

Sentence

At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father

Phil. 2:10-11

Collect

Everlasting God, in Your tender love for the human race, You sent Your Son to take our nature upon Him and to suffer death upon the Cross; give us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, that, sharing His humility we may come to be with Him in His glory, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Isaiah 50: 4 – 9a

PSALM

31: 9 – 18

EPISTLE

Philippians 2:5 – 11

GOSPEL

Mark 15: 1 – 39

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Please just stop for a moment and ponder the enigmatic position you are being asked to take about this Jesus. On the one hand, you are presented with a Person Whose life was given wholly to others. That He did, in a world which, like ours, pandered to success and power. On the other hand, that same Person was denigrated, debased and executed like a common criminal. That death was a statement of the assessment placed on Jesus by His political and religious leaders of the time. This is rather more than the ‘tall poppy syndrome’ that Australians seem to enjoy indulging in; this is a deliberate statement by the power-brokers of Jesus’ day that He was far too dangerous to allow to live any longer. **He was a total threat to their position.** Jesus’ death was the expression of the total refusal of the world (of His day and ours) to change direction for everyone’s benefit.

That is the sort of world in which we live, *and never forget it.*

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON.

I do not know how long it will take for some Christians to see the death of Jesus as more than the ransom for their sins. While on that subject, I find it important to underline the fact that, if you sit up and take notice of the Biblical approach to the issue, what Jesus did on the Cross was to ‘wear’ whatever human evil could throw at Him, and destroy it by His refusal to retaliate. **In Biblical terms, evil is overcome when it is shown up for what it is!** The real struggle at the Cross was the harsh business of human evil being confronted by Divine good, the latter revealing that evil by allowing it to do its worst.

This, one of the final in the series of Isaiah’s Servant Songs, points up the profoundly difficult role that the Servant has – to remain true to God while coping with human bitter antagonism. The only encouragement here that the Servant can see is that – sooner or later – that evil human response will become clear to other people. Truth will survive whatever humans can throw at it.

PSALM

This is a far from pretty Psalm as it expresses the extreme anguish of someone who was ‘put through the mill’ by his contemporaries. It may have been jealousy of some sort that evoked such a harsh and judgemental response to the author of the Psalm. The only recourse that victim had was his appeal to God, Who perhaps alone knew and understood the truth of the situation. It has to be said that such situations are far from unknown and maybe a reader of these notes has been pressed out of shape by an erstwhile ‘friend.’

EPISTLE

The translation offered by the Revised English Bible has some unexpected twists to it. 'Let this mind be in you' is replaced by a rather greater challenge really. Certainly it is clearer. If we are to be disciples of Christ, then we need to pattern our actions and attitudes on Him. This will take us in a direction diametrically opposite to what we may describe as 'normal human.'

As I have pointed out elsewhere, this ancient Christian song asks us to compare – or rather, *contrast* Jesus and Adam.¹ In the Genesis story, Adam DID grasp at equality (even superiority!) with God, and that is the clearest Biblical statement of what constitutes sin. It is my determination to get on top of you, to control you, and to control all the circumstances surrounding me. It is hugely destructive, and painfully human.

Jesus operated totally differently, and that is the direction He puts in front of us to pursue. Now please spend some time thinking through the enormous repercussions presented here.

GOSPEL

There is almost too much of the Gospel today to comment at any great length. In fact, by the time this Gospel is read there will not be a lot of time for a sermon – which may be a relief for some. However, as an exercise for yourselves, could I ask you to read through this painfully familiar story and notice the extent to which all but One of the major players found methods to protect themselves or to avoid following where the truth of the situation was obviously bidding them to head. Power, abuse, mockery and other means were employed to avoid following the obvious. How many systems and methods can people use to avoid the real issues? The story of Jesus' trials portrays a long list of miscarriages of justice; but then such trials are never otherwise.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I must be too much of a traditionalist, for I bemoan the way in which Passion Sunday has overtaken Palm Sunday. The huge contrast between the raving welcome given to Jesus on Palm Sunday contrasts terribly with the baying crowd on the Friday morning. And that has always provided me with the challenge never to be only a fair weather friend or a fair-weather disciple.

