possible for us, at this distance in time, to know what it felt like to have had Jerusalem destroyed and people exiled. Small wonder that the book is titled 'Lamentations,' eh! But it underlines something that needs to be wider known. So often the assumption is that God is there to provide protection for the believer, Jew or Christian. The reality is very much otherwise. Please spend some time checking the extent to which the ordinary vicissitudes of life impact on the People of God, who need to come to terms with and adapt to all the rigours involved. Were that **not** the case, then the said People of God would be wimps beyond belief!!!! Struggle is what produces maturity; protection produces little more than shadows of humans. And this is true in all of life.

### Psalm

As I was typing in the Psalm for today, the thought struck me how unacceptable the sentiments would be in much of today's world. Blow you, Jack, I am all right is the general sentiment, and a recent test on TV of people's honesty underlines the extent to which dishonesty reigns. Small wonder, then, that the world is in turmoil. It is strange to me, that these ancient verities are ignored to a large extent, when if that were not the case, life would be so much fairer and safer ... and the wide disparity between haves and have-nots would be very much reduced.

### Epistle

Here we go again, with the same or similar views to the earlier readings expressed, as Paul encouraged Timothy in his life and ministry. It is not as if the Faith is about something exotic or esoteric; it is all quite simple and straightforward, even if it does run so contrary to the spirit of the present age and time.

### Gospel

And talk about contrary! There is not likely to be a lot of people who would agree with the views and attitudes expressed in this passage, now is there? We are far more likely to have people demanding that their presence be noted and their status well on view. Servant? Bah! Hogwash!!!!

Here is one of the principle reasons for rejection of the Faith by many of those in today's world – or at least our part of it. Power and position are the ultimate goals for rather too many. And the result of that way of life shows up in the dysfunction of what passes for community and even family.

There is no way in which the Christian position is 'different' just for the hell of it. It is different because this is the time-honoured way of finding a peaceful and beneficial way of living. When I look out for you, and you for me, and each of us for the rest of us, then all of us are safe and life can be lived peacefully if not profitably. Love is the real factor that makes life tick, and while this may not be rocket science, it is reality (and not in the television sense, let me tell you.)

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

I have commented before of the way in which so many people have departed from faith on the grounds that they expected this from God or that, and were disappointed. If God is Almighty, why does He not interfere and stop such things as wars, as hatreds, as disasters, and such? It has to be said that much of the perceived problem comes from .... making God in our own image, if I may dare to say so.

Even quite recently (as I write this) a most serious issue has arisen within our own wider family, a matter of possibly terminal illness, with one who has long been convinced that God would look after that part of the family because they are Charismatics. Even when contrary evidence and experience had damaged their family quite some years back, there remains the expectation of miracle. Time will tell, of course, but it is the expectation that concerns me.

Over the decades I have been involved in discussions and debates with people involved in both World Wars, whose faith was destroyed, they tell me, because of the totally horrific things that they witnessed. There is no

way I would ever to dare to debate their experiences, for although I have been immune from such things, there is no way anyone could, for instance, be a Holocaust denier with any veracity. So the fact of those horrific things is not for debate: their assessment of God, I suggest, could well be.

There is so often and so easily that assumption that if God is Almighty, then He could, were He real, put a stop to such horrors. It is a simple, and sadly simplistic theory that does not stand up to examination, not only for God, but for a generation or two of parents may I dare say. How often I have heard the complaint that parents had little or no influence on their demanding and unresponsive children. ‘What could I do?’ has been the catch-cry, and I have been rude enough to suggest that they have taken the easy way out, surrendering responsibility to their children. There have been others who have gone the other way and demanded total obedience from their kids, often with results more disastrous than those who surrendered. Either way has resulted in great heart-searching and sometimes heart **burn**, for there is little in life harder to cope with than deliberately wayward children.

The real reason for taking up this issue is dual: one, to offer an alternative, and the other, to point to something that may be of great surprise to a lot of people. The cause of that surprise is found in Scripture, and particularly in the Old Testament. It is not necessary to read the whole lot of that rather large volume, but to check out some parts of it. What may be more surprising still is that the reason we have this document lies in the fact that it constitutes the Hebrew answer to the life question – *why is there all this stuff-up in life anyhow?*

I wonder if that got you sitting up and thinking?

Part of the answer is to be found in that most remarkable (and even more totally misunderstood) Chapter 3 of Genesis. The story of the fall. It **is** story, parable, not history – myth or legend if you like. It was and remains an attempt to understand where all this trouble stems and stemmed from. I am not talking ‘original sin,’ for that is a rather gross misunderstanding of what the tale conveys. But it is about cause and responsibility. It is a tale to help me begin to understand me. And you. It is the age-old demand to be boss, and you my vassal. Reason? I know best, of course, and you do not. Ego! Self. Very damaging.

