

**Sentence**

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

*Mark 1: 15*

**Collect**

O Lord Jesus Christ, Who at Your first coming sent Your messenger to prepare Your way before You; grant that the ministers and stewards of Your mysteries may likewise so 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**

**Isaiah 11: 1 – 10**

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

**Psalm**

**71: 1 – 7 & 18 – 21**

Give the king Your judgement, O God: and Your righteousness to the son of a king  
That he may judge Your people rightly: and the poor of the land with equity:  
Let the mountains be laden with peace because of his righteousness: and the hills also with prosperity for his people  
May he give justice to the poor among the people: and rescue the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor  
May he live while the sun endures: and while the moon gives light, throughout all generations  
May he come down like rain upon the new-mown fields: and as showers that water the earth  
In his time shall righteousness flourish: and abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more

Let his name live for ever: and endure as long as the sun  
Let all peoples use his name in blessing: and all nations call him blessed.  
Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel: Who alone does great marvels  
Blessed be His glorious name for ever: and let the whole earth be filled with His glory. Amen, Amen.

**Epistle**

**Romans 15: 4 – 13**

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name:" and again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people"; and again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him"; and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope."

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

### NOTES ON THE READINGS

#### Old Testament

This passage may well help us to realize that not all of Israel had the fiery expectation of a messiah of the likes of King David. John the Baptist seemed to have that view, and that may well have been because of his Essene background. But, Isaiah did not, obviously. And it is a telling picture and presentation that the old prophet offered. Please read this through carefully.

It may well have been because of the vast lack of such aspects and attitudes that led Isaiah to think in the way he did. Kings and other leaders of those days were fierce upholders of their own authority, which meant that the little people had the most minimal chance of having their voices heard. So Isaiah must have seen the clear need for real justice and caring to emerge from somewhere, and looked to God for such answers.

Do not be carried away with any literal expectation of lions lying down with lambs; it is metaphorical of course, but you still get the clear message. In the forthcoming kingdom, *power* is not the focus of attention, but rather the careful consideration for all people. I suspect that the only possible criticism of the cameo would be that it seems to point to boredom through lack of conflict, but I suspect that the real outcome would be resolution of conflict. Peace is not the absence of war, but rather the possibility of resolving difference without physical conflict.

However, as reiterated often in these pages, please see where the real emphasis lies as the prophet looks for Divine answers to human problems. It is not in heaven that Isaiah anticipated results, but right here and now. Gospel responses to real human issues has ever been a vast need in lives and living.

#### Psalm

*And does not the Psalm – from a period in time after David<sup>1</sup> - make the same statements and hopes as Isaiah?* So why have we missed all this emphasis, and turned it into some sort of spiritual haze?

#### Epistle

This passage begins with a glad rejoicing in the fact of Scripture, and goes on to underline another often missed factor. We would be lost without the Bible, but it does need to be understood rather better.

Take the emphasis on the Gentiles on the second part of this passage: to our view Paul may well be charged with cooking his cabbages a number of times, but he wants to get the point across. And the point is not only that Gentiles are now included in God's vision, but that this Faith is designed for all humans regardless of where or when they live and under whatever culture. This Faith is not so rarefied that only a blessed few can understand it, or have the capacity to have faith in it. This Faith stands up to whatever scrutiny anyone imposes on it, and whilst we who are its believers at the present time are a long way from perfect, we do need to embrace its goals and means for peace and reconciliation. Otherwise we are being apostates.

#### Gospel

I have long wondered – inquisitive so and so that I am – how the Lord coped with John the Baptist. Anyone who has taken care to compare and contrast the very different ministries and emphases of Jesus and John must surely have pondered the same question. John, product of his earlier life almost certainly spent with the Qmram

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<sup>1</sup> Circa 1000BC

Sect, was formidable and forceful, very judgemental and narrow. In fact, time was to come for John when he questioned his Cousin about his credentials. 'Are you the One we are looking for, or do we look for another?'

There can be no doubt that John prepared the way for Jesus, but he did expect a similarly punitive and judgemental Lord, and was disappointed when Jesus did not fit the pattern. Does that mean that the Lord can cope with all sorts of random shot preachers and teachers? My problem is that so many of the narrower folk make the road so much harder for the Gospel, and even harder for any disciple. My sad comment comes from so much time in ministry and preaching trying to tidy up for folk after they had been led up some fearful 'garden paths' – and not only by people on the fringes of Christianity.

