

Sentence

The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Matthew 23:11

Collect

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

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Joshua 24: 1 – 3a & 14 - 25

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors--Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor--lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.

Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."

But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good." And the people said to Joshua, "No, we will serve the LORD!"

Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him." And they said, "We are witnesses." He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel." The people said to Joshua, "The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey." So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

Psalm

78: 1 – 7

Give heed to my teaching, O my people: incline your ears to the words of my mouth
For I will open my mouth in a parable: and expound the mysteries of former times.
What we have heard and known: what our forebears have told us
We will not hide from their children, but declare to a generation yet to come: the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, His mighty and wonderful works.

For He did marvellous things in the sight of their ancestors: in the land of Egypt, in the country of Zoan.
He divided the sea and let them pass through: He made the waters stand up in a heap.
In the daytime He led them with a cloud: and all night long, with the light of fire.
He cleft rocks in the wilderness: and gave them drink in abundance as from springs of water.
He brought streams out of the rock: and caused the waters to flow down like rivers.
But for all this they sinned yet more against Him: and rebelled against the Most High in the desert.

Epistle

1 Thessalonians 4: 9 – 18

Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your

own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

GOSPEL

Matthew 25: 1- 13

Jesus said "The kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! There will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.'

And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

What a powerful and timely passage this is, from Israel's own experience just before being permitted to enter the Promised Land. '*Choose you this day Whom you will serve*' has long been a very challenging and moving 'sermon' from Joshua to those who were, sort of, God's people. The passage is a reminder of the way in which most people, in spite of the determined choice for God, still carry enormous amounts of old baggage of religion, superstition and habit.

I had been brought up on the (remarkably false) proposition that when a person turned to God, then all of those old issues disappeared. That is **never** the case, for one needs to pilgrim on to discover the extent to which old patterns hold sway. Many times this shows up in quite unexpected ways, occasionally quite unsettling. If this happens to you, do not be surprised, but simply recognize the reality – and move on from there. Sadly, Jewish history shows that Israel failed rather miserably in maintaining their loyalty, which tends to be part of the human dilemma, does it not!

Psalm

And centuries later, even the old psalmist was aware both of God's activity and Israel's inconsistency. When will we ever learn

Epistle

It is not surprising that the Thessalonians would have had similar problems to the ancient Jews; their short background in the faith would have left lots of gaps in their understanding of God and the Faith. The Apostle was really quite gentle with this lot, and offered some assurance to them about what we might have heard referred to as the 'Last Things.'

May I reiterate comments from previous years and readings about Paul and the Parousia. Before anyone builds all manner of *schema* about what is said to happen at the Lord's Return, it is **always** hugely important to note how even the Apostle himself moved his views and developed his theology as time and years passed. These letters to the Thessalonians were early in his ministry, so one needs to first discover **when** the various epistles were written

and then place them in order of date of writing. Then notice the movement and development of Paul's comments about the 'End Times.' Then, if you are really game, and understand apocalyptic writing, read through and understand what John had to say in his *Revelation*. Then you may well end up with a remarkably different understanding of the 'Second Coming,' and so avoid so many of the rather crazy views that seem to circulate periodically¹.

GOSPEL

If you are rather put off by the rejection of the five foolish bridesmaids², then realize that this is part of the parable – and part of the culture of those days. The whole point of the story is to underline what Israel failed to do all those centuries ago: this is a tale to encourage, perhaps even to demand that people take responsibility for their actions, -- *and that tends to be somewhat of a forgotten issue in today's world.*

Here is a lovely tale, with a real sting to it. If one is to be in the Kingdom, then one needs to take full responsibility for one's actions, outlooks and attitudes. If one gives one's word, then one has to stick with it.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

If there is one thing about life today, and outcomes from life, today's readings really do offer a different but wholly sensible response to choice and action. It is a day or two since, as I write this, that there was a remarkably foolish road accident just north of the Barossa Valley. Apparently, two young women were riding on the bonnet of a motor vehicle on the main, sealed road when one fell off and was killed. Her sister, we are informed by news outlets, went to her aid and she too was killed by a passing car. The two children of one of the women were in the vehicle and apparently witnessed the hideous event. This is said to have occurred at about 3.00am.

The sad point of mentioning this totally sad tale is that all manner of excuses were offered in the attempt to explain what had happened. It was nobody's fault; its cause was inexplicable. With all due respect, the truth of the situation lies rather elsewhere, does it not? If I carry on like that, drunk or sober, I am responsible for the ghastly outcome no matter how I attempt to get around it all.

