

Sentence

The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!

Collect

Lord of all life and power, Who, through the mighty resurrection on Your Son overcame the old order of sin and death to make all things new in Him; grant that we, being dead to sin and alive to You in Jesus Christ, may reign with Him in glory, to Whom with You and the Holy Spirit, be praise, honour and thanksgiving now and for all eternity.

Amen

First Lesson

Acts 10: 34 – 43

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ--he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

For the Psalm

Hymn to the Risen Christ

Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us: so let us celebrate the feast
Not with the old leaven of corruption and wickedness: but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth
Christ once raised from the dead, dies no more: death has no more dominion over Him
In dying He died to sin once for all: in living, He lives to God.
See yourselves, therefore, as dead to sin: and alive to God in Jesus Christ our Lord
Christ has been raised from the dead: the firstfruits of those who sleep.
For as by one man came death: by another man has come also the resurrection of the dead.
For as in Adam all die: even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

Epistle

I Corinthians 15: 19 - 26

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power, for he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

GOSPEL

John 20: 1 – 18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They

said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

NOTES ON THE READINGS ...

First Lesson

It is really quite important that you take the time to read the whole of Acts 10, which tells the story of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and a contrasting tale about Simon Peter. Here is the tale of a significant collision – between an outsider to Judaism excluded because of his race and lack of circumcision, and Peter, very much the Jew but in rather a rustic sort of way but trying to be true to his Faith. What does one do when a complete, even disqualified, outsider looks like wanting to become part of the new Faith.¹ This is the tale of something of that struggle. It would help to realize that the Infant Church was still struggling to come to terms with all that the resurrection entailed and signified.

After his own vision of the 'great white sheet' and the challenge to see past kosher food regulations, Peter was now challenged to see past the Jewish limitations. Bear in mind, that like Christians after them, the Jews had turned a living vital faith into a rather more somnolent religion. Rules were the order of the day, legalism had stymied all life out of the faith. But the Spirit took Peter and others rather past such limitations even if they were traditions. Sadly, traditions can be used to stifle thought, reflection and growth.

Hymn to the Risen Christ

One suspects that this quotation from Corinthians hardly needs comment, through sheer familiarity, but then that is often the cause of not understanding! Notice how there is the immediate connection in the Apostle's mind between Exodus and Cross! It is not sacrificial system and cross, please note also. The Exodus was a major example of watching the God Who rescues at work. And here is rescue *par excellence*. And as the passage rolls on there is also the distinct connection between resurrection and new life **of sincerity and truth**.

I am rude enough to make comment about 'Adam.' There is no sense in Scripture that Adam was the first (historical) human and male. Adam in Scripture is always representative person, and in particular that capacity within ourselves to turn from God, from truth and sincerity and all that brings a person to fellowship in God. Adamic living points to death; its opposite is living in Christ and that points in the opposite direction.

Epistle

I have to confess to considerable disagreement with Paul, if we are rendered 'miserable' if there is no resurrection. Having long thought it through, I would have to say – and have done! – that if there is no resurrection, I still must follow Christ here on earth, **because His Gospel is the only way of living that makes the slightest sense HERE AND NOW**. No other philosophy, religion or ism offers anywhere near as much to making life more purposeful or significant than loving God and loving neighbour. Give me heaps if you wish, but, as Luther once said, 'here I stand.'

Gospel

It is rather important to ponder John's report of the resurrection, remembering that in spite of all Jesus had had to say beforehand, it all seemed to go over the heads of them all. John seemed to have clicked as the evidence was in front of him, but I would hesitate to use the word 'believe' at that stage. He was on the way, of course, but it was a rather longer process than that.