### **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

Being Anglican tends to have its great advantages, and sometimes some stunning opposites. Ours is a Church that, as someone once wrote decades ago, tolerates the intolerable, and an adherent can be almost anything within the range of right-wing catholic and left wing Salvation Army, - which is an offshoot of Methodists who off-shot from our mob anyhow. So I guess my comments on John the Baptist may seem more than a little off-key.

It has to be said that each person's experience of life produces such a wide variation of responses and attitudes that there is no point trying to push any of us into some sort of sausage skin. Years ago, I was asked why I was Anglican rather than belonging to any other denomination; my answer at the time was 'accident of birth I imagine' but it was not long before the real answer is 'by conviction.' I could not cope with being bound to one of the so-called confessional Churches, not because I look down on them at all! Far from it. But where I am it is expected of me to explore the Faith and test the edges and ask the awkward questions to find the real and lasting answers. This is the very process that has produced for all of us that most remarkable document called Scripture. I have no monopoly on God or even on theology, but I have become aware of how some preaching has gone beyond the reasonable limits and produced huge antipathy to the Faith once delivered.

So I have to come back to that question about John the Baptist: how did Jesus cope with his outbursts, though many of them were productive? How did Jesus cope with his judgemental approach, when He was far more laid back and relaxed about a lot of the same issues? More to the point, although I am retired these days, I still find it hard to remain quiet when whoever is preaching or teaching either has not thought through what he/she is saying, or is way off beam Biblically let alone theologically. (Obviously, I would not make a good Jesus, but then you know that already!)

Whilst I have to report beginning my Christian pilgrimage in very much the judgemental, fundamental evangelical Christian position, it was a matter of first the Scriptures and then people and clergy in the bush areas where I first worked whose honesty and integrity had me looking rather wider than up to then. I may have told you how, one Sunday evening after Church, the men of the congregation took me aside and told me that I was preaching rubbish<sup>2</sup> .... and that I knew it. *And they were right. They had seen further in what I was on about, and I had missed out on many important factors.*

It was not a matter of fearing that the narrow Gospel would not be accepted by people. It was a clear and present fact that my narrow vision of the Gospel was the big inhibiting factor. The more I read the Scriptures, the more my blinkers were removed, not by people but by the Spirit of God. It is no easy path to travel from certainty to ... where one was not sure for some time. That uncertainty was not long in being replaced by a greater sureness, as both Scripture and life intertwined in a way it had never done before.

*So I am still not sure how Jesus coped with the Baptist. But then He had to cope with me, did He not?*

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<sup>2</sup> That was not the word they used; your imagination can fill in the blanks!

**Sunday 12th December, 2010**

**Third Sunday of Advent**

**Sentence**

Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.'

*Isaiah 35: 3-4*

**Collect**

Almighty God, You have made us and all things to serve You; come quickly to save us so that wars and violence shall end and Your children may live in peace, honouring one another with justice and love; through Jesus Christ Your Son our Lord.

Amen

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Isaiah 35: 1 – 10**

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

**Psalm**

**The Song of Mary**

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord: my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour  
Who has looked with favour on His lowly servant: from this day all generations shall call me blessed  
The Almighty has done great things for me: and holy is His name  
God has mercy on those who fear Him: from generation to generation  
The Lord has shown strength with His arm: and scattered the proud in their conceit  
Casting down the mighty from their thrones: and lifting up the lowly  
God has filled the hungry with good things: and sent the rich away empty  
He has come to the aid of His servant Israel: to remember the promise of mercy  
The promise He made to our forebears: to Abraham and his children for ever.

**Epistle**

**James 5: 7 – 10**

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 11: 2 – 11**

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes?

Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### Old Testament

For anyone who delights in offering 'fulfillment of prophecy' studies, a word of warning is offered. Although much of the commentaries available to people these days tends towards the ridiculous that does not mean that the old prophets are to be ignored. In fact they need our attention, but on a more real level.

This passage, if you read it through a couple of times, seems to be taking us a two or three different directions at once. There is the flowery and light-hearted bit, and the promise (threat?) of retribution, and then a going on to where perhaps we need to look more closely.