And how does one respond? The normal human reaction is one of force. Father knows best, and don’t argue, or you are dead. The Cain and Abel response.

And the rest of the Bible, or the latter part of the Old Testament, shows that such an approach only aggravates the problem; it does not solve it. Read some of the prophets, and see how different an approach they offered, and anticipated a divine involvement in the whole business, the Suffering Servant approach being one of them.<sup>1</sup> Or read Ezekiel who talks about real shepherds. Serving not controlling. Love not force, persistence not power. Now it all sounds so terribly easy, and it is nothing of the sort, but any good parent worth their salt will not demand, but offer a better way.

Oddly, many of those who oppose Christianity consider it to be mere superstition, and I have the hide to wonder why. The Faith has all to do with operating with justice, truth and integrity, and being a persistent parent as the prophets see God as evidencing. It was no easy business for the Loving Father to watch His own people acting like foolish and recalcitrant idiots. His reaction was not to step in and stop their stupidity – for the simple reason that such a course of action would reduce people to something far less than human. Like any parent, He would offer correction, until His next path was (and remains!) to step back and allow them to follow their own direction, in the hope and longing that they would see the disaster in front of them, and turn back to a more sensible path. This is described in Scripture as the ‘wrath of God,’ which was no belting over the head, but a waiting for a more reasoned response from them.

When it comes to World War I or II, or wars subsequent or before, **who was responsible? TRULY!** And the answer is us! Humans, foolish, selfish, ego-centric humans. And yes, quite a lot of them were Christian ... who either were not aware of their apostasy, or did not care a damn. Germany was Christian in both major conflicts. And so were their enemies. That first Scrap was, remember, *the War to end Wars!* And who remembered and for how long?

So before you go and call God for everything, or decide He no longer exists (if ever He did!) then stop and remember how He operates, and see just who is responsible for all the issues and problems, and see where He is perhaps longing over you to change direction, and return to truth and justice and integrity. Or, if you have no room left for God, then simply stop and see just who is responsible and then **you *change direction, and return to truth and justice and integrity.***

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<sup>1</sup> The second half of Isaiah (CH.40 on) has a series of these poems, including Chapter 52 -53. Yes, it has to do with Jesus, **Who** underlines the valid approach in His own life, death and resurrection.

**Sentence**

What shall I return to the Lord for all His bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation, and call on the Name of the Lord; I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all His people. *Psalm 116:12-14*

**Collect**

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

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Jeremiah 29: 1, 4 – 7**

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. [*This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. The letter was sent by the hand of Elashah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It said:*

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD.

**Psalm**

**66: 1 – 11**

O shout with joy to God all the earth: sing to the honour of His name, and give Him glory as His praise  
 Say to God, 'How fearful are Your works: because of Your great might, Your enemies shall cower before You.  
 All the earth shall worship You: and sing to You, and sing praises to Your name  
 Come and see what God has done: how terrible are His dealings with the children of Adam  
 He turned the sea into dry land: they crossed the river on foot: then were we joyful because of Him.  
 By His power He rules for ever, His eyes keep watch on the nations, and rebels shall never rise against Him  
 O bless our God, you peoples: and cause His praises to resound  
 Who has held our souls in life: Who has not suffered our feet to slip.  
 For You have proved us, O God: You have tried us as silver is tried.  
 You brought us into the net: You laid sharp torment on our loins.  
 You let our enemies ride over our heads, we went through fire and water: but You brought us into a place of liberty.

**Epistle**

**2 Timothy 1: 8 – 14**

Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

**GOSPEL**

**Luke 17: 11 – 19**

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were

made clean.

Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### Old Testament

That attitude of Jeremiah must surely be a poke in the eye at the modern expectation that everything happens at the push of a button. Put yourself in the prophet's position (without the wisdom of hindsight!) Surely everyone else at that point in time would have bemoaned the drastic situation for Israel and especially for its important ones. City and country gone; exiles in a foreign (and hated) country. No future; no hope; and despair at the heart of everything. *How would you feel, eh?*

And then comes the prophet, whose word from the Lord is, basically, **get on with it. Take the long-range view.** It is a stunning and comforting word, with enormous challenge at the same time. This is where you are; stop looking back or over your shoulder. Respond to the present. **And respond positively.** We Westerners find great hardship in that, and most of it is of our own making, is it not? **LONG RANGE VIEW, do you see!**

### Psalm

If one steps on the shoulders of the OT reading, there is more of the same to come. Much of our problem stems from failure to ponder where God is leading His people. Whilst we tend to expect peace and tranquillity, it rarely comes, now does it. But when you look back, which is why we have the Bible unvarnished, one has to see that the times of real progress and the times of great struggle. One of my convictions, for many years now, is that when Israel was pilgrimaging, all manner of lessons were learnt. When settled, lessons were forgotten with amazing speed.