Should you think that to be unfair, then look at almost any other situation where the attempt is made to lay the blame on someone or something else. This is not the preserve of the ordinary person; it is a constant from our political leaders down to the humblest citizen, Not just with road accidents, but with decisions made about the Murray, the Desalination Plant, and it won't be long before it applies to the Adelaide Cricket Ground or the RAH, new or old. So much of society is taken up by those who seem to delight in avoiding issues and side-stepping responsibility. And that is the top part of a very slippery slope indeed.

So much of the emphasis of today's readings point in exactly that direction. From Israel's story as the people entered to Promised Land, to that odd little parable about a wedding. You have a task to fulfill; so go ahead and do it properly. One is left wondering quite why the current view of things has dropped so very low. It is not as if such a process has any value or offers any real benefit to anyone except perhaps the person who refuses to oblige. It is a strange thing about so many similar issues – the line of least resistance is followed, and the more that is the case, the more devastating the outcome emerges.

On the other hand, it is worth exploring the relative value of the better path. While there may well be some superficial disadvantages initially, the far more widespread advantages show up very quickly.

If there is one thing that produces maturity in individuals and communities, it is precisely the extent to which responsibility is taken. Maturity is hardly something one might consider wearing on one's sleeve, so to speak, but the increase in trust and reliability one can expect from others means a huge boost to confidence we can have in each other. You must know what it is like when someone offers or even promises to do something, and then when the crunch comes, you find that the matter has been ignored. All manner of interesting and even exciting things hoped for simply collapse – and that person is unlikely to be relied on ever again.

¹ I can offer some notes on Revelation – an email to me will get you a copy.

² Remember when 'bridesmaid' was translated 'virgin?' Parthenos is an interesting Greek word.

It goes almost without any further explanation. As it has often been said: when people take responsibility the sky is the limit for their worth and value. When the opposite happens life simply becomes a struggle for existence. So what are we waiting for?

Sentence

God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ; therefore encourage one another and build each other up.

1 Thess. 5: 9 – 11

Collect

Almighty God, Whose sovereign purpose none can make void; give us faith to be steadfast amid the tumults of the world, knowing that Your kingdom shall come, and Your will be done to Your eternal glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. **Amen**

Old Testament Lesson

Judges 4: 1 – 10

The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died. So the LORD sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goim. Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly twenty years.

At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you, 'Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.'"

Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." And she said, "I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him.

Psalm

123

To You I lift up my eyes: You Who are enthroned in the heavens
As the eyes of the servants look to the hand of their master: or as the eyes of the maid toward the hand of her mistress
So our eyes look to the Lord our God: until He shows us His mercy
Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us: for we have had our fill of derision
Our souls overflow with the mockery of those at ease: and with the contempt of the proud.

Epistle

1 Thessalonians 5: 1 – 11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

GOSPEL

Matthew 25: 14 – 30

The Kingdom of Heaven is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one

talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.

Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

It really is a great pity when people do not read or do not know some of the old Biblical tales, such as this one, violent though it is. May I suggest that you read on from where this passage ends, even if you are a little squeamish. Life was rude and ugly then – so what is new?

The real point at issue in **this** passage lies in the wimp that was Barak. Now I suspect you have been sold on the idea that there was little room for female leadership in Israel, but the reality was that, every now and then, the patriarchal setup was undermined by remarkable women. Deborah was one of them, and good on her. She held her nerve even if the wimp did not. Boom boom!

Psalm

And there is always a limit for those who feel downtrodden and oppressed. The worm will always turn, thank heaven, and that is as it should be.

Epistle

You may like to refer again to the comments on last Sunday's Epistle, for this stands on its shoulders, so to speak. Whilst it must be said that Paul moved somewhat from this particular position as time passed, it must also be affirmed that life tends to be somewhat as he describes, with people and leaders often all too ready to jump on and control the unaware and the naive.

As last Sunday's emphasis was on responsibility, so this is on awareness. One needs to learn the lessons of life and relationships is one is to grow to maturity. And your Creator designed you to have that capacity to learn, understand and respond significantly. There are never any prizes for stupidity, even if it is (falsely) titled as faith.

GOSPEL

And here is the precise story or parable that is needed to underline the point and to do it strongly. (Only recently I heard comment from theologians that there is some question that this parable actually comes from Jesus! It is all too harsh and judgemental, they say. I would have to offer a serious and significant disagreement with such a view. That view sounds all too much like political correctness, and there is a good, well-used Australian epithet for that! Is there not?