It has to be said that prophets were not, *repeat not* gazers into some future. They were spokespeople from God to their own day and age, and as we connect to what it all meant then, so are we more able to see where things connect in our own day and age. So the first thing to note is this: that Israel was facing stern difficulty around then, and the prophet encouraged the people to keep going, regardless of the circumstances. That is a firm response at any time in history or life.

The common expectation of the time from the promised messiah was the vindication of Israel but a God Who would punish those who ignored or disobeyed Him. It might be excusable for people then to have the expectation of God being the powerful bruiser of the time, for life was brutish and short those days. So it is a little surprising to find that cameo of healing and restoration: blind, deaf and lame being healed. (This imagery was taken up to a much more expansive extent by Isaiah's successor, Isaiah II.<sup>3</sup>)

When it comes to the final paragraph of this passage, the position that the prophet took was not an exclusive one: ie. One did not need to be pure to be part of the flow. It was and remains the case that the Faith has always called for a significant response to God. In other words, those excluded in this passage are those who would have nothing to do with the life-pattern of faithfulness.

### For the Psalm - Song of Mary

I have reported elsewhere the shock received by some MU members, years ago, as we explored what the Song of Mary really had to say. It is little less than the reshaping of society, in terms of caring and sharing and upsetting the power-brokers. Read it through again to ensure that you get the picture, please.

### Epistle

*Be patient until the coming of the Lord.* There was a time when I adhered to the expectation of a parousia sooner rather than later, until my understanding of Scripture grew somewhat. The real point of it all, surely, is to recognize that what we may think as slow passage of time is seen rather differently from a Divine standpoint, if I may be so bold as to offer my opinion. History itself shows how slow things really move, except in some rather drastic situations. However, it is true most of the time that real and lasting change is not accomplished in a hurry.

### Gospel

I referred to this passage a Sunday or two ago, indicating a real difference of understanding between Jesus and John. It may seem strange to you that people on the Biblical stage, so to speak, were so diverse and capable of misunderstanding each other. John was looking for a 'gung-ho' messiah, and Jesus did not fit the pattern one little bit. It must have been disconcerting for the Baptist, but I suspect that his perceptions stemmed not so much from Scripture and observation as from the teaching (*propaganda?*) of the Essenes. That interesting sect of the Jews, from whom certainly we have gained the Dead Sea Scrolls, were somewhat on the lunatic fringe, and such folk tend to get too much air time, with their rather odd views.

Jesus' response to John was typically gentle, and framed in question. You may be aware that Jesus reply was framed in a quotation from Isaiah, from one of the Servant Songs. John would have been quite familiar with the passage, but probably not in giving it the eminence that Jesus gave. (In a recent email conversation with a great

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<sup>3</sup> It is quite obvious that the book of Isaiah covers the lifetime of at least two people if not three. If you find this concept difficult, then I suggest you obtain a commentary on this most fascinating of the OT Prophets.

Jewish mate, we debated the Servant Songs: she had a very different outlook on this passage, which was a great surprise to me.)

## **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

I do not know about where you live, but where we do these days, we seem to be surrounded by churches and groups that tend to have a great *penchant* for Biblical prophecy. Christadelphians seem to love the subject, and also appear to have – to my mind – a strange outlook on Scripture and contemporary history, still seeing Russia and the USA as the great antagonists. Around the corner – almost – is another denomination where similar studies appear to be held, and one is left wondering why! We appear to be surrounded by Christian people who are focussed on extraordinary expectations about what the Lord will or will not do, as the world seems to race on to a crisis of its own making. With Advent here, I am cheeky enough to raise the issue and ponder some other directions.

One of the main sources of the strange debate tends to be the apocalyptic sections of the Gospels in particular, where Jesus talked about wars and rumours of wars, and earthquakes and all manner of stars falling from the skies. Recent events along the Ring of Fire in our own hemisphere may well have upped the ante, along with floods and global warming and so on. Sadly, such readers seem to be unaware of the Jewish style of writing about critical issues.

That old Hebrew affection for apocalyptic writing – and getting the message across, - had little or nothing to do with end of the world stuff. In accord with the entire Biblical drift, it had to do with being aware of and responding honestly against those forces in human history and culture that demean and destroy people. If you like to put it this way, apocalyptic is yet another way of preaching for the Kingdom of God as opposed to the kingdom of humans.