On the other hand, the readings for Passion Sunday provide so much to ponder and make one's own that the extent of the learning curve seems quite endless. First there is the exploration of Isaiah as he pondered the role of the Suffering Servant, and it is a measure of Isaiah's insight as the Jesus story unfolded. The old prophet underlines the terrible and lonely road of the person who dares to be different and offer a superior way of living. Of course it all makes sense, that way of Jesus, but who is prepared to walk in that way? The Psalmist was passionately aware of the loneliness of being different.

The passage that sticks out head and shoulders even in this remarkable series of readings is that most marvellous of Epistles. As I have often said, if this is all there ever was of the New Testament, then the Gospel of Christ would be remarkably vivid and clear in this ancient Christian hymn. For the Gospel is far more than wacko I can be forgiven. It is clearly visible here that the Gospel is the offer from God Himself to chose to follow Christ in the pattern of living. In complete contrast to Adam, Jesus lived lowly and as a servant. If and when we follow the pattern ourselves, then people will perhaps begin to see the real and profound value of the Gospel, not in the world to come but right in the here and now.

¹ Remember, *Adam* is humanity, you – not some indistinct ancestor from a forgotten past.

Sunday 12th April, 2009

Easter Day

Sentence

Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us: there let us keep the feast

1 Cor. 5:7

Collect

Brightness of God's glory, Whom death could not conquer nor the tomb imprison; as You have shared in the frailty of human flesh, help us to share in Your immortality in the spirit. Reveal Yourself to us this day and all our days, as the First and Last, the Living One, our immortal Saviour and Lord. **Amen**

FIRST LESSON

Acts 10: 34 – 43

FOR THE PSALM

Hymn to the Risen Christ

EPISTLE

1 Corinthians 15: 1 – 11

GOSPEL

Mark 16: 1 – 8

NOTES ON THE READINGS ..

I will often ask people –when hearing or thinking about the Readings, to take notice of the fine print. That means, either to know quite something about the passage and its context, and/or to refuse to allow familiarity to overlook the information given in the passage. It is far too easy to assume that you know it all, for that is when you may well miss much of the point.

First Lesson

If you are a little mystified by the inclusion of this Reading on Easter Day, then keep thinking. You may be satisfied, initially, with the fact that there is clear reference to the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Now let's travel that extra mile.

This event took place well after the Resurrection, when it is clear that much of the ramifications of the Gospel had yet to impact even on the Apostles. This incident, with the Roman Centurion, is another of those fascinating learning curves for the Apostles and for Peter in particular. *They had to work through their theology just as much as you do!*

Peter was stunned to confront the extent to which this pagan military overlord understood about life and faith and reality. It was an affront to Peter's religious heritage and background. Like all Jews, he remained convinced that all Gentiles were beyond the pale, ignorant, and of utterly no interest to God. This incident had the effect of (beginning the) change to all that. Like any 'epiphany' or transfiguration, it ran against Peter's grain, and needed some time in order for him to come to terms with it all. In other words, it is about time Christians, including the most conservative of them all, took off their blinkers and saw things as they really are.

For the Psalm

There is rather a lot to ponder in this rather stunning old Christian hymn: not least of which is the reference to the Passover. In case it has never hit you before, the Biblical record is quite constant in its appreciation of the fact that the Passover and the Exile are all part of the one plan of redemption, and are all very illustrative of the Divine approach to the human dilemma. The Resurrection is rather more than the means whereby you get to heaven. It is in fact the example *par excellence* as to how Christians should operate as humans in a world that turns its back on God. Here is no religious illustration: here is down-to-earth information on why to operate as Christian, for here lies the only workable and valid way to reconciliation for any human situation. That reference to Adam (yes, that is what is being referred to) is making it quite clear that in Christ there is a completely different way to operate. Why do so few Christians even see that let alone follow?

Epistle

Back when I was a very young priest, the old Prayer Book has this passage as the reading as a Funeral. It is powerful stuff, but I am sure that most if it went over the heads of mourners unless they were believers. There are a couple of items that strike me as important as we refer to this passage.