Talents, skills, personalities, even other matters can be lined up as 'talents,' even though money was the focus here. And the focus is also on how those gifts were put to use, or not as the case may have been. And it is a measure of the serious approach to this matter that we have the well-known epithet of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

All of the Biblical record is involved in that matter of being taken seriously. It is a foolish person who discounts either the point or power of what is being conveyed. Life is serious, and so are relationships and responsibilities, and as was mentioned in last week's notes, to refuse such an emphasis is to be party to ultimate collapse of society and culture.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

Don't you just love it? Have you noticed how often in Scripture, Old Testament in particular, those who delighted in retaining patriarchy often had their pretensions smothered? It is a delightful constant if you keep your eyes open. Here is one of the Judges, another situation occurs as well; then there is Ruth and Naomi (Gentile as well as female) and Esther some time later. And as I have often commented, that picture in Genesis 2 is describing such a view of humanity as removes any possibility of assuming the lower nature of woman. Yes, 'bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh' is comment enough, but if you are not aware of Hebrew, here is something else to ponder.

'Adam' is a generic, not a personal name. And Adam consists, not of the male, but of 'ish' and 'ishshah' – male and female. And there is no 'adam' until there is ish and ishshah together. That ancient author knew exactly what he was saying and exactly how impactful it all is. And it has taken Christians most of 2,000 years to catch up with the vision of one of the authors of the Creation stories. (And there is a great deal more in them than most people are aware.

One of the tragedies of human existence is our sad capacity of hanging on to our bigotry, our unwillingness to see past our comfort zone or our narrow-mindedness. Perhaps the saddest part is that whatever we are afraid of, we tend to demonize. Back-door immigrants, people of other nations or cultures, different colour or different views. Even amongst ourselves, I have encountered sad chasms between those who understand the Bible literally, and those who do not. High Church or Evangelical. The list goes on and on.

I often wonder if that passage from Judges creates a lot of squirming as the story of Deborah is read in synagogues and Churches. Barak comes across as a great wimp; Deborah as a rather strong lady. And the former will not do as commanded unless he has some skirt behind which to hide. It is almost a caricature, is it not? But whatever the truth or strength of the tale, it really does underline the fact that there was no reason why Deborah should be disqualified from the role of Judge. She had the skills, the gifts, the vision, and was prepared to respond to the crisis, and who can complain about that?

There is room here for a long and impassioned sermon about the equality of women, but do not expect that from me. Such an approach tends to move off into some sort of tirade – which tends then to reduce the value of the argument. May I simply posit the Biblical reality as seen as far back as Genesis.

That remarkable Chapter 2 of Genesis spells it all out rather simply and beautifully. Reduced to its simplest, it could be said that that person saw us humans as equal and different. The differences can be attractive yet are sometimes grounds for conflict. The similarities are clearer. However, because someone, male or female, is a little different provides no real grounds for conflict, but does offer the challenge of learning from each other. Now that **does** provide some difficulty, because most of us reckon that we know best which way is up, and remain determined to impose our views regardless. That is often very short-sighted – and destructive.

Anyhow, the main point to take hold of and ponder is that quite early in Hebrew history, somewhere after King David perhaps, wise heads saw that patriarchal power was neither the best way to go, nor did it fit the Divine pattern. One looks back in wonder that such brave people took it upon themselves to posit what must have been a radical and different approach to life and relationships. Surely there must have been sufficient evidence to shoe the need for change. It has only taken around 3,000 years to adjust a little to the wisdom of that.

Sunday 20th November, 2011

**Sunday next before Advent
Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
CHRIST THE KING**

Sentence

O shout to the Lord in triumph all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness and come before His face with songs of joy.

Psalm 100:1

Collect

God of power and love, Who raised Your Son Jesus from death to life, resplendent in glory to rule over all creation; free the world to rejoice in His peace, to glory in His justice, and to live in His love. Unite the human race in Jesus Christ Your Son, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Ezekiel 34: 11 – 16 & 20 – 24

Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

Psalm

100

O shout to the Lord in triumph all the earth: serve the Lord with gladness and come before His face with songs of joy

Know that the Lord He is God: it is He Who has made us and we are His, we are His people and the sheep of His pasture.

Come into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise: give thanks to Him and bless His holy name For the Lord is good, His loving mercy is for ever: His faithfulness through all generations.