### Epistle

And there you have it. This is precisely what the Epistle for today is underlining!

### GOSPEL

Funny, is it not? Those with the expectation of support and healing seem to be without gratitude almost completely. It is the outsider who really values the help when it comes. This – like the rest of today's readings – are a challenge to those of us who have been faithful (and possibly quite blind in some respects!)

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

Perhaps it is because that cameo of a Gospel passage is so well known, that it goes right over our heads, and does not remain long enough to have its important impact. It is because we **expect** Jesus to heal the leper, that we miss the point when He does. We would make great Jews in that situation, would we not? This is what God is supposed to do for His people and we get our knickers in a knot when He doesn't fulfill our expectations. So the point of such exercises, surely, is not to twist our underthings, but spend a bit of time wondering what He is on about.

I really do **love** that Jeremiah passage: it is a boot in the backside of all conventional Christians – and Jews, too come to that. Jeremiah lived in a critical period for Israel, for the Babylonian exile looked for all the world like the end of things for Israel, nation and religion. How would you feel if more than half of your congregation suddenly ceased to exist? How do you feel when, in lots of places to this day, you see your congregation ageing and failing? What does the future hold?

Jeremiah knew the answer to such questions, and responded to it with a great Australianism. **Just get on with it.** It was the word of the Lord through Isaiah, and when locals heard it, I bet they derided the prophet. 'What do you know about things anyhow?' they would have asked and challenged. In fact Jeremiah found himself imprisoned and threatened a number of times during his life. A most uncomfortable path, poor man. But the prophet had, quite obviously, pondered, as all good prophets did, **what God was saying to His people in this most horrific of circumstances.**

**And there lies the message for today.** Stop complaining, and begin listening to God if there are issues in front of you. First of all, be glad that He trusts you with such a position, and then ponder. Listen. Pray. Think. And

look back to see what our ancient worthies did to handle such crises.

Crises are there for very good reason. (Did you know that in the New Testament, the Greek word *krisis* is translated **judgement**. And that judgement is not some sort of punishment from God. It is a moment of choice, of decision, of picking the right path forward from that point on. And the choice you make is a clear illustration of who you are and what is important for you. Choose wisely, and it will be of great benefit to you and those around you. Choose foolishly, and you will find yourself in the pooh of your own making.

So the challenge that Jeremiah has for us is to take the long-range view of life – for God does not react like or to a press-button world. Nor does anyone else with any sense. ‘What are you saying to us in this, Lord?’ is the question that will provide significant answers if you stop long enough to listen and to see. And more often than not, the answers may well be evident from the time you ask such a question. The Lord does not much around with you and treat you with cotton wool. He treats you like an adult so that you will become more adult. And thank God that He does.

**Sentence**

Will God not grant justice to those who cry to Him day and night? Will He delay long in helping them?

*Luke 18:7-8*

**Collect**

Lord, tireless guardian of Your people, teach us to rely, day and night, on Your care. Drive us to seek Your justice and Your help and support our prayer lest we grow weary, for in You alone is our strength. We make our prayer through Your Son Jesus Christ, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Jeremiah 31: 27 – 34**

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD. In those days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

**Psalm**

**119: 97 – 104**

Lord how I love Your law: it is my meditation all the day long  
Your commandments have made me wiser than my enemies: for they remain with me for ever  
I have more understanding than all my teachers: for I study Your commands.  
I am wiser than the aged: because I have kept Your precepts.  
I have held back my feet from every evil path: that I might keep Your word  
I have not turned aside from Your judgements: for You Yourself are my teacher  
How sweet are Your words to my tongue: sweeter than honey to my mouth  
Through Your precepts I get understanding: therefore I hate all lying ways.

**Epistle**

**2 Timothy 3: 10 – 4:5**

Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.

Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. But wicked people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

**GOSPEL**

**Luke 18: 1 – 14**

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain

city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'

And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### Old Testament

It almost beggars imagination as to how one might comment on this most significant of passages. It is important for modern readers to realize how steep the learning curve was for those worthy ancients, and a learning curve that left previous experiences for dead. Modern readers need to be aware of the enormous evolution of the faith that took place over centuries and millennia, from Abraham to the time of Jeremiah. Please realize that this was a period of close to 2,500 years. From search for truth, to settledness of law, to – in this passage – the awareness of responsibility of each person and the availability of conscience in the making of moral and other choices. I doubt if there is any other religion or ism that contains anything like the breadth of exploration of life and God than that reflected in Judaism over that time.