The incident of Mary also has its impact, if you will. Thomas was permitted to touch Jesus, but Mary was not, and there are those who may still wonder why. It had nothing to do with gender restrictions, but rather deeper

¹ Actually that is not quite fair, for the Christian movement was not yet really seen as either new or breaking away.

ones. Thomas, as we will see when the passage comes up, needed evidence for something so life-changing and earth-shattering. Mary, on the other hand, wanted things to go back to the way they were. And that was not an option for Mary, *or anyone else in their faith pilgrimage*.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

If anyone had read any of my previous notes on the Resurrection, you may appreciate that I have long found it necessary not to be like Mary, wanting to go backwards. And it had long been a concern of mine that, with something so huge as Jesus' resurrection did not leave us with any form of proof, such as Thomas had. However, when you think about it, 'proofs' are there, but one needs to act upon the concept to become certain of the reality.

That takes me, if you dare follow, into territory that may dismay you for starters. Only yesterday (as I write this) I was in conversation with a couple who had been parishioners several years ago. A lovely couple, she is a remarkable searcher after truth who has found it (in **spite** of the Church I must add) and he is rather more of a nomad in some ways. One of his 'things' is the need people should have of myths. By that he does not mean untrue things, but stories that illustrate the important issues of life, matters without which life loses its direction and sense. And he is quite right.

Mention 'myth' to some and they have conniptions; but this is something that the people of the Bible (Old Testament and New) have always had, valued, and lived by. The Creation Stories are powerful examples, and their truth stems from what they convey, truth that becomes concrete as people live by them and find them working well thank you very much.

Now while we have no chance to go back 2,000 years and determine the reality or otherwise of the Resurrection of Jesus, we can discover the reality rather rapidly and certainly when we act upon what it is saying to us. This has little to do with life after this, at least at this point in our experience, but it has everything to do with the way we operate as humans right here and now. In fact if we do not operate in this new and living way, then we have denied the resurrection.

If there was one thing that Jesus kept putting front of people right through His ministry, it was the call to give oneself away and live for others. To die to self, in fact. This is not to deny one's personhood, but it is to live for others. It looks like death, but oddly, it turns out to be quite different. 'Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone. But

The remarkable thing is that not only does this sort of living work out stunningly in real and ordinary life (and I am not going all 'spiritual' here,) but it has enormous ramifications for all humanity whenever or wherever they live, lived or shall live. To take its opposite, is it not true that almost all of our human relationship problems stem from determined selfishness and disregard of others? This remains so whether we are talking family, community, State, nation or world. As the old Aussie saying goes, 'bugger you, Jack I am all right.' And that is part of the problem. If I begin to live in such a way as takes you into account also, then what may look like 'death' to begin becomes a far more significant way to live, far more productive, and far more creative. From death to resurrection. Sadly, I will not be convinced of the truth of this **unless and until I stick out my neck**, so to speak.

Resurrection. Never doubt it, but see all around you so many examples of its process in the ordinary aspects of life. Day and night; summer and winter, light and dark, truth and falsehood, birth and death, and so it goes on. None of the above can be described as 'religious.' And all are common to each and every human being. And thank the Lord for that!

Sentence

Jesus said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it in My side. DO not doubt but believe.'

John 20: 27

Collect

Living God, for Whom no door is closed nor heart is locked; draw us beyond our doubts till we see Your Christ and touch His wounds where they bled in others. This we ask through Christ our Saviour, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever

Amen

First Lesson

Acts 5: 27 – 32

When they had brought the disciples, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us."

But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

Psalm

118:14 – 29

The Lord is my strength and my song: and has become my salvation
The sounds of joy and deliverance: are in the tents of the righteous
The right hand of the Lord does mighty things: the right hand of the Lord raises up
I shall not die but live: and proclaim the works of the Lord
The Lord has disciplined me hard: but He has not given me over to death
Open to me the gates of righteousness: and I will enter and give thanks to the Lord
This is the gate of the Lord: the righteous shall enter it
I will praise You for You have answered me: and have become my salvation
The stone that the builders rejected: has become the head of the corner
This is the Lord's doing: and it is marvellous in our eyes
This is the day that the Lord has made: let us rejoice and be glad in it
O Lord, save us, we pray: O Lord send us prosperity
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord: from the house of the Lord we will bless you
The Lord is God and He has given us light: guide the festal throng up to the horns of the altar
You are my God and I will praise You: You are my God and I will exalt You
O give thanks to the Lord for He is good: and His mercy endures for ever.