Epistle

Ephesians 1: 15 – 23

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

GOSPEL

Matthew 25: 31 -46

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

The OT prophets are often full of vivid and powerful images of God at work; very often there is the contrast between those who had been leaders of the people, so-called shepherds who did nothing but seek their own agendas, and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This is one of quite a number of passages that takes the shepherd image – and poses such challenges. It was not only for those of Ezekiel's time, but of all times; and it was not only an image for Judaism and the Church – it is in fact an image for all humanity, for all leadership, for all who would share responsibility for humanity. Do not miss the powerful point of all this – the other readings will point you in the same direction.

Psalm

Although there are not a lot of specifics, this psalm rejoices in what the author sees as the breadth and effect of the faith. Remember that he was Jewish! We can enter into the same joy, but do see where that points!

Epistle

Have you dared to see what Paul was talking about or have you succumbed to the polite and spiritual level that manages to avoid the realities? The second paragraph of this passage has enormous repercussions which need to be seen, in this day and age when it is said that 'religion is irrelevant!' It is nothing of the sort, and has an enormous – if unpopular emphasis to offer all humanity of whatever culture. Here is no dominant, exclusivist nor triumphalist doctrine, but is a pointing in the only direction that can offer peace and progress – in love.

GOSPEL

'When the Son of Man comes in His glory' sounds like the set-up for a grand and powerful *denouement*, not unlike the sort of thing ancient Jewry hoped for when the Messiah came and sorted out the enemies of Judaism. There they felt sure that God would show up the rotten so-and-sos, and make it clear that Israel was top dog.

Forget it. Christ the King was, is and always will be concerned not with power but with service and caring. Who is the focus in this passage, and the answer is those who are hungry, thirsty, estranged, sick, imprisoned! Not your usual sort of king eh? Not your standard politician, eh? Why ever is it that we so miss the point of this Faith of ours, and turn the Servant Shepherd King into some sort of power-broker? That will never be the reality, so don't ever forget that.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

If you were ever asked to give a resume of the Faith to someone who has no real idea of it, what would you point to? Jesus Who died for you and everyone else? If ever you do that, you have almost certainly removed Jesus

of the Scriptures right away from reality and into some sort of religious morass. I kid you not! What is the goal, point and purpose of the entire Biblical Faith? Heaven? No right here and now. Start again if you will, at the opening chapters of Genesis, and see that what is being presented to you is a world view of singular and present significance. It is the proposition (not a good word for this at all really!) that this Faith that is explored over centuries is designed to offer a direction and means whereby human history can be changed from not complete disaster but almost, into something much closer to life as it was designed to be. From Genesis 3, with its expose of much of the cause of human ills, it is a statement that life was not meant to be like this, but was designed to be far more complete, open and valuable, with far less in the way of stuff-up.

That Old Testament Lesson illustrates part of the problem. Leadership, whether we take the picture from Ezekiel's time or from our own, is marred by the same selfish, human power-exercise. If I am boss, you are my slave to do exactly what I tell you. I know what's best, so get used to it. People from politicians to colleagues do it, and life becomes shattered. Power. Control. Sexual abuse, financial control. Look wherever you like and there it is staring you in the face, and demanding your attention or at most your obedience. What is becoming quite intolerable is the expectation and pressure from governments in this country to give them the freedom to do whatever they want. That is one short step left to tyranny. I remember someone writing, towards the end of the last century, that the 21st is likely to be the century of the tyrant.

You will know the old – and totally unreal! – comment that religion and politics do not mix. However one look at the Old Testament prophets, and a solid look at the Gospel, makes it quite clear that such an approach is simply the avoiding of the real issues. This is no attempt to make everyone religious; it is the expression of the conviction that the usual human means of governance tends to be counterproductive most of the time. While there will ever be Christians who will support people like G.W.Bush in the Iraqi campaign, seeing that as the true use of power, the Faith in fact turns right away from such abuse of people and position.

The Christian Faith has not only to do with matters spiritual, but with matters rather closer to the bone. From those Old Testament prophets on, the clear perception has grown that justice and truth, compassion and integrity are vital for the formation and preservation of society. These are not so much 'religious' statements as they are really quite basic human issues. So if I have to belt you over the head to get you to follow my programme and be obedient to me, then I have shown that my process of governance is totally false and untrue.

Now look again at Jesus' path: when He talked about destroying evil, it was not by destroying the perpetrators but by showing up evil for what it is. The crucifixion, apart from anything else, underlines that reality. Jesus came as servant not as boss, carer not as master. And the very Eucharist itself points in exactly that same direction, even though we tend to ignore both the emphasis and the importance of the faith.