Responsibility and conscience. As Paul put it, the Law was the 'school-teacher' to bring us to Christ. As with our own children, we begin by telling them what to do and how to do it, but as they grew and matured, we parents stepped back allowing mistakes because young people need to see that being human equals being responsible. My own eldest daughter thrilled me to pieces when, late in her teens, she thanked me for allowing her to make her mistakes. That she saw that was great enough; that she was grateful was enough to bring tears to my eyes.

### Psalm

Had you asked me to comment on this psalm when I was young, my response would have been caustic. Baloney, I would have said. But when one realizes that the genius of the Hebrew faith was – as mentioned above – then one's view changes radically. Justice and truth and integrity is, even in this day and age, the only sensible way to go. And the old psalmist was spot on.

### Epistle

As one comes to expect it, the Epistle stands on the shoulders of the earlier readings, underlining what has been said heretofore, but adding the factor that such an approach of faith and integrity in the real world is most likely to encounter strong and constant resistance. We do not live in an ideal world; we live in a rough-as-guts world where the old verities are despised and rejected. Small wonder that the Lord of life was similarly despised and rejected. Do not be surprised that there will be strong and sometime violent resistance to the Gospel, even to the Gospel properly understood and preached and lived. (I am not talking 'religion,' which word I dislike intensely because Christianity is not about 'religion.')

### GOSPEL

In fact, today's Gospel reflects the difference between religion and Christian reality. That second cameo reflects 'religion,' which misses the point and looks only at boosting the ego of the participant. The Faith has nothing to do with ego-boosting. It has everything to do with persisting in the direction one knows one needs to head, and getting on with the job, regardless of contrary resistance. This fact certainly does tend to show the difference, may I express it as, between the men and the boys. (Ladies, I imagine that the same distinction obtains for you also. Maturity is a necessary reality.)

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

I seem to manage great discussions with quite some of my Christian friends from decades past, whenever

the subject of evolution comes into focus. Part of the reason for the debates tends to arise because I was once right where they were, 'Biblical, literalist and conservative,' though I have to add that that situation arose largely out of ignorance. Science and evolution, in the '40s and early '50s where I lived, were mortal enemies to faith. As I look back to then, and to my Biblical ignorance, I wonder at my gall at taking such a position. (Since I have seen little disagreement between real science and Scripture (properly – which means *Jewishly*) – understood, I am amazed that such old battles continue, even though the grounds are rebutted.

What is more to the point in this context, is that a close look at Hebrew/Christian Faith reveals exactly the same process of development and growth, over a period of millennia. The Old Testament Lesson for today underlines that process, and – as the notes above indicate – that underlining continues through the rest of those readings. One of the remarkable things about the Hebrew Faith is, that as far as I can see, it emerged over that long period **because** Hebrew Faith developed as those ancients pondered life as they lived and experienced it. This means that as experience grew and outlooks widened, people's move from the last gasps of superstitious paganism to a far more mature outlook emerged. Perhaps the best and clearest example of that progress is one that has long been the tool of antagonists of these faiths.

I have memories going way back of arguments against the Faith, because of the bloodthirsty view of God held by those in early Old Testament times. The punitive, retributive God Who is said to have demanded the deaths of Achan and his family, and other perpetrators of such periods, was really the hangover from the ancient fear of the unknown that translated to the fear of God. (Are you aware of the extent to which the first Creation Story in Genes 1:1 – 2:4a changed perception radically. There was only one God to worry about, not multitudes! That was an enormous leap forward. It was such a leap forward that millennia afterwards, the very discoveries of science were rendered possible. *If there is one God, then one can expect to find order in the universe!*)

Back to Jeremiah. "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge." It is a rather common, present furphy that our bad points come to us through our genes, or through our environment. In Jeremiah's day, it was common to blame your parents. (You have heard that one yourself surely!) It is interesting to note, while on the subject, that in the Ten Commandments, those who disobey can, so to speak, blame their parents to the third and fourth generation. This is a limitation of impact, please note, not an excuse for me to blame Mum and Dad. On the other hand, those who are faithful have the comfort of thousands (of generations) of beneficial effect.

The real issue that Jeremiah was raising was the business of personal responsibility. As one of my Bishops once commented to a vastly erring young man at our Rectory after a night fleeing from police, 'Bill, you are human; *ergo* you are responsible.' Bill did all he could to refute the charge, but +Bruce left him no room to move. It is an important point: without personal responsibility, our humanness is reduced to penury. With it, the sky is surely the limit.