It is only a year or so ago that I was ‘bouncing off’ the second readings in Church, where those readings were from Revelation. I wondered out loud whether people were scared of John’s writings, or perhaps just confused. Nods generally indicated the perception that Revelation was not on the ‘often read’ list for just those reasons. Having spent quite some time over the years expounding this book to groups in parishes, I asked them to see something of what I underline to you now. The Old Testament prophets were emphasising the same or similar issues; and Daniel<sup>4</sup> may possibly be one of the first to use this strange style of writing. Daniel’s huge concern was that Israel and its culture and faith would be over-run by Hellenistic ideas, fearful that Judaism would be blunted and defeated.

So back to present-day realities. Advent is the annual reminder that the task of the modern Christian is to be aware of the faith and philosophical differences between Christianity and the culture in which you live. It also emphasises the need for the People of God to remain true to the Faith once delivered, perhaps even at the cost of their own lives. *Failure to be aware of such issues is one of the horrors that permitted the rise of Nazism, amongst others.*

One final word: ‘save us from the time of trial’ is a phrase in the (said to be new) Lord’s Prayer, against which some folk still have reservations. This is, in fact, an accurate translation of the original Greek – and for good reason. It is precisely this situation of needing to stand firm against contrary pressure in times of crisis that makes this phrase so relevant. Please never forget that.

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<sup>4</sup> Actually not regarded as a prophet in the Hebrew Bible

**Sentence**

A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel, God with us.

*Matthew 1: 23*

**Collect**

Gracious God, You chose the virgin Mary by Your grace to be the mother of our Lord and Saviour; so fill us with Your grace that with her we may rejoice in Your salvation and in all things, embrace Your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and in the unity of the holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Isaiah 7: 10 – 16**

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

**Psalm**

**80: 1 – 7 & 17 – 19**

Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, You that lead Joseph like a flock: You that are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine out in glory

Before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh: stir up Your power and come to save us

*Restore us again, O Lord of Hosts: show us the light of Your countenance and we shall be saved.*

O Lord God of Hosts: how long will You be angry at Your people's prayer?

You have fed them with the bread of tears: and given them tears to drink in good measure.

You have made us the victim of our neighbours: and our enemies laugh us to scorn

*Restore us again, O Lord of Hosts: show us the light of Your countenance and we shall be saved.*

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Let Your power rest on the man at Your right hand: on that son of man whom You made so strong for Yourself And so we shall not turn back from You: give us life, and we will call upon Your Name.

*Restore us again, O Lord of Hosts: show us the light of Your countenance and we shall be saved.*

**Epistle**

**Romans 1: 1 – 7**

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 1: 18 – 25**

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke

from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

## NOTES ON THE READINGS .....

### Old Testament Lesson

You may find this to be a ‘hard hat and seat belt’ area, as I am asking you to step outside the square somewhat, and listen, not to me, but to Scripture itself. There may be few who will find it easy.

It has to be said that the use of Old Testament by some of the authors of the New can not be considered valid these days. A fairly cursory glance at OT quotes will justify such a statement, not only from me but also from commentators far more learned than me. Alternatively, the real position may well be that moderns have misunderstood the ancient useage of quotations, and led people up some garden paths.

Take this passage as example. *What is the real situation into which Isaiah spoke?* And the answer is interesting. (a) It had very little to do with the procreation, gestation and production of a little child. (b) The word translated ‘virgin’ did not have the overtones that have applied subsequently. The Greek word is parthenos, (παρθενος) which means, quite simply, ‘a young woman of marriageable age,’ which in those days meant a 15- or 16-year old, and had nothing to do with sexual activity or lack of it. What is most important in this context is (c) – the historical fact that Ahaz the king was scared to death of invasion from the north, and his subsequent loss of kingdom. What Isaiah was stressing to that rather pathetic king was that *in the time it takes for a young woman to conceive and bear a child, for that child to develop to the stage of being aware of truth and falsehood, the kings before whom you cower now will be no more.*

The reality of the situation in this story was not dependent upon a ‘virgin’ at all, but upon the **God Who rescues His people from disaster, real or potential.** And that is the real issue: God is a God Who saves His people, often from the brink of disaster.

### PSALM

And is not the Psalm this morning emphasising exactly the same thing – God is a God Who saves His people, as He did in Exodus and Exile, for Ahaz, and now through the Son of Man?