You may well feel that such an approach is disingenuous and pathetic. But did you notice the effect of the reconciliation approach of South Africa after the collapse of apartheid? Who knows what the picture would have been if the reaction then was one of revenge rather than reconciliation.

It is certainly true that it will take a book rather than a sermon to unpack all that lies behind the point and impact of the Christian approach to life and living; even Gandhi in India suffered the same fate as Jesus when he attempted to point people to a similar non-violent path. But neither experience of Gandhi nor Jesus does anything to invalidate the direction, and its values.

This is the **Christ the King** we worship today – the real question for us is whether or not we **respond in life** to Him Whom we say we worship!

Sentence

'Heaven and earth will pass away,' says the Lord, 'but My words will not pass away.'

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

Isaiah 64: 1 – 9

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins.

Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, O LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people.

Psalm

80:1-7 & 17-19

Hear, O shepherd of Israel, You Who led 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 and 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 victims 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

Let Your power rest upon 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 shall call upon Your Name

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

Epistle

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge—because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

GOSPEL

Mark 13: 24 – 37

Jesus said “In those days, following that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

It has been mentioned before, but it bears repeating: there is nothing in religious history of any country or culture that even begins to parallel the Jewish line of prophets and their writings. Mind you, any reader needs to understand that Hebrew prophecy is no star-gazing future-predicting stuff, except in a strong but minor way. It is perhaps understood best when seen in terms the attempt to understand what God is saying to Israel in its history **then and there**, and where God is aiming to take Israel – at the point in history at which the prophet was speaking. The whole business is essentially down-to-earth, and focusses on matters of justice and compassion. My best description of Hebrew prophecy is the activity of the various authors to look back to see where Israel has come from, and what has happened, to see where God is taking them from there.

In this particular and vivid passage, it might be easy to assume that Isaiah is looking for some sort of miraculous Divine intervention to provide solutions to all of Israel’s problems, political and social. At the time of writing, Israel would have been in exile in Babylon, or on its way back from there: and the huge issue would have been of reconstruction of nation, faith and temple. In the wake of the Indonesian and Sri Lankan tsunami of late 2004, or the Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf States of the USA, or the Queensland and WA floods of 2010 -2011, the enormous task of rebuilding can be visualised even by those not in the thick of it. It is all so heart-breaking and vast.

One of the magnificent insights into the whole ‘God’ business shows up in this brief passage, where Isaiah writes of *no God besides You, Who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him*. In most religions, past and sometimes present, God is perceived of as both utterly distant and completely disengaged from the usual daily grind of life or as the one to be manipulated by correct rites rituals and mysteries. The Hebrew Faith had never seen God in that way, and could point to all manner of events and situation where God ‘got His hands dirty’ for the sake of His people.

So Isaiah – like us in the Season of Advent – should look for some sort of coming of God into our midst, to point the way, once again, to where real and lasting life and values are to be found. That is big enough agenda for anyone these days, is it not?

Psalm

This Psalm would appear to be either Exilic or post-Exilic, a time of great stress for Israel which was recovering from the harsh experience of first losing their homes and land, and then returning 70 years later to rebuild. The whole business was traumatic as you might imagine, and quite something of a learning curve. It was from the Exile that the synagogue arose, as an alternative to Temple for worship. And much of our modern approach to worship, with hymns, readings, prayers and sermons, stems from that harsh experience.

Epistle

It may well be a sign of my cynicism, but I implore those who would go off with the fairies here, that, after reading this intro to the Corinthians, that you also read on. This flowery language sits rather strangely with the hugely important issues that Paul deals with, in writing to this Church. In other words, it needs to be said that, whilst this may be the language of hope, there needs also to be an air of reality as well.

Please notice the important thing: that discipleship of Christ is designed to lead to a maturity of personhood. This maturity is not just for the individual but for the group, the congregation, the community, the Church – and then for the world of people around them. One of the narrowing things that may ensue from *blameless* is that it may be taken somewhat personally and individually. Once again, the important outcome is maturity.

