

Sunday 3rd December, 2006

Advent 1

Sentence

Stand up and raise your heads; your redemption is drawing near.

Mark 13:31

Collect

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

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Jeremiah 33:14 –16

PSALM

25:1 – 10

EPISTLE

1 Thessalonians 3: 9 – 13

GOSPEL

Luke 21: 25 – 38

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Advent often seems to have some strange effects on people, and for some of them the end of the world is their theme. It may come as some surprise that it is neither the Biblical nor Prayer Book emphasis. It is often good counsel to read the fine print, and not just see what we think we want to see. There is certainly a strong challenge to be true to Christ and to have a strong air of realism about you, but that does not give any reason to race off after the fairies.

Old Testament Lesson

Before one goes racing off, looking for if and where this passage has been ‘fulfilled,’ it is important to understand Biblical stuff from a Biblical perspective. Neither God nor Jeremiah was promising a safe and secure future, but rather pointing to the way such hope might be realised.

About the only thing I would ask you to ponder is the emphasis, in even so brief a passage, on the issues of law, justice and righteousness. With them, life can prosper and go forward. Without them life shrivels, and we know something of the devastation of that, do we not?

Psalm

It may all sound a little naïve and twee but do stop and realize that what this world needs now. And has done for almost ever, is a good dose of truth and the recognition of falsehood. This is no bland statement but a powerful and real one. Just consider the areas where this is clearly so!

Epistle

The basic factor that Advent is designed to bring finds expression in this remarkably short and direct passage. Advent is not so much a time for breast-beating or other introverted activities but rather is a time for checking our directions, reassessing where we are in our pilgrimage, and then getting on with the job. Here is the start of a new liturgical year and a move towards Christmas and the celebration of the Incarnation. Never forget that.

Gospel

For all the world this appears, on the surface, as some sort of doomsday look, and end of the world stuff. However, read the fine print and see otherwise. *‘The present generation will live to see it all!’*

In Jewish mythology (if you are game to call it that), the reference to suns and moons and stars falling all over the place, earthquakes a wars and that sort of stuff, do not refer to the literal thing. It is another way of referring to the collapse of a culture, a community or a country, expressing both the urgency of the matter and the likely damage that will ensue. None of us like our settled pattern of life disrupted, but many human beings in this very day and age suffer from exactly that.

The 'Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory,' likewise, is not a visible phenomenon but rather a clear statement that – for those who have eyes and wit to see it, - those ancient verities of truth, justice and integrity have wrought their work on the people who ignore them. That also impacts on what we call innocent people, for the simple reason that we are all in this together. One of the things that I am asking people these days, constantly, to consider is that the increasing breakdown of relationships and the damage that ensues is, to me at least, a clear and positive line of evidence of the truth of the Gospel. Turn your back on those ancient verities and life disintegrates, gradually perhaps, but inevitably. And we have no one to blame but ourselves. As some one once said, *the only lessons we learn from history is that we do not learn the lessons of history* And that is precisely what Jesus was asking, even demanding, of His followers in that Gospel. Open your eyes!

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I make the comment fairly regularly that we humans have somewhat of a fetish with end-of-world stuff, as shown up by the long series of disaster movies that seem to titillate people again and again. Whilst I have no problems whatever with such a form of entertainment, I do have difficulty with two thoughts on the matter. The first is that we humans like to fiddle with realities, safe in our lounge rooms or cinemas, protected from reality. The other problem I have is the strange propensity of some Christians to reduce the Gospel to some similar form of titillation – you are aware of the fact that one sect, for instance, has been predicting end of the world scenarios for something like 150 years. And that group is far from alone. It reduces the reality to the ridiculous. Crying wolf far too often has, of course, the result opposite to that which was intended.

Advent, it has long struck me, has also suffered a misdirection and emphasis. Traditionally, in our Church at least, it has tended to be presented as a time of severity and discipline similar to Lent. No flowers on the altar, no wedding was once the rule, and that has long seemed a mis-direction of emphasis. In this season that precedes the celebration of the Incarnation, the point of it all is really to reassess our direction as Christians and as Church. Like a rower, to check where we have come from to see where we are, or should be, going.

Cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light. So what are the real issues?

The answer to that question is presented to us in the Gospel. Traditionally, the apocalyptic passages in the Gospels tend to be misunderstood to a large extent, or avoided as they seem to be rather upsetting or disturbing. And that is precisely what they are meant to be. The situation into which Jesus spoke these words is that which should give us the clue as to the real emphasis. It was getting close to the climax of arrest, trial and execution of our Lord, and if one has one's blinkers off, one will be aware of the harsh reality. Jesus was painfully aware of the fact that whatever lay in front of Him would not have any guarantee of justice or truth. The opposite would be the case. In a world then (and not so different now), the chances of receiving a fair and valid trial were extremely limited. It was a world where evil – or dishonesty, or injustice, - was paramount. There was nothing especially different about that, but our Lord was also aware that here was a critical period in human history where evil would be shown up for what is really is. In other words, this world of humans can seem to tolerate a degree of human evil, but the point will ever come when that evil reaches such depths that it is source of its own destruction. It is fascinating to see that this is precisely the theory or expectation that John presents in *Revelation*, and his theology is rather powerfully expressed there.

So all that business of portents in sun moon and stars has little to do with natural phenomena, and a great deal to do with civic, political and national disaster. Jesus was painfully aware of the fact that, not only was He subject to the machinations of human evil, but also that people would be the unwilling but deeply affected targets also. We in Australia have never yet suffered from the ill effects as have others; the closest we got, I suspect, is the ghastly effect suffered by our parents and grandparents in the Great Depression of the late 20s and early 30s. Other countries and communities have been far more profoundly affected, so we need not think we are immune.