As if to underline the direction of this development pointed to by the prophet, he went on to promise what, I suspect, has always been true. Deep within our psyche, Christian or otherwise, we are aware of what is just and true, honourable and compassionate, regardless of our background, genes or parents. In fact one of our late departed Archdeacons of decades past used to pontificate on how, in his early years, whenever someone did wrong and erred from the straight and narrow, they knew it, and expected the repercussions. Those outcomes may result from Court action, but mostly they stemmed from bent consciences, traumatised by their sins. Nowadays, I wonder whether our almost innate dishonesty and failure or refusal to face our responsibilities is one of the factors that lead to breakdown and disintegration. (I am always grateful for the confession and absolution in our Anglican formularies; they are not there to drive us into breast-beating, for heaven's sake. They are there to free me up to be able to face my errors and glitches, **and learn from them. If I do not need to hide them from God, then I do not need to hide from them myself. If you cannot handle my failures, then I still know Someone Who can!**

**Sentence**

Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.

*Luke 15:7*

**Collect**

O God, Who alone can probe the depths of the heart, You hear the prayer of the humble and justify the repentant sinner: grant us the gift of humility that, seeing our faults clearly, we may refrain from judging our neighbour and rely solely in Your saving grace. We make this prayer through Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Joel 2: 23 – 32**

O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame. Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

**Psalm**

**65**

You are to be praised O God, in Zion: to You shall vows be paid, You Who answers prayer  
To You shall all flesh come to confess their sins: when our misdeeds prevail against us, You will purge them away  
Blessed are those whom You choose and take to Yourself to dwell within Your courts: we shall be filled with the good things of Your house, of Your holy temple  
You will answer us in Your righteousness with terrible deeds, O God our Saviour: You that are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the distant seas.  
Who by Your strength made fast the mountains: You that are girded with power  
Who stilled the raging of the seas, the roaring of the waves: and the tumult of the peoples  
Those who dwell at the ends of the earth are afraid at Your wonders: the dawn and the evening sing Your praises  
You tend the earth and water it: You make it rich and fertile  
The river of God is full of water: and so providing for the earth, You provide grain for us all.  
You drench its furrows, You level the ridges between: You soften it with showers and bless its early growth  
You crown the year with Your goodness: and the tracks where You have passed drip with fatness  
The pastures of the wilderness run over: and the hills are girded with joy  
The meadows are clothed with sheep: and the valleys stand so thick with corn that they laugh and sing

**Epistle**

**2 Timothy 4: 6 – 8 & 16 – 18**

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

At my first defence no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

People were bringing even infants to Jesus that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

A certain ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother.'" He replied, "I have kept all these since my youth."

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" He replied, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God."

Then Peter said, "Look, we have left our homes and followed you." And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life."

## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### Old Testament

Whilst part of this passage from Joel is fairly well-known, the earlier section is rather less familiar. One needs to read and understand this prophet in terms of where **he** understood God, which will be a little different and perhaps more sophisticated in our present day and age. As repeated constantly, Israel's understanding of God grew, not from eremites who went into the desert to pray and think; that sort of spirituality is not really part of Hebrew culture or religion. What they did was wait and watch and understand from the exigencies of ordinary life, and from those experiences catch sight of what was necessary and true and good. As with all human searches, there were potholes along the way.

What the prophet was expecting was fairly normal for then: when Israel was true to God, then there would be moves forward. In this context, Joel was indicating that not only would prophets and important people have clear indication from the Almighty, but that ordinary and even unexpected people would catch sight of truth and have visions. Sometimes we lose sight of the fact that the Holy Spirit is, in fact, given to all humans, if only they keep their eyes and ears, and more importantly their hearts, open to truth.

### Psalm

Obviously this ancient psalmist is on the same wave-length as Joel, when he expected that God would replenish his people with abundance of food if and when they returned to Him. Mind you, the ancient Jews were always **very** aware of from where the benefits of life came. That is something that moderns, unconnected with rural reality, lose sight of with great speed.

### Epistle

Here is an interesting and somewhat well-known section of Paul's writings: and you might notice something of a contrast between the promise of faithfulness and the difficulties likely to be experienced. While I find it odd that Paul was left to his own devices in the stressful time of his house arrest in Rome, it would be hard for anyone to be identified as Christian, for they would be likely to suffer the same fate. (Mind you, I am not sure that the Apostle would have been all that easy to cope with; such people can be quite demanding in expectation even when they do not see it that way!)

## GOSPEL

Here is an interesting connection between little ones – children – and the 'certain ruler.' The Gospel writers will often present contrasts in situations or in people to get a clear message across. The first part of this contrast is not all that difficult to follow: but note the difference between **child-like** and **childish!**

That cameo of the 'certain ruler' needs some explanation, it seems to me. There was a person who was a product of Judaism of the time, all self-righteous and rigid, keeping to the Law. Sadly, such approach in any field of human endeavour seems to produce an inflexibility that soon becomes a self-justification and a refusal to accept anyone not likeminded.