### EPISTLE

Even the short epistle for today underlines the humanity of Jesus, as descendent of David *κατα σαρκα* - according to the flesh.

### GOSPEL

In recent times, (January, 2010) the story of the beatification of Mary McKillop had filled the airwaves, bringing an unfortunate emphasis to the story of that remarkable woman, reducing her by the apparent need of proving a couple of miracles. I say unfortunate, because the person concerned surely needs no justification of miracle. In fact, it removes the reality from the story, and elevates the person to a sort of demi-god position. *And that is the silly part of it all.*

The elevation of Mary to sainthood via miracle leads simply and directly to missing the entire point of the exercise. Read the Biblical accounts properly and there is the tale, repeated throughout Biblical history, of an unimportant, very ordinary person who was completely content to obey God wherever that took her. It is that apparent unimportance that is the issue. The moment I relegate someone to ‘sainthood’ I miss the point. I am left with the conclusion that God will deal only through the great ones of the world. That leaves me in the comfortable position of being certain that I will not be called upon, because I am a no one. The real Gospel leaves me in the position of being aware that it is no ones that the Father calls, because – I suspect – the Father knows that He can depend on such folk. Think that through, and maybe find something of an answer to today’s constant fear of depression: I am a nobody, incapable of anything, and nobody cares! ..... Oh! Yeah?

### NOTES FOR A SERMON

I find it rather strange that – rather too often – this remarkably down-to-earth Judaic-Christian Faith gets focussed upon in all manner of odd-ball and mysterious directions. It may be miracle; it may be predictions for the

future, it may even be on the matter of faith healing. Sadly that is not the limit of oddball and dangerous diversions into which some people take what they think is the faith. The latest horrifying oddball adventure is that hitting the press these days in South Australia – the so-called Agape Ministries. That group's apparent *penchant* for violence and force, added to the 'end-of-the-world scenario takes it well out of sensible consideration. (How, in the name of fortune, is some Pacific Island going to survive if the end of the world comes? As mentioned last week, no Biblical apocalyptic writing has to do with such a situation anyhow!)

As Christmas approaches, the age-old story of Mary and her Son begins to fill air-space once again. It is a great tale, and its reality is the great issue. It has very little to do with miraculous births, but aren't all births miraculous anyhow? I remain amazed at the arrival of our children in spite of the fact that the first arrival was close to 50 years ago.

Bethlehem of Judaea, you are the least of all ..... Some years ago, we had a parishioner who was born in Bethlehem, a Palestinian of Christian persuasion, who underlines the very ordinariness of the town. It is just a handful of kilometres from Jerusalem, and lives under the shadow of its much larger and more important rival. And dear young Mary, mother of our Lord, was of precisely the same ilk. Just a very ordinary Jewish lass, of marriageable age, and engaged to someone rather older than her, by all accounts. Nothing fancy, nothing special, just ordinary-ordinary. And why?

I have a sneaky suspicion that the reason behind that is that ordinary people can be rather more down-to-earth and fair dinkum than what I may call 'pretty people.' Those latter tend, in my experience at least, to be rather more self-focussed and sometimes obsessed – demanding their position and rights. Humility is not the strongest of their attributes. And not to put too fine a point on it, if you look back (and forwards) in Biblical history, you will find such choices of ordinary people something of a constant. Abraham may be something of a variation, though I suspect his ordinariness was a matter of not finding much substance in the faith he had professed before his pilgrimage. Moses? Joshua? Gideon? David?

In fact it is only when the occasional variant appears, someone like Saul, that problems arise with their personalities. I doubt if there is any great need to expand the picture: I will dare to lay the proverbial 'London to a brick' that you have lots of illustrations yourself.

My great difficulty with lionising someone like Mary, mother of Jesus or McKillop come to that, is that the real and significant point lies here: when Mary is elevated to such high rank as in Roman circles, the parallel thought is that such a person and her work is way beyond the capacity or faith of little old you and me. It can become a horrible cop-out. I cannot attain to anything like that, Lord. I am only little old ordinary not very fancy me.

And that is rubbish! I may not be able to shake the world, but then nor did Mary, come to that. But she was given a task, and a sad one at that in the end, and was faithful and constant, and did more than was needed.