The reality is just as imminent. On the one hand, we as Christians need to see the truth of what is happening in our world, as so many attempt to avoid the realities or convince us that they are not there.

Political spin and multinational self-interest have a great deal to answer for, but if we ever live through the demise of that world, the Christian awareness of those realities should enable us to see both their source and their limits. For instance, I am still stunned by visions of American businessmen suiciding from the tops of Wall Street buildings because their fortune dissipated suddenly. They were still alive, before their plunge. Their fortune may have disappeared, but they still had a future I they could have seen past their self-obsession.

The constant Biblical record, covering millennia and not just years, is that a culture, country, civilisation or even religion that turns its back on the ultimate realities of justice, truth, integrity, love and compassion can only ever blame itself for its refusal to operate in reasonable ways. That collapse occurred in Israel in the 6th Century BC, and the same can be expected in our own day unless the direction is altered. This is not just a global warming issue: it is a self-destructive issue.

And there is a solid reason for Advent being a time to check direction, reassess emphasis, and to check out again the solid reality of the Faith once given.

Sentence

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. *Luke 1:78-9*

Collect

O Lord Jesus Christ, Who at Your first coming, sent Your messenger to prepare the way before You; grant that the ministers and stewards of Your mysteries may likewise prepare and make ready Your way by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, that at Your second coming to judge the world, we may be found an acceptable people in Your sight, for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Malachi 3: 1 – 14

FOR THE PSALM

The Song of Zechariah

EPISTLE

Philippians 1: 1 – 11

GOSPEL

Luke 3: 1 – 6

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

There is a severity in the content of today's OT reading, a severity that has been the mark of the prophets as far as many folk are concerned. (Much of the OT prophecy is not the severe thing many feel it to be, incidentally.) However, here the boot is well and truly 'stuck in!' And to the modern mind, that tends to be regarded as political incorrectness – and there lies a huge issue.

Malachi is not the most popular of prophets, for he tended to tell it as he saw it, and one suspects that he was not far off the mark at all. Here the prophet absolutely castigated Israel on the rounds that it had a living faith, and had turned it into something of a dead religion. They may have gone through all the motions, but they did not adhere to the real practices. And into that situation the Lord was likely to break in to 'test, purify and refine.' Take time, please, to ponder the issues with which Malachi took up the people of his time, and look and see what the likely Divine reactions to the failings. Never lose sight of the fact that this is a moral universe, and the correction and adjustment is likely to happen to the 'household of God' before it reaches the rest of the world. I have more than a sneaky suspicion that the current and lasting crisis for the Church these days has much to do with a somewhat similar 'going through the motions' rather than being a genuine response to life, God and history.

For the Psalm

*It is with some deep regret that I cannot attach some music to this file: that of Donald Swan who, 40-odd years ago, wrote music for his version of the **Benedictus**.¹ Whilst the music rollicks, it matches the mood of the canticle, and underlines the message being conveyed. I have the book, but no longer the vinyl record.*

In spite of the severe words of the first lesson, there is the hope expressed here of a God Who forgives and continues to be faithful even to His faithless people. Here is the remarkable Song of Zechariah, a great tribute to the depth of faith and understanding of God even in the lives and minds of His little people. It is worthwhile pondering a moment or more of the value and validity of the entire covenant relationship that God has with His people, even if that is to get us looking at the value and validity of our response to Him. There is an awful lot of shallow, self-seeking 'discipleship' these days, - if you think I am being awful, just get in touch and ask me. Quite some of the problem is the so-called populist groups who have a severe shortfall in their grasp of Gospel and faith.

¹ Sing Around the Year, © Donald Swan, Bodley Press, London 1965

Epistle

Of all the NT Epistles, this one to the Philippian Church is probably the most affectionate. I guess it is the experience of many priests and pastors that one particular congregation is fixed in their memory as the best in their experience, and that may well have something to do with the fact that square pegs in square holes can be most effective. (The opposite can become quite tragic!) Because of that, Paul seems to have been able to help the Philippians well along the way as the second chapter, in particular, emphasises. Many Christian people have taken encouragement from that lovely verse about *He Who started a good work in you will bring it to completion* However, the real point and great challenge, it seems to me, is to continue the process of moving towards maturity in faith and humanity. The Faith is dead if it is static, as are its followers.

Gospel

There are two significant matters to note in this brief excerpt from Luke's Gospel. The first is that Luke was always very careful in his writings to pin the events down to real time and in real life. Here is no fairy-tale. Here is reality. Point One.

Point Two is just as earthy. Whilst we become accustomed to hearing stories about John the Baptist, and perhaps even turn our noses up somewhat at his theology (and at his manners!) the point is there to be emphasised, that like us, John was one of God's little people. He made no excuses by looking for someone else to carry out the task he saw as essential. He took on the role and responsibility – and thank God he did. Notice how almost always² God works through the humble efforts of quite ordinary, little people, and does not look for the *beau geste*.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

Ours is no longer a world where straight and plain speaking is permissible any more. One has to speak or write in periphrases – in the hope that someone just might catch on to what we are trying to say. Bluntness is rude; straight truth is no longer acceptable. So the only possible outcome in a world such as we have is diplomatic non-speak, political correctness, which results in sweet absolute nothing, or complete misunderstanding, or simple determination to misunderstand. Nothing is true any more, no one is right or wrong, everything is tentative, nothing is absolute. And then we go on to wonder why, in the name of all that is wonderful, none of us going anywhere, and when we get there we do not know where we are!!! I suffer from the strong conviction that as long as this state of affairs continues to exist, nothing else can possibly exist except in someone's imagination. It is all spin, propaganda! As the old saying has it, there are lies, there are damn lies, and then there are statistics.