There lies part of Jesus' reason to challenge the 'Good' epithet. That man was probably being somewhat snide in calling Jesus 'Good.' If it was not a put-down, it would have been a signal that 'we are both on the same wave-length.' If so, that would be why Jesus refused the tag, simply because that assumption of that man was quite false. The measure of goodness is not you or me; it is the Father **and no other**. As the debate went on, Jesus made it clear, in His challenge, that if that man was to mature as a believer, then he had to let go his self-styled position of importance, and give himself (let alone his wealth) away. It was a challenge for him to be 'fair dinkum,' and to turn his back on legalism in his religion. As it turned out, it was a challenge too far, as it was shaping up to be even for the Twelve.

### NOTES FOR A SERMON

I am not sure that you will follow me in the direction (seems to me) that today's readings are taking us. I can only hope that you will see through the words to the reality.

Not far from where we now live is a Christadelphian Meeting Place, and the sign outside will often show the subject of next Sunday's sermon or talk. It is a revealing pattern, often commented upon by my wife as we pass by. The latest sign indicated a Bible Study on, *inter alia*, Law and Order. At this time<sup>2</sup>, that subject is close to the bone for South Australians, and whilst it may provoke quite some interest amongst locals, I am rude enough to wonder if the focus is somewhat outside the Christian range. Law and Grace is a contrast to which we are used; Law and Order seems to me to signify another path altogether.

Judaism at the time of our Lord's life was very focussed on that sort of direction. The Mosaic Law lay at the very heart of Pharisaism, and keeping of the Law in 'every jot and tittle' was primary. With the wisdom of hindsight, it is clear that such a path in religion is both terribly divisive and ultimately is very self-centred. It is one of the great divisions between haves and have not. As a holy one, I could take great pride in being 'holy,' and be despising of those lesser mortals who were unable or unwilling to travel that path. Legalism in any range of human endeavour tends to be most counter-productive, and often leads to the very fundamentalism in religion and politics that does little other than exacerbate whatever issue is being faced.

Our Lord, of course, having been brought up in such an atmosphere, was keenly aware of the issue. In fact, much of His ministry was directed towards pricking the bubble of such practices and attitudes. And that is a difficult direction to head, as that legalistic approach tends to be sanctified by tradition. Old habits are very hard to shift. On the other hand, if they are not shifted or abolished, there can be no progress or development of faith – and that can mean the end of that process.

Spend some time to read Scripture, especially the Old Testament, to see the extent to which this process of growth and development, of leaving behind old patterns and attitudes, is focal and vital. The OT Prophets' writings are full of such challenges. Even today's reading from Joel points to the need to leave behind outdated and ineffective approaches, in order to leave the path clear for all sorts of different and unexpected now growth. Having the 'Spirit poured out on all flesh' was a radical departure from what had been perceived as the normal way. *All flesh!* Even slaves, and women! Shock. Horror. But it could not happen unless there was a great mind shift in Israel.

In fact the Gospel for today takes that a step further. Jesus' pointing to children as exemplars must have shocked those people: kids were important, but were nonage, non people until Bar Mitzvah. But kids have long been illustrative of capacity to sense when truth is being denied and justice hidden. It is from adults that children learn to lie and prevaricate.

So it is for truth in faith, in living, to which Jesus pointed. Being fair dinkum, and open and honest. And let's be honest: there is not a lot of that around these days now is there?

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<sup>2</sup> October, 2009

**Sentence**

Today salvation has come to this house, for the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.

*Luke 19:10*

**Collect**

God our Father, Whose will it is to bring all things to order and unity in our Lord Jesus Christ; may all the peoples of the world, now divided and torn apart by sin, be brought together under His sovereign rule of love, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Habakkuk 1: 1 – 4 & 2: 1 – 4**

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw. O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous-- therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

I will stand at my watch-post, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint. Then the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

**Psalm**

**119: 132-144**

Righteous are You, Lord God: and just are Your judgements  
The commands that You have commanded: are exceedingly righteous and true  
Zeal and indignation have choked my mouth: because my enemies have forgotten Your words  
Your word has been tried in the fire: and therefore Your servant loves it  
I am small and of no account: but I have not forgotten Your precepts  
Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness: and Your law is the truth  
Trouble and anguish have taken hold on me: but Your commandments are my delight  
The righteousness of Your commands is everlasting: O give me understanding, and I shall live.

**Epistle**

**2 Thessalonians 1: 1 – 4 & 11 – 12**

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.

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To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

**GOSPEL**

**Luke 19: 1 – 10**

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### Old Testament Lesson

There will be rather few people who may have heard of Habakkuk, but I suspect many will be aware of the statement at the end of this passage. Minor prophets are often overlooked or even never seen or referred to, and that is a pity. They often reflect the struggle that the real people of God had with those who simply went through the motions. Injustice is the issue, and that is never a rare experience for anyone, let alone people of truth.