That is the sort of person this Lord of ours looks for: not flamboyant, pompous, self-focusses people. They are more trouble than they are worth, *n'est ce pas?*

**Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> December, 2010**

**Christmas Day *during the day ii***

**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: give us a spirit of wisdom to know how rich is the glory You have given us, and how great is the hope to which You have called us 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 52: 7 – 10**

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the LORD to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

**Psalm**

**98**

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

**Epistle**

**Hebrews 1: 1 – 9**

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." Of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire." But of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous sceptre is the sceptre of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions."

**GOSPEL**

**John 1: 1 – 14**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### Old Testament Lesson

I wonder what you make of today's OT reading, and what you might expect other people to see and understand of it. Is it not difficult to try and 'translate' such a passage to people who really have little or no idea either of faith or Scripture? Is this not just a rune of words 'signifying nothing?' Perhaps I shock you, but the reason I offer the shock is that many Christians hide behind some sort of piety, or simply presume that something great is being said but have no real idea. However, let it be said that the prophet knew what he was on about.

Rather too many Christians know or understand little about the Kingdom of God, unsure where it all fits in. My dear old Dad had long assumed that a person would know little about the kingdom until after death. You can imagine how his contemporaries would have thought of the relevance of that!

Isaiah the prophet<sup>5</sup> knew exactly what he was referring to, and it was not Christmas, of course. It was far more immediate to his own day and age, and to people of his own time. His and Israel's experience of God right then had more to do with the return from exile; and do not forget that that return was not the result of military action but of the far more peaceful permission of Cyrus. (Why was it that the Jews could see the hand of God more wisely and realistically than more recent Christians?)

The whole point of this passage is that God's activity is far more often a peaceful 'salvation' than military victory. Isaiah was perfectly aware that war produces far more tension, trouble and damage than peace does. So God is a God of salvation for Isaiah, and salvation was seen then (and still should be!) not as some future hope but as the gift of room to move and grow, to become the person or people they were designed to become. Salvation is wholeness, health, and all that benefits life of and for people. And as far as Isaiah was concerned, the only real source of that is Yahweh.

In other words, it is only as people operate on the same wave-length as Yahweh, in justice and truth and peace, that life will become the arena for real growth and maturity. If one wishes to look at the other side of the coin, simply observe the extent to which life and relationships are disintegrating in our own day and age. It parallels the extent to which people are turning their backs on God, and that results in rejection of each other. Life's disintegration, surely, is proof of the relevance of the Faith rather than the opposite!!!

### Psalm

Now look at that psalm! And read through it again, getting the gist of all that is being said here. It is no mere exaltation without reason or direction, but a clearly stated and understood consideration of the role of God in the world of His making. And the delight comes, not from power and strength, but from caring and justice and equity. One would have to wonder if ever there was any other religion or life-view that held such matters as important and creative. Even at this early stage in Israel's religious development, hugely significant aspects of life were seen to be the only way to go. A person may choose other directions to head, but even then such directions would have been seen and destructive and damaging.

### Epistle

I can almost recall when I first encountered this rather remarkable passage – as a young person. And that discovery lit up my surroundings in a stunning way. Having (at that stage) seen Jesus only as a possible choice one might make, and likely to appeal only to religious people anyhow, here was something that took me much further into the realities of life. Like today's Gospel, it pointed to the real meaning of life, and as such pointed to God not as some dream for believers to hang on to, but that *without which* life is voided of meaning, direction and purpose.

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<sup>5</sup> And this would have been Second Isaiah

There is a choice, of course; one can despise any idea of God, but all that is left is something without meaning, value or direction. And as I have said to lots of people in sermons and talks, if there should be no life after this, then I still must follow Christ, because He is the only one who makes sense of life, and gives it value, purpose and direction. And thank heaven for that.

## **GOSPEL**

Most Christmases of previous decades, I have used this passage as the Gospel each Christmas Day. Many commentators are certain that John's Gospel was written quite late –relatively speaking – in the first century, partly to combat rather shallow and/or false understandings of Christ and Gospel, and partly to help people see the far more wide and strategic view of where the Faith was pointing people ... and the Church. (If you consider that to be a little odd, then please do stop and see the extent to which many modern Christians have yet to begin to grasp the significance and relevance of the Faith once delivered.)