So when (or if) are we ever going to get back to solid reality, real reality and not the TV series versions of it? When are we ever going to be able to head for solid, substantial and recognizable goals, in the nation, in the world, or even in the local community. There are lots of yells and screams about the 'religious right,' and whilst there are often great chasms between those stated views and true reality, at least there are people seeing the need for something solid, a base from which to operate. Truth is not relative. It never has been and never will. We may well see it from slightly differing angles, but it is there hitting us in the face. If we choose to ignore it, its collision with us will be all the more severe.

So what has brought on all this?

Dear old Malachi.

There are not a lot of people who realize that Israel's perceptions of God and life did not come via some lightning-bolt from heaven or even a series of them. The old holy ones from that distant past were actually acute observers of life and relationships, simply watching out to see what things worked in life and what things didn't. It was not a case of them being all religious and introverted: it was very much the opposite. Abraham, quite obviously, was a man dissatisfied with the religious views of his time and world and went searching for better responses and he found them. As long as Israel pilgrimmed, in mind as much as in movement, their discoveries grew and their understanding widened. 'Religion' almost certainly started off with what we would call superstition, until the more cynical saw past the blindfolds of others, and searched further. Thank God for the exploratory nature of quite some of the Hebrew population, who would almost certainly have found it difficult to be pushing against the settled conservatism of the greater part of

² And at present I can think of no exceptions!

their world of people. It would have been no fun at all being a prophet! Often I find it no fun being a priest, watching people scuttle back into the safety of their religion, whilst missing out totally on the real benefits of asking the hard questions and searching for valid and lasting answers.

Such a one was Malachi. I doubt he was ever an angel, and feel certain that he had lots of blind spots like the rest of us. But lots of things he saw very clearly, amongst some of which was the propensity of Israel to bog itself down in no-issues and non-entities. So he let them have it, warts and all. You could imagine the 'holy'³ ones of the day getting their knickers in knots, tutting and huffing at the terrible things old Malachi was ranting on about. But the old prophet was right, and the huffers all wrong. One needs to be rather more fair dinkum than those complainers when one is talking about real faith and faithfulness.

One of the most powerful aspects of Anglican worship, to my small mind, is that very disturbing prayer we all utter, and often ignore just as utterly, at the commencement of the Eucharist. *Almighty God, to Whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from Whom no secrets are hidden* You are reminding yourself that you can do a snow job on yourself, boyo, but forget your chances of pulling the wool over God's eyes. There is no threat in this, no challenge of eternal punishment. It is simply the clear and present statement that the only one you can fool is yourself, so stop all the garbage and crap and face reality.

If I am going to muck about with you, if I am going to take you down, then it is time for me to see what I am doing and to accept the responsibility. That business of responsibility, seems to me, is one of today's greatest obscenities, and if recent newspaper reports contain any truth, it seems even judges and other ones high in society's ranks are as likely to cover their tracks as anyone else.

It was that sort of world into which the old prophet⁴ and his concern was the same as ours. Where will it all end? And the answer tends to be, not with the downfall of the naughty ones, but with the collapse of a culture, a country, or even a civilization. I would like to hang around for another hundred years or so (No I would not!) just to see what remain standing and what collapses. I doubt that there will be any white / European dominance left around the place.

The point of all this is not that there is threat of destruction. It is that such a path is self-destructive, and always has been, and always will be, so who will put up their hand to change direction --- towards common sense?⁵

³ Inverted commas intended!

⁴ Actually I have no idea how old Malachi was, but I suspect he would have to some wide experience of life to be able to handle the pressure to shut up. However, Jesus would have known the same pressure and He died at 33 or thereabouts.

⁵ Common sense seems to be something of an oxymoron these days. Neither the former word nor the latter relates to anyone terribly much!

Sentence

Do not fear: the Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will renew you in His love.

Zephaniah 3: 16 – 17

Collect

Almighty God, You sent Your Son into a world where the wheat must be winnowed from the chaff, and evil clings even to that which is good; let the fire of Your Spirit purge us of all corruption, so that we may wait eagerly for Him Whose Day draws near, Your Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ. **AMEN**

Old Testament Lesson

Zephaniah 3: 14 – 20

Psalm

A Song of Isaiah

EPISTLE

Philippians 4: 4 – 7

GOSPEL

Luke 3: 7 – 18

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Before we go anywhere, hands up those who have heard of the prophet Zephaniah before? The fact that this is one of the twelve minor prophets gives you an excuse, of course, and it also raises a problem for the Biblicist. More of that anon, but there is also the issue that we Anglicans are often not as Biblically aware as well we might be, in a world where the faith is under some stress and attack. Christianity has some sharp edges and is far from being some sort of chloroformed response to life.

OT Lesson

I have in my hot little hand right now a copy of a book written by one E.W. Heaton on the Old Testament prophets. It is not a young book having been produced in 1958 (Pelican). Heaton draws some interesting comments on this book, and passage in particular, where Zephaniah tends to lay the blame for the Exile in Babylon on Israel's foes, which runs rather contrary to the perceptions of other (and dare I suggest wiser!) prophets. Those men tended to see that the problem lay with Israel herself, failing to live the faith and falling between two stools, so to speak.