A comment I dare to make on that *'the righteous live by their faith.'* This was sufficient a variant to have motivated so much of Luther's reformation in Germany, though I suspect that much of the real emphasis has been missed in the furor. I suggest that the word 'faith' should be translated 'faithfulness' – a reflection of their direction and goal, rather than anything less visible. In a world of injustice and greed, when people to live by the ancient verities of justice and truth, it meant that they had a far more solid and substantial basis by which to live. In so doing, they reflect the nature of their God and Father.

*You might observe that my difficulty with 'the just shall live by faith' has so often been demeaned to a so-called 'spiritual' level that is internalised and no longer visible. It turns the Faith into a somewhat secret religion and that is the antithesis of both Old or New Testament theology.*

### Psalm

There will ever be a strange dichotomy between Law and Faith in people's minds and in their practice. Quite some comment has been made in last week's readings, but I offer a comment or two here.

First of all, this psalmist rejoiced in the mere fact of God's Law, for law properly seen and used offers a clear and solid regime for living and inter-relating. It is the opposite of chaos, something that both Jews and other of the time feared greatly. Chaos is destructive and pointless; Law is neither, properly approached.

On the other hand, when I become legalistic, I become harsh and divisive. It becomes a tool to ensure (to my certainty) my superiority and your inferiority, and that becomes almost as destructive as chaos.

If there is one thing that mars the lives of countless people these days, it is the utter uncertainty and lack of values – so people end up being unaware of which way is up. One wonders to what extent the current issues of depression and anger stem from that factor in life.

### Epistle

*If you take the time to read the omitted verses (5 – 10) you may realize the reason for their non-inclusion. Thessalonians was written quite early in Paul's ministry and you may note that if you read Paul's letters **in order of date of writing**, that the development of his eschatology is clearly visible. So too is his rather punitive theology of hellfire and damnation.*

It must have been a very difficult thing to be Christian in Thessalonika – then and now one suspects. It was a pagan city, of Greek allegiance<sup>3</sup> - and the ancient Jewish expectations within the Faith would have been quite anomalous to most people there. It is remarkable to see the extent to which the Faith grew in such infertile ground. Remember, too, that Christianity was not the only 'new religion' (or old!) floating around. What is called 'New Age' these days is nothing but a revival of much of what passed for religion then – and before, and after.

### GOSPEL

This story of Zacchaeus is a stunning tale of growth of a human being from self-obsession to faith, and it also illustrates the stunning capacity of Jesus to recognize and respond to people in unexpected and surprising situations. Our Lord's ministry was, primarily, to offer the chance to move forward and develop as human, and this is a remarkable instance.

Read between the lines, and do not miss the 'small man syndrome' that seemed to motivate this man. You have come across other examples surely, where little people try to magnify their position to make up for their lack of size and influence. One suspects that Zac became a tax collector simply in order to amass wealth and (somewhat false) status simply to thumb the nose at his contemporaries. That he would have been hated for it would have had little effect: this short man had endured such misjudgement all his life, no doubt.

I find it fascinating that Jesus invited Himself to Zac's place for lunch. As the tale unfolds, Zac would have been somewhat delighted that Jesus Himself thumbed His nose at current social etiquette for the sake of another human being. Jesus never was one to kow-tow to current social practices, as you will have noticed. And the mere

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<sup>3</sup> Greek allegiance may be seen as an oxymoron to some extent. Greece was not a country but a rather mixed bag of city states, largely autonomous – and somewhat affected by Roman control.

fact that he was seen as human as anyone else may well have been the pivot on which the sudden and powerful change came to that man.

Notice, if you will, the use of the word 'salvation.' It has nothing to do with heaven here: it has everything to do with being made whole, being healed, given room to move and grow. It is the opening of the door of opportunity for Zacchaeus to become the person he was created to be. Barriers to that growth were removed, not by Jesus interestingly, but by the little man himself.

### NOTES FOR A SERMON

Several times over the years I have pondered with people outside the Faith about how they would consider a world and life not so much without conflict, as without **unresolved** conflict. Their responses have been quite interesting, really. One of the chief complaints as they ponder the apparently impossible is that it strikes them as being boring, boring, boring. When you stop and think about it, you have to see that whilst no news can be good news, no news at all would leave a considerable blank at 7.00pm on ABC TV. So is all this a matter of the Good News being no news at all for most of our Australian contemporaries? In the face of today's readings that may well appear to be the case.