First, please do see that Paul saw the necessity of offering to people of his day some real and tangible evidence that Jesus has risen. None of that evidence (talking to people who spoke to the Risen Christ) is available to us today, but there were mobs of witnesses, eyewitnesses, then. So Paul was saying that there were then lots of people who could verify the facts. (If he was trying to fool people, then he was being remarkably stupid.)

Now second, that raises a problem for moderns. If such evidence was necessary then, why it is that we are no longer able to access such evidence for something so hugely important. I find the answer to that rather stunning. If resurrection sounds all a bit too much in this cynical and scientific age, then I ask you to ponder awhile.

What does the resurrection say to us? It is not just (if I can put it that way) that Jesus rose again from the dead. It is a powerful statement that **truth can be suppressed by humans but not killed, not destroyed**. The same is true about love, and about all the important factors of life. And the only way I can be sure of that **is to be committed myself to truth, to love, to justice and everything else that Jesus points to**. Only by treading that path can I be sure that these things are true. The evidence is there all right; but I need to stick my neck out to be sure of it.

GOSPEL

It is always the ladies, is it not, who are there bright and early to deal with the practical issues of life and of death. Nothing seems to put them off. Mind you, I have more than a sneaky suspicion those Jewish peoples, and the ladies in particular, have always been down to earth. [I can tell a story of a particularly remarkable lady and her response to her husband dying right there at home.] Certainly, they were overtaken by events, but they had their feet on the ground. There was a job to be done, and an unpleasant one at that. But there they were, with all the equipment needed for the task.

On the other hand, none of the disciples were in any way prepared for the events that were to unfold before their very eyes. And it was the ladies that had to convey the message to the Eleven, - which is something which makes us look beyond the old male hang-ups, surely, as the women led the way.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

Perhaps it has been a matter of over-exposure, but I am getting to the stage where the great Christian celebrations do not excite me as once they did. Much of the reason for that response in me has very little to do with the reality behind the season – it has more to do with the strange and inflated stuff that passes as sermons or explanations of the Seasons. Small wonder that the Easter congregations are smaller. Some people are far less likely to cope with froth and bubble these days – so where do they get solid stuff?

I guess that part of my problem also lies with dearly-loved parents who lived their faith without wearing in on their shirt-sleeves, and were really quite down-to-earth people in everything that they did. While we were certainly excited by Christmas as kids, it was always made clear that there was little point in celebrating if the rest of one's life did not reflect the attitudes that the Season emphasised. Christmas is giving; Easter is forgiving; and if one did not operate along those lines *every* day of the year, then one was missing the point.

Run all that alongside a world where advertising for Christmas **spending** begins in late October, and where the hard sell increases in stridency as December 25th draws closer. Parallel to that is the constant news flashes of under-age drinking and car accidents, sudden death or long-drawn-out depression. One of the things that must be of almost total disappointment to the unbelieving world is the tinselled pointlessness of the season. Worse happens when the credit card chickens come home to roost about a month later.

I am not being all morose and negative! I am wondering why people other than Christians celebrate Christmas *at all*. It must be totally pointless for them.

Sunday 19th April, 2096

Second Sunday of Easter

Sentence

Jesus said, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, so I send you.'

John 20:21

Collect

Risen Christ, Whose absence leaves us in despair, and Whose presence is overwhelming: breathe on us with Your abundant life, that where we cannot see, we may be encouraged to believe, that we may be raised with You.
Amen

FIRST LESSON

Acts 4: 32 – 36

PSALM

133

EPISTLE

1 John 1:1 – 2:2

GOSPEL

JOHN 20: 19 – 31

NOTES ON THE READINGS

First Lesson

There may well be a whole range of cameos in the Acts that are not familiar to many present-day readers. This particular one is an absolute beauty, being somewhat in line with that *random, foolish acts of generosity* comment that used to be popular a few years ago, Here is record of an experiment that should have succeeded, but really did lapse (or collapse!) because of sheer human cupidity.

It is ever the case, is it not, that we Christians are capable of the most loving and risky choices for others, or at least in the talking about it. However, when it comes down to the nitty-gritty, we tend to step back. If ever you wonder why St. Paul was for ever taking up collections for the Jerusalem Church, its roots may well be traced back to here. The idea was wonderful; the execution dreadful. It was an experiment with (dare you say this?) communism. Not the Russian sort, but the basic version.