The point that this passage raises for me is that of a caring but somewhat misguided person who wants to take the weight off Israel, and in doing so tends to see God as the whiz-bang Solver of All problems. In the overall scheme of this, that is a rather false view. And leads to disturbing expectations. Mind you, the powerful message of God's love for His errant people is one that needs a strong focus even today.

For the Psalm

It is rather helpful to have a reasonably clear picture of the historical and political situations into which the Old Testament prophets wrote and spoke. In fact, I confess to having been utterly confused by the writings until I was given that overview of the situation into which those ancient worthies responded. Isaiah⁶ here – in the fact of rather negative situations – remained convinced that God is a God Who rescues His people, and that conviction came from the then-persistent view of 'A branch out of Jesse.' (Is. 11:1) The strong Messianic hope built up expectations of a renewal of hope. While the outcome may well have been different from what the prophet expected, there is no doubt whatever of the activity of God on behalf of His people. This song is no 'hoping against hope' but rather a certainty stemming from the awareness of the character of JHWH.

⁶ First Isaiah for the purists – writing long before the Exile, and trying to cope with the apparent downturns of Hebrew history and wondering where God was in all that.

Epistle

A confession is offered here: that the passage selected has been extended a little to include the most lovely few lines in the entire NT. Paul's attitude to the Philippians seems to have been a most happy one, and this epistle is shot through with all sorts of loving terms and phrases. It also has some fascinating theology in the well-known passage in Chapter 2. However, one is encouraged this morning to delight in the obvious openness and warmth of the relationships within the congregation and the challenge to continue to move ahead into that growing and developing warmth and honesty with each other.

Gospel

People of today may well have been put off by the appearance and demeanour of the Baptist, and possibly even of his smell. On the other hand, there is no possibility of charging John with what we call political correctness these days. What you saw was what you got, unapologetically and unavoidably. If you consider John to have been somewhat rough around the edges, just stop and consider his challenges in terms of his demand for total honesty. He was not into soft-soap disciples: you were either in, or you were out, and no baloney. It is fascinating to see that the real issues he uncovered had less to do with 'religion' and far more to do with justice, truth and integrity.

Perhaps harder still for any human being was the necessity for John to point away from himself to One greater than he. It is not all that often that human ego is put aside for the sake of the greater good. For John, that approach was essential.

The real and powerful point of this ministry of John was his pointing to judgement. The imagery is all there, as a threshing picture, but we humans tend to have some rather short-sighted views of judgement. We tend to look for sudden *denouements*, with big bangs and obvious outcomes. One suspects that this was John's expectation also, something of a view reinforced by his time with the Essenes in the desert. However, the Biblical reality is more subtle, and more effective overall. Whilst the Biblical perception has more to do with responsibility than punishment, it is expressed far better in the Cross. There, evil was said to be overcome *when it is shown up for what it is*. Once I can see evil, I have both the choice and responsibility to turn away from it. However, if I am belted up for having chosen evil⁷ - ask any prisoner in gaol! - I tend to be more stupid and reinforce myself in the foolish choices I have already made. Look at Australia to see the lack of value of the penal settlement process in terms of creating a fair society!

NOTES FOR A SERMON

When I was young and World War II was all the news, I remember the extent to which the news was absolutely full of the utter treachery of the Japanese, because of their unprovoked attack on Pearl Harbour. I would have been all of 7 or 8 at the time, but even so it seemed to me that for something as devastating as that, there had to be a better excuse than sheer treachery. Even as a kid, I was aware that if someone got stuck into me, it was probably because I had done something fairly nasty to them in the first place.

It was not until some decades after Pearl Harbour that more of the realities emerged. Even in those halcyon days, it seems that the USA was determined that the Nips would never be allowed to step outside of boundaries placed on them by others! The real irony of the Pacific war was that it was unnecessary in the end, (what war is necessary? There are a few!) for the Japanese have long been in a position of great strength and trade, and why not! My point is simply, that sooner or later the truth will emerge, and when it does, the egg may well be over unexpected faces.

Perhaps it is just a case of me getting old and crotchety, or there may be more to it than that. But I am getting more than a little impatient at the sort of stuff that passes for conventional wisdom these days when the reality is conventional folly. From advertisers to politicians, the art of spin-doctoring is turning into one of the fine arts, and many people are left in the utter desert of not being able to work out what is truth and what is baloney. Certainly the passage of time tends to show up the falsities, yet many people seem to

⁷ Sometimes to be seen in terms of less than good rather than blatant evil!

have short memories, or maybe are so focussed on themselves that they see no further than the their proverbial nose.

The great tragedy behind all this spin-doctoring is that the real issues are never faced, the real problems are never dealt with, and the confusion, mess and backlog just gets larger and larger. In the end, the said backlog will become impassable.

It is not all that popular today to stress the need for truth, for honesty and integrity, for it must be a case that the opposites are all being exercised by an increasingly wide percentage of the population. And while people are quite free to be dishonest, - for such are the choices to which we humans are open! – there will ever be repercussions of one sort or another. For instance, if I am dishonest with you, it will not be long before you and I have little or not contact, and whatever is left of that contact will be at arm's length, or ever more distant. Life between us would become quite fraught, unpleasant. This is a moral universe, and there is no get-away from that. It may be quite a while in coming, but come it will, with inevitability and with impact.