For the Epistle

Revelation 1: 4 – 8

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

GOSPEL

John 20: 19 – 31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

NOTES ON THE READINGS.....

With such an array, it is very hard to choose which passage or part of passage one selects to 'bounce off' for a sermon. Part of me opts for the Revelation reading on the grounds that this last book of the New Testament is the most misunderstood – even feared, and it ought not to be. The first lesson underlines what had once been a real strength of the English people, that of conscience before other loyalties. And that pre-Pentecost Pentecost in the Gospel has enormous interest; and last of all dear old Thomas. Mind you, I could suggest that, to save cooking cabbages twice, you might refer to last years' notes (see Sermon Archives at diowillochra.org.au) So you will have to wain till you read on

FIRST LESSON

As mentioned in the notes above, one of the outcomes of ordinary people knowing their Bibles, as least from the time of the Reformation, this experience of the Infant Church underlined and enabled people to see that their conscience was above the repressive attempts of King and Parliament to demand the same sort of obedience as the Jewish leaders did here. It takes little imagination to see how enormous a step forward this was, and remained in the English psyche. Mind you, these days there have been instances of 'conscience gone mad' – for one also needs to realize that the Spirit of God is at work in us through that capacity.

PSALM

This is a delightfully *positive* psalm, recognizing in God all that supports and stands for truth and justice and equity. When life gets tough and pressure contrary, it is often very supportive to realize, that in the long term, the ancient and divine verities remain firm in spite of human pressure to deny them. It is a bond of hope in an extremely dangerous world.

For the Epistle

Every now and then we get snippets from John's *Revelation* as second readings at Church. It is a double-edged sword for some people, who find little but raised fears from this book. Others are simply confused. The pity is that not a lot of people take the trouble to explore the book, or they find the most excruciating commentaries that simply lead one up garden paths.

At the risk of taking up a lot of space, may I first comment on this passage, and then on the book as a whole. (Not much you can do anyhow is there!) This passage, at least, is reasonably clear, but that is because we have not yet reached the apocalyptic passages, of which there are absolute heaps.² Nor is John predicting the end of the world, but rather what may be called the process of 'God's wrath' which itself needs to be understood properly. John was painfully aware that, at the end of the First Century, Christians who claimed 'Jesus is Lord' *χριστος κυριος* – when all the reality out there seemed to be that Caesar is Lord. John expected the collapse of Rome rather earlier than it did, understood that its fall would be largely due to what we call opulence and injustice, and that God in Christ, as guarantor of all that is true, just and honourable, would outlive the Empire and any other such attempt at humanity to dislodge the ultimate realities.

There are enough statements made here about Jesus, including that stunning 'ruler of the kings of the earth,' and that was no hyperbole, but – as outlined in the paragraph above, the actual reality, if one is prepared to take to long-term view of things. And the Christian – as any realist – must do that!

The second paragraph about He Who is coming with the clouds, is not an event to be waited for – as if Jesus is going to drift down through the atmosphere: one needs to understand Jewish imagery rather better than that. Look up all references to clouds in such situations, and realize that it has to do with God being seen as God. 'Those who pierced Him' are not limited to people involved in the trial and crucifixion; it involves all who have

² Apocalyptic writing is a singularly Jewish style of writing, as far from prose as surrealism is from photographs.

turned their back on truth and justice, who will have to take responsibility for their actions. In fact, a proper Biblical understanding of ‘judgement’ has to do with taking responsibility, a factor so many people attempt to avoid in our own day and age. Such a great move forward actually improves the human situation rather than destroys it.