*So the question I have for you today is ..... is the Gospel irrelevant to most of today's population? It is an important issue to discuss!*

Irrelevance used to be very much the in word as Christians faced their uncertain future. It may still apply where some Christians tend to resemble troglodytes and attempt to live a matter of a century or two ago. Anyhow, it may well be that there are not a lot of people concerned enough about the state of the world and relationships – or perhaps feel that it is futile to attempt any change or betterment. In the end, it must be said that in spite of such resistance to change, the need is there, and is worth attempting to find a resolution.

"Today salvation has come to this house." It may well be that one of the problems we Christians have is the use of words, and the meanings we place upon them. That 's' word is a case in point, which reduces what we are on about to the old saw "Jesus saves" being met with 'at which Bank?' All a bit twee, of course. I have to say that the hardest part, I have found, in 50 years of ministry, is to get people prepared to think beyond the trite and *apparently* tried understanding of the Faith. 'I was taught such and such in Sunday School and that is what I will always believe!' And there is not much one can do to move the troglodyte forward, in spite of the fact that Sunday School tended to be a rather poor learning centre. Lots of enthusiasm, thank heaven, but very little Biblical or theological skill.

So back to the Readings. Little is known about the prophet Habakkuk except that the evidence points to him being a contemporary of Jeremiah; that means also that 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah and Ezekiel were in action around the same times. This prophet's problem with what he saw as evil is that God seemed to be using pagan – and therefore sinful! – nations as instruments of punishment of the People of God. Yet it was wider than that, for the prophet's real issue was that evil always seemed to win the day, and that left the righteous out on a fairly useless limb. Unlike the other-mentioned prophets, Habakkuk was arguing against God, rather than against the errant Israel. In other words, evil was the great problem for the prophets; why is it not so much the case now?

Had you lived in the time referred to, around the beginning of the sixth century BC, you would be more aware of the fact that those now revered prophets were in an almost total **minority**. Jeremiah was imprisoned and threatened several times and went in fear of his life. Isaiah longed for Israel to take up its role as Servant of the Lord (though they still do not see that challenge in their reading of the Scriptures, I discover.) And you know from your own reading of the Gospels, that Jesus had no easy path to tread, being opposed so often and constantly by those who one would have thought knew better. In other words, it remains a fact of life, then and now, that searchers after truth and reconciliation may well be few and far between. In spite of that, the realities are also quite near to people, even if they turn their backs upon it.

I guess the surprising thing, as evidences by today's Gospel, is that searchers after truth may well be found in the most unexpected places. (I can vouch, for instance, for the fact that my most responsive 'congregation' was in Prison.) Had you lived in Jericho then, (even more so now perhaps!) you would not have expected Zacchaeus to have reacted the way he did. He would have been one of the most despised inhabitant of the town, and an apostate of the first order as far as the synagogue was concerned. Mention has been made before of the small man syndrome, doubtless as common then as now. It may be reading into the information more than is there, but one can imagine this young fellow growing up in an atmosphere where he was looked down on, and despised for his

lack of stature. That can be devastating for many people, especially in their younger years. (I recall having to do with a Senior School pupil many years ago, quite some inches shorter than his peers, male and female, and being 'too big for his boots' in order to prove some point or other. So doubtless our short character determined to rub it in the noses of his contemporaries by having 'the best house and the best car and the highest status' - albeit with the Romans! And it may well have been a situation similar to Matthew (Levi) who had come to the conclusion that the amassing of wealth did not reach its promised proportion. It is only as the honesty of such people comes to the surface that any sense of search or real betterment stirs within them. It certainly did with Matthew, and, as we see, with Zacchaeus.

It is often said that the 'hip pocket nerve' offers a real insight into the true nature of a person. If one gives to make an impression, then they have yet to learn. But if they act as did Matthew and Zacchaeus, then something rather more genuine is going on inside them. And I doubt if it needs to be said that there are never a great number of people of that sort of character around.

Salvation had come to the house of Zacchaeus that day because the barriers to him going anywhere in his real pilgrimage of life were broken down – *and they were broken down by old Zac himself*. Certainly, Jesus offered the possibility, which is all He did if you look closely, and then supported him for the time He was in town. The path ahead would still have been problematic for the tax collector, for he would have had to cope with a most unhappy Roman regime, a misunderstanding by his peers, and a sense of threat from his co-religionists. Following Christ is never going to offer a bed of roses, an easy travel.

So it is an informative and challenging series of readings, and one which intending Christians ought to take note of. Whilst the Gospel **is** Good News, it is also running diametrically opposite to the normal human stream of things, contrary to the culture of most parts of the world and times in history, but it remains – as far as I can see – the only valid, **relevant**, effective path to overcoming evil and creating community through reconciliation. And both the way it all works, and the outcomes it produces remains the same for either vertical (towards God) or horizontal (towards others) aspect.