This is the power and impact of the message of John the Baptist. It is straight-forward, it is unapologetic, and it is pointing towards a form of community that is worthwhile for all involved. here is no fear of hell here, in spite of the vivid imagery; there is concern for all people, and especially the little people. It is the almost eternal Hebrew message about life, as a call for open and transparent and fair relationships and dealings with each other. There is nothing very complex: it is all rather straight-forward.

Mind you, the real sting in John's tail – as always with the OT prophets – shows up in the sorts of expectations that John and the prophets had: ignore the important realities of life, they would say, and you will pay for it, not in some future penal hell, but in a very present breakdown of life and community. The imagery of judgement, in John's terms, has to do with the separation of wheat from chaff, of silver from dross. That 'fire that can never be put out' is, as mentioned earlier, not a 'hell' image but rather it points to an unchanging situation. Whether in John's day, or ours, or three thousand years ago or ahead, the same breakdown will always result from injustice and dishonesty.

Sentence

Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken of by the Lord.

Luke 1:45

Collect

Gracious God, You have visited Your people and redeemed us in Your Son; may our hearts leap for joy at the sound of your word, and move us by Your Spirit to bless Your wonderful works. We ask this through Him Whose coming is certain, Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Micah 5: 2 – 5a

FOR THE PSALM

The Song of Mary

EPISTLE

Hebrews 10:5-10

GOSPEL

Luke 1: 39-45

SPECIAL NOTES - Sunday before Christmas

We make life a little difficult for ourselves with the Sunday celebration just a day before the 'Big Event.' It is a little previous to concentrate on the Christmas story, and rather silly to look elsewhere for inspiration. And two of the readings, OT and Epistle, produce, to my mind at least, little help to anyone who does not have some wide knowledge of Scripture in general and difficult passages in particular. If those readings bemuse you, do not feel that you are somehow inadequate.

NOTES ON THE READINGS

If there are major issues that arise from this rather difficult set of readings, they seem to be to ones too easily overlooked. That is strange because the overall message of Scripture is there for all to see. Micah, that minor OT prophet, expresses what must have been an unexpected message even to people of his own day – that God works through little people, not through the great ones of this world. History is all too ready to list the heavies and important ones, but if the truth be known, most of what makes this world go around stems from ordinary little people getting on with what they see as important to be done.

Bethlehem, it may surprise some, is but one hop, step and jump from Jerusalem. A handful of kilometres, and no more. Living in the shadow of great places is as debilitating as living in the shadow of some great human being.

Another factor which is expressed in that really quite strange (to our ears) Epistle, is the recognized need for whoever is going to get the job done, to hang in there, body and soul, and to persist to the end in spite of contrary pressure. We ordinary humans are far too ready to get our knickers in a knot, spit the dummy so to speak, and leave the arena because of some hurt real or imagined. Had Mary, Jesus, Apostles or prophets operated so, we would not have any gospel to proclaim.

When it comes to Mary's Song, the *Magnificat* as it used to be known when I was a pup, one has to report that much of the impact is lost, perhaps due to sheer familiarity. Go through it again and see it as it really is, a radical statement that looks for turning the world upside down.

And whilst the Gospel passage is all rather homely and low key, it still underlines the fact that God works through ordinary, faithful little people, and does not require wide spread advertising campaigns to get His work done. He always operates through humans, *and please never forget that.*

NOTES FOR A SERMON

You may well have heard this story before, but it is one that has stuck in my memory for all the reasons that will become obvious. It is a tale that brings the familiar and even well-loved out into a sometimes unwelcoming open, but which still has fascinating repercussions.

I was quite new to a Parish, one which somewhat overwhelmed my wife, because in it lived all whom she called the heavies of the Mothers' Union. Lovely folk all, and powerful in their adherence to the MU. However that same group seemed to be able to take quite some risks. As one Lady Day drew near, the new priest was asked if he would give a talk on the *Magnificat*, which, if my memory serves me correctly, is part of the MU liturgy. When I was asked, I wondered out loud with some if they were aware of the impact of the request, for the *Magnificat* is not the sweet and lovely song many see it to be. They decided that they could cope. From what I have discerned, there are many who know the *Magnificat* well, but have no idea of the similarities Mary's song has with that of Hannah, before the birth of Samuel (1 Samuel 2). It must be said that Mary knew all about Hannah's song, and the view of God and life that lies behind it. When the day came for this short talk, I asked that people tightened their seat belts, donned their hard hats, as we worked our way through the fascinating song.

It starts off with all sweetness and light, as Mary found herself the focus of attention. Mary, the unknown and unsung daughter of obviously faithful people, but unknown and unimportant in the wider scheme of things. What is even more stunning is to stop and realize that when Mary was called to the role of Mother of Jesus, she would have been all of a mid-teenager in today's common parlance. A mere kid. What young person whom you know would you consider eligible for the task set before this young miss? I would find myself scared as an adult, let alone as a young person.

But that is much of the point. We have long tended to require vast experience and wider wisdom from people who take a lead in our communities. References need to be produced, sponsors ready to back them up, and a long apprenticeship tends to be called for. But, Mary – simple and homespun, and obviously a practical person – was prepared to jump in with both feet.

But jump into what? First of all, it was into parenthood, and into a slightly tinged parenthood at that. Now pardon me, but those with long memories tracing back to 'having to get married' might somehow re-run the situation and see how a story of the Holy Spirit impregnating one would have been received. I can see the faces of people from this far away! But even that was not the point.