GOSPEL

There is a strange capacity of Christians somehow to fail to see the wood by missing the trees. Some denominations seem to focus almost exclusively on what we call the Second Coming, whereas I have a more than sneaky suspicion that the Biblical emphasis lies quite elsewhere. When Jesus required His followers to observe the situations surrounding them, was it a question of ‘keeping their noses clean’ or was it for something more significant? It strikes me that, in this gigantic struggle between truth and falsehood that the People of God need first of all to recognize and follow truth -- at whatever cost. That is the real issue. In other words, Jesus was – in a quite typical Hebrew manner – making sure that His followers understood that in front of them lay a period of great turmoil, as evil battled with good, and that they needed to understand very clearly where the right and true priorities lay. *It is by the silence of good people that evil triumphs*. God is involved in the struggle, as the Cross indicated. And God’s method of dealing with that issue is illustrated in that Cross. But He does not solve all the issues and problems for us, otherwise we would remain as ineffective incompetents!

NOTES FOR A SERMON

If I had five dollars for every time someone, worried about the ‘way things are heading,’ asked me what I thought of the likely outcome for people, expressed their wishes that something or Someone somewhere would shake the living daylights out of everything, and bring more than a little peace and sense into life, I’d be rather wealthy. As I rework this material (October 2010) the Adventists are offering what they consider to be the Biblical approach to the huge issue, and the Christadelphians seem rarely to consider any *other* matter. Where does the truth lie? When we are faced by crises, big and small, we humans do long for some sort of suitable closure or resolution do we not? You could probably add a huge and long list to the sorts of situations in your life where you would love to have some fulfillment. You may well dispute the perception that force and war solves no issues at all but rather escalates them.

Can you now better understand the longings and yearnings of the prophet when he put the words together that are our OT Lesson today. Isaiah was possibly in Babylon, expecting a return to Israel even if it meant one hell of a lot of hard work. ***He longed for a beginning to the action.*** He was aware of the fact that God was perfectly capable of bringing it all about, for had not JHWH brought Israel out of certain slavery and annihilation back in Moses’ time, with a strong right hand and an outstretched arm? Isaiah – it has to be said – was right in the middle of a huge crisis for Israel, and had been for 60 years or more. When will it ever end?

The Gospel for today is looking in a very similar direction. In this apocalyptic section of Mark’s Gospel – interesting to have it here in Advent, before Christmas! – there is another taste of a sense of doomsday and crisis, and shivers down spines. It is the sort of attitude that comes to the surface whenever people face an uncertain future. I have found it rather interesting to see how, for two or three decades now, the movie industry has produced quite a number of scary-scenario films. This is because the subject is a live one for many, many people; and it also provides something of a vicarious thrill where the audience can feel involved in something scary, and still go out from the cinema and have a nice hot coffee before going home to their warm and safe bed. But real life is not like that, for real life produces some real challenges.

There, it seems to me, lies quite some of the unreality that underlines so much of today’s view of life. It is a push-button one, where huge problems are expected to be erased simply by pressing the delete key. And when that does not happen (because life is more real than that!) people come apart and seek some sort of solace in depression and isolation. Is this all that the Faith has to offer?

Notice in that OT lesson that Isaiah saw some of the genesis of such times as being the responsibility of ordinary humans. *'No one calls on Your name or strives to lay hold on You, You have hidden Your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins.'*

It may sound all far too old-fashioned to talk of sins these days, but I reckon we need to have a whole new and fresh look at what the old Bible has to say on this subject. It is not a matter of me having dirtied my pure soul by sinning. It is very much a matter that *if I disregard and turn my back on the old verities of justice, truth, compassion, integrity and love, then I am disconnecting myself not only from reality but also from YOU --- let alone God! And the more I do that, the more relationships disintegrate, personal, social, national and even international.*

The answer to these huge problems is NOT to look for some small or big 'm' Messiah who will do it all for me. The answer to the issue begins with me, and you, and each other individual person, to make the move back to truth, to integrity, to God! The reason for the shift back is not to avoid repercussions; rather, it is so that life and people become significant and valuable once again. When Isaiah (or anyone else in Old Testament or New) looked to the God Who rescues His people from the folly of their own making, they did not expect some BIG GURU to come and do it for them. In fact, Isaiah himself, in his absolutely remarkable series of Servant Songs, saw ever so clearly that, when God is at work, it is invariably with human input. There is ever the Abraham, the Moses, the David, Mary, Jesus, Peter and Paul.

So do not go looking for an escape route. Start wondering how and where the change can begin with you.

As we celebrate Advent, celebrating the Lord Who comes among us, please stop long enough to see that when He does come, it is not with some sort of whirlwind, whiz-bang answer to amaze everyone and take their breath away. He comes in the quiet stillness of our conviction to follow Him into the enormous challenge that He puts in front of us. *This is one of the reasons why Jesus disappointed the Jews of His own day, and continues to disappoint others.*