Psalm

For the life of me, I have never been able to make the connection between brethren unity and oil on Aaron's beard. Dew of Hermon, of course, even sounds enormously refreshing, but oil? Perhaps we ought to begin with the expression of unity and belonging together, without the involvement of the hip pocket nerve. But even that tends to come undone because I see things differently to you.

Epistle.

Dear old John; small wonder that he was held in high esteem in the Infant Church. Simple words as usual, with profound insight if you dare to explore. One of the issues that modern minds may miss is the emphasis on *incarnation*. The tangible Jesus if you like to put it that way. So much of modern 'religion' lays emphasis on the spiritual or even ephemeral. The Christian Faith is rather different, aligning with the need for expression in human and tangible terms. I am no use to you if I do not love my brother **right here and now**.

Gospel

If they think about it, the purists may well have difficulty with this passage, for here John has no difficulty in placing Pentecost before Pentecost, if you understand what I am saying.. The Holy Spirit comes to

the Eleven, well before the events portrayed in Acts 2. Here is the *shalom*, and here is the *Spirit*. And there is the ever-present emphasis on *forgiveness*.

However, that which always hits me between the eyes is the popularist misapprehension about poor old Thomas. ***Disbelieving he was not.*** In fact Thomas usually tended to be light-years ahead of the rest of the crew. The reality is that Thomas was aware of the enormity of the change to life if Jesus really is risen. Nothing can ever be the same again ... ***if the resurrection is real.*** But Thomas was not prepared to take someone else's word for something so hugely significant. He needed cold hard evidence. And you will notice, if you dare, that Jesus gave it to him. Please note that Thomas was ever the one to ask the hard questions that no one else dared mention, and yet everyone needed the answers. Thank the Lord for Thomas. I think he is tops. And so should you!

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I may have told you the story before, but shortly before leaving Port Augusta earlier last year, I was in the Church of an un-named congregation that tends to emphasise some strange things in their faith. There, in a huge poster in their worship centre was the following statement: "*Reason and sense are the enemies of faith.*" If I had had the opportunity, I would have had words with the pastor – not that he would have listened, I fear. One of the reasons that so many people have turned their backs on Christian Faith has been this propensity of many preachers to denigrate reality and posit the necessity for faith that operates from no substantial base. (Mind you, I find it remarkable, that so many who turn their back of Christian reality then go on to choose reliance on the most unsubstantial of possibilities. Check out the back pages of most popular magazines, to see what I mean.) On top of that, so many apparent antagonists of Christianity, such as those of atheist persuasion, regale their readers with what they consider the idiocy of religious people who follow something - they say – is completely unproveable. Little could be further from the truth. Mind you, they are not too bad at doing exactly the thing with which they charge their antagonists.

One of the sad reasons that so many Christians still see faith as rather like crossing one's fingers and hoping seems to stem from the way Thomas has been regarded, traditionally, as the doubter. In fact, the poor bloke was nothing of the sort. He was the Apostle whose real work was not really uncovered for many centuries – a millennium and a half, actually – after his death. I recall, during College years, having an Indian priest, MM Thomas, studying alongside the rest of us. He told us about his Church in India (Goa, I think) which is the Mar Thoma Church, which owes its existence to the Apostle of old. Long before the missionary expansion from Europe, this old Church has borne witness to the faith. It is a long way from Israel to India, especially when walking was the only way to go.

So back to Thomas. In this well-known passage from John's Gospel, there is – as mentioned above – the Pentecost before the Pentecost. And then there is the tale of Thomas and his apparent 'disbelief.' But what was really happening? There must have been a lot of things going on at the time of the Resurrection, and much of it involved the ladies. Had you lived in those unenlightened days, and you were male, you would have been quite distrustful of any information offered by the fairer sex. OK, you can have your explosion now – but that is how things were – and notice how Jesus Himself refused to accept that point of view. So Thomas, who was not party to the appearance of Jesus on the night of the resurrection was not prepared to accept the word of other people that Jesus had actually risen. And the reason for that refusal? The answer is interesting.