Mary was simple, perhaps, but certainly aware enough of the real *telos* or goal of the Faith to know that the child she was to bear was rather more than a religious experience. Modern Christianity is only now seeming to rediscover something of the emphasis on fairness, justice and integrity in the real world, but dear young Mary knew all about it right where she was .

Now read through the second half of this song of hers, and see how radical and world-changing she saw the outcome of that through which she was passing. This is 'turning the world upside down' sort of stuff, removing monarchs, (regime change we call it these days, and Iraq is showing us how popular (!!!) that is) and removing the wealthy – and selfish – from their positions of self-importance. Now, in the Biblical vision, there is nothing new here. This is what Judaism and Christianity have always been on about, *or should have been*. But religion is a far safer path to travel than the Faith once delivered, which is why the latter tends to be shoved behind the door, and the bland and pointless 'religion' door is opened in its stead.

People of faith are called to be agents of change, *here and now*. People of the Faith are called, like Mary to operate and present the eternal values that move towards a far more

Monday 25th December, 2006

Christmas Day

Sentence

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. *John 1:1,14*

Collect

God Most High, Whose eternal Word chose a dwelling among us that we might live in Your presence; grant us a spirit of wisdom to know how rich is the glory You have given us, and how great is the hope to which we have been called in the Word made flesh; Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. **Amen**

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Isaiah 9:2 – 7

PSALM

97

EPISTLE

Hebrews 1:1 – 12

GOSPEL

John 1 :1 – 14

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

I confess to altering this reading from Isaiah 62. The reason is simple – people struggle with the readings often enough without making those selections so obscure as to drive us all to drink. (Mind you, I suspect we tend to get all ‘thingey’ with OT readings and miss their main point anyhow.)

The alternative reading, whilst well-known, may still go over the head of the normal reader, especially when it talks about all those bloodthirsty issues. So ponder moment and think about this: what is the contrast set out in the reading, without even wondering about the historical context? On the one hand, images of war – on the other, images of peace. Now is that enough to make you think a little?

Take this how you like, but is not one of the major issues of today that of finding paths to peace? And do not those who talk most about peace act most about war? D not imagine that life was all that different in Isaiah’s day (and it is 1st Isaiah, around 700 BC.)

What the ancient prophet is looking for and expecting from God is a path to peace. And with the wisdom of hindsight, we can look back and see that this path to peace is materialised in Jesus. And it is not done with force of arms, but with exercise of that which leads to peace, *even if that path is longer than one may hope*. Notice two aspects that underline the direction of this path: **justice and righteousness**. To be a little pedantic, they are two aspects of the same thing, *justice*. And while too many humans understand justice in terms of their opponents getting their come-uppance, the reality, the Biblical and human reality, is rather quite different. If you and I are in conflict, and wish to find resolution, then all the factors of the dispute need to be taken into account and brought to resolution. Only then is justice served, and only then is peace at all possible. If you like to go on a bit, the need for righteousness can be expressed in terms of both of us being open, honest and fair dinkum with each other, without baloney, without cant, without hidden agenda.

Now tell me that there is no one on this planet that would not like to see such outcomes!

Now stop and see that you have reached the heart of the Incarnation, the heart of Gospel, the hearts of Jesus from those very old and very searching words.....

Psalm

It is something of an imperative, in understanding Scripture, to have some idea of the period in Jewish history from which any particular item comes. Psalms come from a widespread period, tho’ the

earlier ones can be assumed to emerge from earlier times. King David is said to have written many, and he lived around 1,000 BC. Then, as you might imagine, most people operated on the principle that power was right. So here you have an amalgam of those sorts of thoughts mixed in with the recognition of the need for justice and peace. Today, we need to emphasise the latter and then go on to see that the former comes only by holding out on offer the possibility of peace when righteousness and justice are firmly on the agenda.⁸

EPISTLE

From my childhood, this passage has stuck out for me like the proverbial organ stops. Apart from anything else, it showed me how well God understands humans, by giving them a bit of the puzzle at a time. You may tell me something wise and useful, but if I am not 'there,' there is little point. One piece of the jigsaw at a time, and I can ponder, absorb, and take on board. Only then can I grow. Be patient with me

So God, with Israel. Two steps forward, one step back, but simply. Slowly. Patiently.

Even with the Incarnation, God has come among us, not with all the whizzbang and oomph, but as a human. And it is only *post-eventum* that we have the chance to absorb the implications. And when it does finally hit us between the eyes, those implications are enormous.

GOSPEL

And this Gospel passage has always been Christmas to me. *Ev arxhē ēn o logos* – In the beginning was the Word. John's obvious reflection back to Genesis 1 leaves the other Evangelists' openings for dead. It is a hugely significant statement that the reader is not expected to believe initially, but to recognize that the author will provide all the necessary evidence in the rest of his book.

John's statement is extraordinarily potent. He is actually saying that the point and purpose of life is to be found only in the Word-made-flesh. He is saying that the Word always was the answer, always will be the answer, and don't bother looking for any other answer. John was also painfully aware that there would be multitudes of people who did not and will not give a stuff about such things, and will turn their backs on the only reason (logos) for existence that there is. People, as my old father used to say, are funny cattle!

NOTES FOR A SERMON

You will have heard this story before, but at Christmas you will cop it again. Sorry if that bothers you, but the whole scenario is a huge bother to me.