GOSPEL

It may come as some surprise, though it ought not, that John here records two separate and significant incidents. The first is ‘Pentecost before Pentecost,’ as Jesus ‘breathed on them’ with the Holy Spirit. This is not so much a denial of Acts 2, as John making it clear, long after Luke’s Gospel and Acts were written, that the whole Spirit business is rather more involved and involving than the tale Luke told. This is something with which to come to terms and understand, but also to recognize its veracity. Mind you, I know of few people who have grown directly from one ‘nudge’ of the Spirit; in my experience it tends to be a matter of continuing reinforcement. *N’est ce pas?*

And then there is that business of Thomas, who has borne the ignominy of faithless for far too long and for totally incorrect reasons. Thomas, like me, was not prepared to take this story of resurrection second-hand no matter who (human) reassured him. He was – more than any of the others – very aware of the fact that if resurrection of Jesus was true, then it changed absolutely everything. If it was not true, then nothing had changed. **And that is why Jesus offered Thomas, what He offered no other of the Twelve, for Jesus knew where Thomas was coming from.**

NOTES FOR A SERMON

You will doubtless consider this a strange start and illustration for a sermon this Sunday after Easter, and perhaps even a stranger Easter address, but I hope you will be patient and understand where this leads. Hopefully, it just may widen your horizons.

Many years ago, I found it necessary to study for the Leaving examinations at night, at a Tech College. Being aware that coming back to study after years out of School, I chose what I thought were easy subjects to handle, as lectures were in the evening after a hard day’s work in the building game. History struck me as a pushover, with just a list of dates and events – or so I thought.

Our lecturer, a remarkably helpful man, soon opened our eyes to the real thing, and thanks heaven for that. Our period of study began with the French Revolution of 1789, and ranged up to before World War 11. And suddenly, history became a fascinating business, of causes and outcomes, of far wider-ranging matters than I had ever conceived. Long before we got past the turn of the 17th Century, I began to grasp the effect of those events on history right up to the very World War which, at that time in my life, had finished a mere ten years before. It was about change as much as conflict, as well as the time it takes for ideas to filter through to the greater part of the population. Scales had lifted from my eyes, and they remain dispersed.

If there is one thing that marks the stunning line of prophets – especially the later ones – in the Old Testament, it was their grasp of history, albeit history of their own nation in relation to other peoples around about. Isaiah in particular is the stunner of them all, espying as he did that God was involved in human history, far beyond the reaches of little old Israel. And John, of *Revelation* fame, was no different.³ The reason for him writing his book was not to prepare people for the end of the world, but rather to understand far more clearly **what their Faith and Lord had to offer in a time of great challenge**. And there is nothing new in that, pussy cat!!!!

In the third-generation Church, there had been both a fading down of their understanding of the Gospel, and even of Jesus. Excitement had passed somewhat, and ennui spreading, as Empire seemed to take both precedence and control of everyone. (That is the nature of Empire, of course, as we have come to understand about the British example.) Whereas Christians had been taught to see that Jesus is Lord, anyone in Empire had to attend a ceremony annually at a ‘temple near you,’ to announce to the world that they held another credo, that Caesar is Lord. To refuse such an oath was tantamount to sedition, and led almost automatically to second-class (or worse) citizenship. Occupation may well be sacrificed, as well as all sorts of other assets. SO to say one thing in Church and another in the ‘world,’ presented great difficulty. And that difficulty was heightened when all the evidence seemed to point to the fact that Caesar (all and each of them) had it made, and Jesus was nowhere to be seen, so to speak.

³ It may help to know that the name Revelation, (sometimes called Apocalypse) has nothing to do with end of world or sudden devastating cataclysms; the word actually means **something once hidden and now revealed**. Like the opening of a flower, or – like me and history – a bursting in on me of why history is important, to understand what is going on.

The Apostle John,⁴ by now well into the latter years of his life, had become very much the Elder Statesman of the Infant Church, had suffered enormously because of his loyalty to Christ, and – I am quite certain – had long faced the issue of a Church losing its way – and its sting. Whilst in exile on Patmos, he had lost of time to ponder the issues, just as any self-respecting prophet would. His response to the problem was to write the book we still have, and in line with quite normal Jewish practice, wrote in the apocalyptic style foreshadowed by Ezekiel and Jeremiah, and later by the Book of Daniel.⁵ If you know your Bible reasonably well, you will know that some of the Gospels contain apocalyptic sections, quoting Jesus in His teaching leading up to the Cross.