IF Jesus had risen, Thomas was quite aware, then the goalposts of life and history had changed for ever. If He had **NOT**, then nothing had changed. And the change had little to do with 'miracle,' but everything to do with outcome of the event. For all of history before this, evil seemed to go on unchallenged and unaffected. Might was right, and get used to it. Little people were mere cannon fodder for the powerful of this world, so evil seemed unchallenged in its supremacy. That Jesus was crucified was not unexpected in the least. That is what always happened to upholders of truth and justice. End of story. Judicial murder was far from uncommon, and as noted when Lazarus was raised, Thomas was totally committed to Jesus and His Gospel, even if it meant death and elimination for him, too. (Notice that Peter SAID he was prepared to die with Jesus – but Thomas was committed totally.

You may well be thinking that there seems to be little evidence of anything changing even nowadays. Evil still seems to triumph and God appears to be silent or dead. But – as I made the comment above, the resurrection and its outcomes need to be acted upon, even if the same sort of crucifixion comes your way. Like it did with Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

However, if Jesus HAD been raised, had defeated death, then the whole ballgame of life had changed totally and irrevocably. Not longer was truth defeated, no longer was justice a mere pawn, no longer was love lost whenever the crunch was on. But Thomas needed proof, substantiation of this inexpressible change: Thomas needed to see Jesus, touch His hands and His feet to be totally sure. No lack of faith here at all; it was the expression that faith is not something ethereal and unreal. Faith is based on real evidence. In fact, as I often say to people, **faith is the choice a person makes on the basis of the available evidence.**

I have long taken off my proverbial hat to the Apostle. for he has my vote, and my total support, In fact I relate to him completely, understanding very much where he was coming from, and his need to be sure he was chasing no pipedream, nor was he being led up some garden path. In fact I challenge you to look up all New Testament references to Thomas, and see how often he raised the difficult questions and was not satisfied till he had substantial answers.

Reason and sense are NEVER enemies to faith. They are essential adjuncts to it, without which faith of any sort is nothing but will'o'the'wisp stuff. And thus no use to person or beast.

Sentence

Turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.
Acts 3:19

Collect.

Lord of life, by submitting to death, You conquered the grave; by being lifted upon the Cross You draw all peoples to Yourself: by being raised from the dead, You restore to humanity all that was lost through sin. Be with us in Your Risen power, that in word and deed we may proclaim the mystery of Your death and resurrection, for all praise is Yours, now and through all eternity. **Amen**

FIRST LESSON

Acts 3: 12 – 20

PSALM

4

EPISTLE

1 John 2: 15 – 17 & 3:1-6

GOSPEL

Luke 24: 36 – 48

NOTES ON THE READINGS

First Lesson.

This little epilogue to the healing of the lame man has more to tell us about ourselves than about the incident. The story has less to do with miracle and more to do with terrible human inconsistency. The big debate here with the Jews was whether Jesus was Messiah or not. And – as was so often the case in Jewish history, the religious leaders of the nation demanded obedience to their perceptions regardless of the truth or otherwise of their evaluations. How often, then and now, people in positions of power reject, often violently, anyone who disagrees or raises protest.

It is remarkably sad that the question of authority seemed to take precedence over the value of the person healed. It is another example of the human capacity to avoid issues by producing a smokescreen. Notice that the same reversal of issues showed up in the death of Jesus and the release of a murderer. It would be a most useful exercise if and when Christians stopped and thought through the sometimes bitter arguments that they have about the Faith, especially when the outcome tends to be nothing other than a great divider or excluder between people. It is blasphemous, actually.

In the second paragraph there is another rather fascinating aspect of the Faith well worth examination. On one hand there is the stunning situation where God uses human stupidity to bring about His designs. It is the awareness of that ‘folly’ that even led Isaiah to catch sight of what God does. If you prefer to put it another way, then stop and see that it is always the *forgiving one* who has to bear the pain and ignominy of initiating the means of reconciliation. Think that one through if you dare.