It was a while ago, and I was taking part in an ecumenical Christmas service in a Prison and another of the local ministers was the preacher. It was a Carol service, and occasionally the men joined in. But when my mate got up to preach, he preached not about Christmas but about Easter. Jesus was born to die, and went straight to Cross and Resurrection. He was underlining his view of the Gospel that it is designed to get people into heaven. My great problem with such a vision of the faith is that it has no connection or roots in the here and now. It is escapism, pure and simple, and has little to do with the 'faith once delivered.' If ever I raise my voice about such a view, I tend to be howled down, not by my own colleagues but by those of some other denominations. If you think I am splitting hairs, then I will worry about you, too. And the reason for my worry is that you, too, are missing so much of the point, and rendering the faith irrelevant to the majority of people around you. The Faith is more about redeeming the world here and now, than it is about getting you to the next one.

Those ancients worthies of the early Old Testament may have had some myopic views of God, too, but even old Isaiah was painfully aware of the need for people to find a better way to resolving conflicts and hatreds, and he was quite aware of the need for justice in relationships. Even the Psalmist, anonymous though he (or she) may be, was just as acutely aware of that need, here and now and immediate. And I challenge anyone to provide the evidence that we humans have moved very far from the perception that issues are resolved by power and military might.

⁸ Keep your eyes open for the number of times in Scripture when those words, righteousness and justice, hit airspace. You just may be amazed, and may need to do a solid rethink of the faith and your response to it.

Because we have overlooked, deliberately or because we have not known Scripture well enough to have a wider outlook, this business of searching for and finding the path to peace amongst ourselves, we have been presenting and offering an emasculated Gospel. What is worse, those among us who are convinced that they have the whole picture have a far narrower version than many of the rest of us.

OK it is Christmas and you may well feel that you have not the time or energy. But I challenge you to take notice of every time in Jesus' ministry He was about resolution of conflict or removal of that which debilitated people in the health and in their relationships. Stop and see how often the phrase 'righteousness and justice' is reiterated in Old Testament and New. Whenever any reading, in Church or at home, is before you, ponder again the direction it is taking you.

One of the great tragedies I have encountered over many years of ministry in many different places is that people in some congregations are more interested in creating havoc and division than anything else, isolating some folk, and embracing others, causing hurt and divisions and isolation for no other reason, it would seem, than to feather their own nests. So if that is the image of the Faith that is conveyed to people around us, small wonder that so many of our local people decide that they will have nothing to do with us.

So, spend more than a little time, today and in the year ahead, to focus on Incarnation, God with us to give us lots of clues as to how to live and in what direction to operate *here and now*, and do not be surprised if there are folk who poke their heads in to see what is going on

Sentence

Arise, shine, for your light has come! And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

Isaiah 60:1

Collect

Lord God of the nations, we have seen the star of Your glory rising in splendour; may the brightness of Your incarnate Word pierce the night that covers the earth, signal the dawn of justice and peace, and beckon all nations to walk as one in Your light. We ask this through Jesus Christ, Your Word made flesh, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever **Amen**

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Isaiah 60: 1 – 6

PSALM

72: 1 – 7 & 10 – 14

EPISTLE

Ephesians 3: 1 – 12

GOSPEL

Matthew 2: 1 – 12

NOTES ON THE READINGS

But first

It has long struck me as sad that the Season of the Epiphany occurs when so many people are on holidays, or in neutral. This tends to mean that the impact of the Season is lost, and that means several aspects of the Faith are not responded to. In the BCP this Season was designated as ‘The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles,’ and it had to do with the most disruptive element for the Infant Christian Church. Stemming as it did from Judaism, the same assumptions about life, faith and other people tended to be transferred holus bolus. That included the exclusion of all people not Jewish. However, the Acts of the Apostles illustrates a series of incidents that forced the Church to think outside the square. If they had not, we would have had no Church now.

It strikes me that, in this day and age, we again have to need to go past comfort zones and again to think outside the square. Failure to do so will result in Church and Faith being marginalised -- and ineffective. One of the huge issues is to wonder of Christians can have the propensity – and honesty – to see that other people and other groups are in the search for truth, too!

Old Testament Lesson

In the period during and after the Exile in Babylon, quite some of the prophets looked forward to some new golden age, when Jerusalem in general and the faith in particular would become the focus of attention to those who had been scattered, and to other peoples and races generally. One might sympathise with such a view that included greatly increased prosperity for Israel, as well as it being a focus and source of wisdom and faith.

All this may sound somewhat over-rated, but please do see that most self-respecting Jews could see that the embracing of the Faith would be of great value to many people besides Jews. It sounds a bit of a leap, but then it must be said that if more people were to embrace the Christian Faith, properly and profoundly, then life and history could well be profoundly affected as well.

Psalm

Take off your blinkers and see that the author of this Psalm has a very similar vision in front of him. Notice, too how it would seem that the possibility of regional leaders bringing tribute seems to overflow atop the justice and righteousness aspects.

Epistle

If there was one major thing that faced the Infant Church, it was the fact that people other than Jews were looking to be part of the Faith. No big deal says you! But if you had been inured by thousands of years of seeing yourself as part of God’s Chosen People, you had long learnt to consider any other group or race of

people as really quite non-existent. Truly. With long tradition, such a perception had the status of being a sacred cow, so to speak. I find it strange how Paul claims some special privilege for Apostles in having the position of Gentiles revealed to them. A careful look at the OT prophets shows their interest and concern for people of countries around them, and even that strange book of Jonah actually castigates Israel for not being prepared to see past its adequate nose. However, the real point is that Jesus is the answer to all human life and aspirations, though we moderns tend to create our own limitations on how we see that. It is time to take off blinkers.