This form of writing was used, almost exclusively, when people were trying to catch people's attention for matters they considered to be immediate, serious and potentially dangerous. Daniel's big problem was with Jews seeming to take on cultural views and attitudes quite foreign to them and coming from Hellenistic influences.

John's issue was partly with Rome and its imperial demands and – as with most empires – the growing emphasis on self-aggrandizement and luxurious living. Look at the OT prophets and see how they were on exactly the same wave-length. The appeal of that 'get-rich-quick' culture and its despising of justice and truth, led the prophet to express his profound concerns in no uncertain terms. And John's approach was to show that, despite appearances, Jesus **is Lord**, and Caesar (whoever it was at the time) was both a very poor and utterly false substitute. On top of that, John was convinced that the Empire would finish up collapsing under its own weight, and then rather more people would see the truth of his convictions.

Actually, John's book is – like the other prophets – a huge expose of so much that comes apart in human activities and rule, and his focus was on the destructive outcome of utter selfishness and luxury. Much of his issue of course was the constant fact that if I have far too much then that means you have insufficient, and sooner or later, there will be a grand denouement to restore the balance.

Now one of the aspects of the Faith that tends to be downplayed or disregarded as precisely this business of inequity and falsehood. Also there is that business of 'Jesus is Lord' having all manner of what maybe called normal and natural repercussions, and the demand that I operate with honesty and integrity. If I do not, then sooner or later, those oppressed will find a way to force me to face my falsehood and selfishness. **And it was that which held the attention of the Apostle – and that is a matter of genuine response to Christ as Lord.** To avoid it is to fall away from the Faith and Lord.

In the event, John's expectation of the collapse of the Roman Empire took longer than he expected – and that is the nature of history anyhow. However, he points confidently to the Kingdom of Christ, with a stunning picture of life as it was designed to be – without evil or death.

⁴ My conviction has long been that the author of the Gospel is also author of this book. This is not a view held by all commentators.

⁵ You will know that, in the Hebrew Canon, Daniel does not appear in the section of the prophets, but rather in the writings. He was not considered a prophet at all!

Sunday 18th April, 2010

Third Sunday of Easter

Sentence

To the One seated on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honour and glory and might, for ever and ever
Revelation 5:13

Collect

Almighty God, through Your only Son You overcame death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life; grant that we who celebrate our Lord's resurrection may, through the renewing power of Your Spirit, rise from the death of sin to the life of righteousness, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

FIRST LESSON

Acts 9: 1 – 20

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Psalm

30

I will exalt You O Lord, for You have drawn me up from the depths: and have not suffered my foes to triumph over me

O Lord my God I cried to You: and You have made me whole

You have brought me back, O Lord, from the land of silence: You saved my life from among those that go down to the Pit

Sing praises to the Lord, all you His faithful ones: and give thanks to His holy name

For if in His anger is havoc, in His good favour is life: heaviness may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning

In my prosperity I said, 'I shall never be moved: Your goodness O Lord, has set me on so firm a hill.'

Then You hid Your face from me: and I was greatly dismayed

I cried to You O God: and made my petition humbly to my Lord

'What profit is there in my blood if I go down to the Pit: can the dust give You thanks, or declare Your faithfulness?

Hear, O Lord, and be merciful: O Lord be my helper

You have turned my lamentation into dancing: You have put off my sackcloth and girded me with joy

That my heart may sing Your praise and never be silent: O Lord my God, I will give You thanks for ever.

For the Epistle

Revelation 5: 6 – 14

I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. They sing a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth."

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!" Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!" And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the elders fell down and worshipped.

GOSPEL

John 21: 1 – 19

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go. (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

NOTES ON THE READINGS

First Lesson

(You will notice that the extended reading has been set down, for the simple reason that more of the story of the Conversion of Paul be repeated. Notice particularly the bravery of Ananias, who though he knew all about Saul, still persisted in obedience and welcomed the apostate into the company of believers. It was a most remarkable thing to do ... and must have impressed the new convert.)