If you have never noticed this before, please stop and see that here, in John's Prologue, is an almost straight parallel between Genesis 1 and the Gospel. It is the clear and unmistakable statement from John that Jesus is nothing less than both the reason for existence and the creator of it all anyhow. (*The rest of his Gospel is the line of evidence the author offers to establish the validity of his case.*)

The other thing to notice is, that by the time John wrote this Gospel, he – amongst others- was of the clear view that this Gospel was for all people, of whatever time and place and that the Gospel needed to be expressed in terms that enabled anyone of any culture to understand the fact. Here is no pious chat about Jesus, but a staggering, all-embracing vision of The One and Only.

## **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

*It is something slightly odd to be part of a Church that used to be titled 'C of E' – because that title had long been varied to 'C and E' indicating the fact that lots of adherents would attend only at Christmas and Easter. For the rest of the year they would be absent.*

*The reason for raising this ancient information is that I have long been concerned that such light connection must leave such people wondering quite what we do celebrate at those Festivals. Most people seem to experience Christmas as a remarkably ineffective celebration, the point of the celebration not seeming to last as long as the toys given to the children at that time. So what IS the point and purpose of Christmas? And that would be – and remains – the focus of my attention for whoever happens to be in Church if I happen to be preaching. I have never seen either point or purpose in preaching pious nonsense.*

There is great sadness in the fact that Anglicans, who used to be classified as 'the people of the book' have lost real connection with the Scriptures, and seem to base their faith (or sometimes lack of it) on something or someone else. However, I ask you to come back to this most remarkable of books, not to be hoodwinked into something vague and beyond proof or evidence, but rather into the clear and evidential

Oddly enough, the search for meaning of life has been a constant in human exploration, and – in my experience at least – the Western search seems mostly to be delighted that there 'is no definitive answer.' That seems to be the mindset of ancient Greece also, where people loved to discuss and debate, but did not want nor look for real answers. I have more than a sneaky suspicion that much of modern culture's experience of depression and suchlike stems from precisely that lack of answer that people really do seem to need.

So what is it that Jesus purports to have but that modern culture rejects?

First of all, in Australia at least, the answer seems to be that religion itself is the great hang-up. Anything that has the slightest taint of 'religion' or 'Church' is suspect immediately, and the clear and present failure of Christmas celebration of 'peace and goodwill' seems to be evidence enough that we can offer only the most pathetic of options. Peace and goodwill are clearly in such short supply that it cannot be taken as valid in any sort of way. So it all seems rather drear does it not?

And the answer is 'no it is not drear.' One needs to look in the right direction to get answers that stand up to any sort of examination.

If we are to be at all serious in looking at Jesus for answers, then we need to take all that He has to say with greater seriousness than seems to have been the case heretofore. And it is not to miracle or other dramatic matter that we look, but to down-to-earth realities. Forget virgin birth or any of that sort of stuff. Look closer, and with greater veracity, for heaven's sake. It is all there, but like some computer searches, one needs to look closer and think more widely.

For a start, the Hebrew/Christian Faith is not the result of some revelation faxed/emailed/dropped from Above. The reality is that this faith is the result of many people over many generations asking all manner of questions and searching for the answers. Here is no faith of dogmatics, but the result of the search for truth. One of the disadvantages of this process, and of the truth being searched for, is that here is something that requires not belief so much as commitment.

Take the story of Abram for instance. I will lay you London to a brick that dear old Abe had got to the stage in his life where his Mesopotamian religion, (almost certainly moon worship) was not meeting him where he lived, so to speak. It would have been in his mind that he first questioned, and in usual Biblical style, the searcher finds that he/she is being searched for by God! The divine call to Abraham was to leave where he was, to go pilgrimizing and wandering, for he would find his answers, not by dropping off the world but by living in it and asking questions, and being prepared to go wherever his search took him. Thank God he was ready, and Sarai with him, - *for without those two people we may well be living still in the dark ages.*

There, historically speaking, was the commencement of the People of God, not perfect or squeaky clean, but searching for truth. And finding it, over a long period of time, but also being convinced that truth was there to be found.

It is interesting to notice in the development of the Biblical story, that all this searching took place in real life and real time. There was to be no hiding away in pious garbage or religious jargon. It all had to stand up to any examination, and life of course is the harshest examiner of the lot. Not only did all this require searchers; it also required honest searchers, who gave no room to baloney.