Psalm

Ponder this Psalm and see how its author, likewise, focusses on the terrible human capacity of avoiding the truth by choosing its opposite. This loving what is worthless is a powerful expression of our human folly. Aware of all that, the Psalmist suggests that we head in the opposite (and sensible) direction.

Epistle

Once again, the emphasis is on thinking rather more seriously about what is real and what is ephemeral. I find it rather annoying when some Christians seem to like aligning whatever they do NOT like with ‘the world,’ and miss the real point of these sorts of expressions. Perhaps the clearest definition of what is ‘world’ stems from the overall picture provided by the Faith. **To be in Adam is to be self-obsessed. To be in Christ is**

to be other-concerned. The former is world, and the latter is not. It really is as simple and as pointed as that. And one needs only to ponder a few moments to realize the extent to which the 'world' is self-driven.

GOSPEL

There are a couple of significant issues that arise for me in this passage.

The first is the down-to-earth request of Jesus, for something to eat. Here is the clear expression of what may be called ordinariness in the Risen Christ. Here is no mind-bending, psychedelic sort of thing, but the simple statement that this is feet on ground stuff. Redemption happens in the real world, with real issues being raised and faced.

The second is that business about 'understanding the Scriptures.' Here is no recital of chapter and verse, but rather a matter of seeing and understanding Scripture in its widest and most consistent emphases. This is the way in which God works **in the ordinary world with ordinary people**, and with a clear and specific agenda. Most Christians that I have encountered seem to put on their blinkers when it comes to reading the Old Testament, or even the New. So easily do we manage to limit our vision by our own propaganda and myopia. I am glad that the Anglican approach to Scripture is to acknowledge the need to see the entire Biblical picture and never to interpret one part of Scripture so that it runs contrary to any part of the other. Apart from anything else, such an approach makes it rather hard to go off into insignificant tangents.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I have long wondered at the sort of world we are all becoming, where everything it seems becomes quite relative, and noting remotely like certainty is 'permitted' any more. I am bemused at most of the sentences that are handed down for offences of various kinds, minor and significant, and the pathetic excuses that are pulled out to justify people's actions. Everybody says that they hate drugs, runners and peddlers, until there is a possibility that anyone caught just might get their comeuppance. And those who perpetrated the ugliest of crimes are reported by their relatives and friends as lovely people. Who is kidding whom?

It is not just in that area, but in almost every area of human behaviour. No one wants to accept responsibility, and they certainly do not want to be landed with the unpretty outcome of such a direction. Whether it is kids at School or adults at work and play. There appears to be no factor of acceptance of responsibility in the ever-burgeoning road toll.

You may well have all sorts of similar comments yourself, from people or incidents that you have encountered. In other words, I doubt if there is any great need to try and list the issues. Nor am I trying to stand in judgement on others, for I am aware of the fact that there may have been and could yet be situations that I have tried to sidestep. The point I raise is the evidence of this approach all around us.

And then the issue becomes heightened because the amount of damage caused to people, to relationships, and even to life itself. That is the problem, because I cannot expect to operate without responsibility, and then to get away without a scratch. What is more, those around me are likely to suffer from what the Yanks call 'collateral damage.'

You may well ask what all this has to do with today's Readings, and with the Resurrection of Jesus. And the answer is simple: this is precisely what all those readings are about. They are about false choices that people make to avoid issues they do not wish to face. They are about our terribly human capacity to solve our problems by avoiding them. They are about the outcomes from such *modus operandi*.

There is a sad irony about the fact that so much human effort goes into attempting outcomes that are thwarted by the very design itself. For instance, the invasion of Iraq was undertaken, so the pundits tell us, to bring democracy to the country and to remove the dictator. Whilst the concept may be laudable in one's own country, it is a very risky procedure, unlikely to produce the much-vaunted goals - - and the passing years have made that fact glaringly obvious.

So while our current 'philosophy' of life may deride the acceptance of responsibility, the outcomes of those choices tend to prove the opposite, do they not? So in some sort of answer to many people who deride the Faith, I offer this particular issue for their consideration to revisit their objections. When it all boils down, the real issue for the Faith, Hebrew or Christian, there is the absolute requirement that truth, in whatever situation, is that which is first uncovered, and then followed Transparently.