This story is well-known and perhaps somewhat overblown; with all due respect I have long sought to show that the whole story of Paul's conversion goes back first of all to his innate honesty, but most of all to the impact that the execution of Stephen would have had on him. Whilst that was a rather blood-thirsty time in history when life was very cheap, the sight of such a person dying such a death would have had its effect. So when the climax came on the road to Damascus (and that was no small journey!) the *crisis* arrived and the change began. (I really do not know of many people who changed direction so rapidly, for such movement tends to be far more measured and slow. Look at the time it took for the disciples, and they Jesus with them constantly!

But change there was, and the outcome was rapid, noting that he preached in the very synagogues who had sent him on his murderous task. Please note, also, that the Apostle spent ‘three years in Arabia,’ for that conversion called for a massive rethink of his theology and outlook. Pharisees, like Jesuits, are not open to vast and quick changes of direction, especially theological. But then, not was I!!!!!!

Psalm

If you take the time to ponder, some of these ancient psalms have some remarkable things to convey to the modern person. We have become rather too used to ‘press button’ responses to issues, losing sight of the fact that automatic anythings reduce humans. But it was not so for those oldies.

Please do not imagine that this author is commenting on individual and entirely personal issues: rather, he is delighting in the fact that his experience of God is such as to be of enormous encouragement to others. In the struggle to survive and thrive, the author encountered a great deal of resistance; and in his search for support to get through, **found it**. And it was not so much that God took him by the hand and intervened; it was rather more the fact that we do live in a moral universe, and – as Aussies often say, ‘what goes around comes around.’ Malefactors do tend to get their come-uppance. There is some satisfaction in that, not that the baddies get clobbered, but that justice seems to find its way.

For the Epistle

Perhaps it does not come clear to you, but in fact this passage from Revelation is saying the same sort of thing. Rather, it is expressing the same conviction at a rather more powerful level. Only the Lamb is worthy to take the scroll and open its seals. Roughly translated that means that without Jesus, nothing in life makes sense. Nothing has real value. And in a world of power and strength, that may well sound rather ridiculous. But it is not.

Humans rely on power, the more the better, to accomplish their ends. And, pray tell, what ends are accomplished that way? The approach of the Lamb is as servant not master, as persuader not demander, and although that process may take rather longer, it reaches its goal with considerably less damage to people – and the environment – along the way.

Gospel

In this post-resurrection appearance of Jesus, there is a series of interesting factors to consider. You may feel that there are more

It is a fascinating insight into the minds of the Eleven that, being rather unsure where to go from here, they reverted to the familiar, at least for some of them. Go to Galilee was Jesus’ command, so it was an easy step (for active people) to return to fishing. One needs something familiar from which to ‘bounce’ in whatever direction life presents. And it was in that normalcy that Jesus came to them, really quite normal Himself, if you follow me. The Risen Christ was not too different from His crew, for He enjoyed a beachside barbecue as well. And it was in the normal that the surprising was revealed.

Once again, Jesus showed Himself to be a rather wiser fisherman than His disciples, a reminder of His initial contact with Simon. And you will remember Peter’s ‘depart from me!’ So the scene was set for the restoration of the absconding disciple who had denied his Lord three times. The restoration followed a similar pattern, and yet the Greek original offers a rather deeper insight into this repentance-testing.