Lining this religion<sup>6</sup> up against both the religions and political systems and truisms of the day meant that quite some of the struggle was against that which, today, we may describe as *status quo*. This was not a matter of 'believing' something either incredible or intangible; far from it. It was a matter of testing all those presumptions and assumptions against the wider flow of history, ethics and realities, and to find what lasted the longest and provided the best outcome for *everyone*.

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<sup>6</sup> I hate the word religion, for it misses the point of almost everything. It is and remains the search for truth!

**Sunday 26th December, 2010**

**First Sunday after Christmas**

**Sentence**

Because Jesus Himself was tested by what He suffered, He is able to help those who are being tested.

*Hebrews 2:19*

**Collect**

Almighty God, Who wonderfully created and yet more wonderfully restored the dignity of human nature; in Your mercy bring us to share the divine life of Jesus Christ, Who came to share our human life and Who now lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. **Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Isaiah 63: 7-9**

I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD, the praiseworthy acts of the LORD, because of all that the LORD has done for us, and the great favour to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely"; and he became their saviour in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; He lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

**Psalms**

**148**

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord from heaven: O Praise Him in the heights  
Praise Him, all His angels: O praise Him all His hosts  
Praise Him, sun and moon: praise Him all you stars of light  
Praise Him, you highest heaven: and you waters that are above the heavens  
Let them praise the name of the Lord: for He commanded and they were made.  
He established them for ever and ever: He made an ordinance which shall not pass away.

**Epistle**

**Hebrews 2: 10 – 18**

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you."

And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again, "Here am I and the children whom God has given me." Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 2: 13 – 23**

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead."

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazarene."

## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### Old Testament

It is always worth the effort to check up on readings and look at whatever passage is involved to espy the context. Unless one does that, much of what is written in such a short passage tends to be rather useless.

What is more fascinating is to find that Isaiah – in the rather ghastly situation of being exiled in Babylon – sees quite clearly that it will be JHWH who rescues Israel, and will do so at great personal cost, so to speak. If the rescue involved struggle and conflict, then God will do it. This really is a remarkably supportive passage, even if it is expressed in terms that are no longer ‘politically correct’ in our own day and age. (That really does show, simply, how short-sighted is political correctness!)

### Psalm

Brief this psalm may be, but read it over a couple of times, please. And then get something of the picture of God that this passage conveys. Not only creation rates a mention, but also **ordinances**, those ancient verities that underlie and uphold any useful community or culture.

### Epistle

Why does God not stop or cut out the rough bits in life? We who live in a press-button age tend to think that all problems should be solved simply and press-button. If you want to grow and develop into mindless, hopeless, uncreative and inexperienced dolts, then keep on thinking that way.

God is into making us into useful, reliable, developing people. And there is only one way to go to reach such goals. Get used to it

## GOSPEL

And that harsh reality is inflicted on the Holy Family as well. No excuses or exemptions even for them. Here is a real world faith for the real world, and no mucking about.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

I can only hope that the person of whom I speak never reads this, but .....

We have a rather lovely 21 year-old grand-daughter for whom life has not been all that happy. Her mother was involved in a ghastly motor accident when she was still a child, and she grew up finding it hard to make friends, except for people who either were no great help or were actually a great disadvantage to her. As she matured towards adulthood, she was in a couple of relationships that turned out to be very manipulative, and when the last one broke down, it left her feeling very low, her self-esteem shattered. It was an awful time for her, and even for us it was terrible enough. How does anyone get alongside a person who, quite sure she knew it all, seemed impervious to offers of support.

The point of mentioning this story lies in the outcome: like phoenix from the ashes, this young lady is emerging with great strength, wonderful poise, and great determination. *One can look back and wonder, that if she had not gone through the trials and tribulations, she would not be half the person she is becoming.*

I have more than a sneaky suspicion that this may be sufficient to set off any number of sermons. What is the most surprising for the Christian – surely- is that whilst one may suspect that if God is God then He can be quite distant from ordinary human struggles. And yet the whole matter of the Incarnation makes it quite clear that God works in more realistic ways than observing foolish humanity from a great height.

WE have a Saviour Who knows what it is like to be you, and never stands in distant judgement of you but stands alongside of you right through it all , in the fond hope that, like our grand-daughter, you will ‘use the vale of misery as a well!