Gospel

It was many years into my own pilgrimage as a Christian before I began to see the story of the Magi as anything more than a colourful addition to the birth narratives of Jesus. ‘Wise Men’ we used to call them, and that was safe enough. When more modern translations referred to the men from the east (from Suddam Hussein territory) as *Magi*, then some blinkers began to fall. Astrologers! Occultists! Shock and horror. What made it all worse was the fact that these searchers after truth from another and alien culture seemed to have a much clearer idea of Whom they were visiting than the locals did, and how can that be?

In reality this is a rather shocking incident, because it removes protection from ordinary believers who think they are safe in their theology, only to find that they are not the only genuine searchers-after-truth.

Mind you, Herod got it all wrong, too, self-obsessed as he was. But Herod never was Jewish but Idumean – foreign and alien from Israel. And enemy anyhow.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I am getting a bit too old to remember where I have told stories to help get some points across. If you have heard all this before, sorry. Two illustrations.

Many moons ago, a cousin of mine expressed concern about her wayward daughter, University student, who was wandering away from the Faith. Mum asked if I, the priest, would talk to daughter and bring her back to reality. I refused that request but did offer to talk to daughter. As we talked, it was clear that daughter was discarding her Mum’s *very* naive faith, because of all manner of material to which she had been opened. Daughter was anti the Vietnam war (as was I!) and horror of horrors, was looking at Communism. The point that I asked daughter to consider was always to be looking for where truth lay, in all aspects. That was where she had been looking, and I could assure Mum that if daughter was honest in that search - and that begs a lot of questions! - it would not be all that long before daughter was ‘home’ again.

You may find that unsatisfying, so I tell another tale. When I first read Joy Davidman’s ‘Smoke on ‘ the Mountain, I encountered very similar stories. Joy was, later in life, to be the wife of C.S. Lewis. She started off life as a Jewess, with all the fascinating business of being part of that faith. For some reason she found it most unsatisfactory, and began a search which encompassed first atheism and then communism, - both of them rather popular and exotic in her young day and age. Each search, apparently, provided quite some disenchantment, so eventually she began to look at Christianity and found the object of her long pilgrimage. In her book, mentioned above, on the Ten Commandments, she brought all of the insights from all of the above into that really quite remarkable publication. And that is perhaps the point: wide vision and openness to all truth does most people a lot of good. On the other hand, narrowness may feel safe, but tends to be nothing of the sort.

One of the great tragedies so often evident in religions of whatever sort tends to be the sense of self-protection. You are welcome to be one of us provided that you fit the sausage skin. Older people amongst us can look back to the time when Catholics and Protestants regarded each other with distinct distrust. In fact, the suburb in Sydney in which I grew up prided itself that Catholics were very little in evidence. Certainly there was no Catholic Church anywhere.

It was into an atmosphere not dissimilar to that, that this tale of the Magi comes. While any thought of any sort of a king was treason to Herod, the tale of aliens coming to worship Jesus would have been quite a blot on the landscape to the traditional and conservative Jew. It would have been really quite shocking. But here Matthew relates the tale, as if it were the most expected thing in the world.

On top of all that, there is the simple and clear statement that these people, however many or few of them,⁹ were rather more aware of the advent and the nature of this child than were most of the child's fellow-countrymen. Shepherds had been and gone, but there must have been but few of Bethlehem's population that time who either knew or cared about any child. And let's face it, the stables at the back of a pub were not the most pretentious place for any birth.

Gold, frankincense and myrrh. King and God and sacrifice, as the Christmas Carol reminds us. Each of them recognition of the extent to which these ancient worthies had reached towards the truth in their search. Ask not so much how they reached their conclusions. Just be glad to realize that the truth is available to all searchers, regardless of their creed, culture or religion. Or lack of it.

And that is the point, is it not? We tend to hold people off because of their differences, and not even listen or hear their point of view. When we do, if we do, there may just be something of a culture shock *for us*.

There was an enormous debate raging in this part of the world several years ago. The basis of the debate was Jesus' words that 'no one can come to the Father but by me.' Those most vigorous in their debate and anger demanded that anyone professing and calling themselves Christian had by sheer necessity, to fit the same pattern, theology and practice that they espoused. Anything else was illegitimate and invalid. The sad part about it all was that such a narrow and constricted view of the Faith, of God and of life was so singularly unattractive, so totally out of step with the Scriptures they professed to follow, and so demeaning of all and sundry who refused to kowtow, that, if theirs really was the truth, I would reject it out of hand.

One further word about the poor maligned Gentiles.

It was not long after the Resurrection that, just as the old prophets had anticipated, that people of other languages, races and tribes, began their pilgrimage into belonging. The Roman centurion, the Ethiopian eunuch, all manner of people, began to fill the pages of the Acts. This was a great problem for much of the Infant Church and, as Acts 15 portrays, there was the great debate to see if this novelty would be then end of the Church, end of Gospel, end of everything. All tradition and perception pointed to the removal of the threat. All Scripture, as far as many were concerned, pointed in the same direction.¹⁰ Through the grace of God, the decision at the end of that first great synod was to accept those of true heart regardless of their genesis. Thank heaven that was the case, for otherwise the Christian Church would have been all gone and forgotten within a generation or two, had the decision gone otherwise.

People of good will of other faiths and none are all in the search for truth, and that has to be honoured and acknowledged. Uncomfortable that may well be, but Jesus did talk about taking up crosses and things, did He not!

⁹ The assumption that there were three is illustrated by the number of gifts.

¹⁰ This was not actually so – but we do have our favourite passages do we not, most of which are there to support our own (limited) views.