‘Simon Peter, do you love (agape) Me?’ was Jesus’ question, and Peter’s response was with the weaker Greek verb, philo. The second challenge followed the same pattern. When it came to the third question, Jesus reduced the challenge to Peter’s level. Do you love (philo) Me? There are commentators who refuse any substance to such comments, but when agape refers to God’s limitless love and philo has to do with brotherly love, the refusal seems rather ridiculous to me. As you will know, there are three basic words for love in the NT. There is ερος (eros) which has to do with erotic love, important but limited. Then there is φιλαδελφια - Philadelphia – brotherly love, familial love and rather more substantial and then there is a word Paul brought back into play, for the sort of love that God offers in Christ. This is Αγαπη – agape; which has to do more with the character of the loving one than the recipient. It was a very telling challenge and encouragement to Peter. And it may be worth commenting that, in spite of the fact that Peter’s denial of Jesus was just as serious as Judas’ desertion, Peter could at least face his failure with the others, whilst Judas could face no one, but hanged himself. Sadly, the same forgiveness of Judas would have been possible, had he been willing and able to face his failure. Each form of (Anglican) worship contains exactly that process of facing the issues, confessing and being absolved, for precisely the same reason as this interlude, and that is to provide a path forward. When the truth is faced, then the future can be also. I am free to **learn from my mistakes, however serious**.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

In their own interesting way, each of today's readings echo the sentiments expressed in the Collect for the Day. That is, of course, the move away from 'death of sin' to 'life of righteousness (justice)' and the readings illustrate several paths in that transition. Whilst this may be old ground, it perhaps will help to reiterate something of that pattern and process. Time and again, I have found people who are certain that their pilgrimage in this direction is faulty, and whilst they are incorrect in their estimates sometimes, that does not reduce the damage going on inside of them. Grace really does come far too stunningly for some.

It was only towards the end of my Mother's life, that my Dad asked me to call in at the farm to discuss an issue with her. They lived in the next-door parish at that stage, so it was not difficult to call. My Mum had been brought up around the turn of the 20th Century in a rural area and a Methodist Church. Even in those days, ministers were hard to come by, so local lay preachers tended to be called on. And rather too often, local lay readers were not all that well versed in Biblical material. As a result, Mum, who had changed Church allegiance some time after she married, remained deeply concerned that there may well have been something in her life that would disqualify her from heaven. Dear Mum: one could hardly find a gentler or more honest soul, and perhaps that can be a difficult factor. Anyhow, we spent some time looking at the nature of the Gospel and the ministry of Jesus, and – if you like to put it this way – the terms of acceptance for the life to come.

As one looks back at much of the 'fire and brimstone' preaching of previous generations, it may be easy to deride the lack of understanding of God in such preaching. I can remember, as a kid, going to Church with those grandparents, and being bored rather than roused by some of that preaching. But that was the case then, and enormous damage was done to all manner of people, who probably deserve as much attention as do indigent people who suffered from rather similar 'teaching' from missionaries.

Take a look at the readings and compare: Paul the very destructive persecutor, who came in from the cold. The psalmist who was very aware of the pressures to defect; compared and contrasted with the Lamb that was slain; and then Peter who denied Jesus. (Also there hangs the question as to why Peter 'escaped' while Judas did not.)

There is no doubt that I have shown my prejudices before, and this time I hope it is helpful, even for people of my own ilk. I recall when young hearing of huge complaints from the lady who lived next door and refused to attend Church any more because 'she could not longer cope with having to declare herself a "miserable sinner" each time she attended. While, even when young, I understood her complaint at the *language*, I have long since understood why confession and absolution is embedded in all the forms of Anglican worship where it is fitting. **However**, the reason it is there is not because we are miserable⁶ but because it is always and ever helpful to have been so freed to look back on our mistakes without hiding from them, because then, **and only then**, are we free to learn from those mistakes. If I need to hide them, as Judas felt compelled, I will forever live in deadly fear that someone will find out and expose my folly. *I have long made the comment that, with all due respect, Christians ought never to be trapped by blackmail. If I have not done the charged deed, then I have nothing to fear. If I have, I need only to face the fact. If people cannot forgive me, I can be sure that God does.*

And there lies the tragedy for Judas. His failure was no less culpable than Peter's – which was appalling and showed up Peter's great weakness as a human being **then**. But Peter, quite obviously, could face his public so to speak, and resolve the issue. Sadly, Judas could not face *anyone, including himself. And there lies tragedy of the first order.*

When it came to Peter's catharsis, notes on the readings may well open up a considerable amount of light on the subject. When you have absorbed all that, it may well also open a lot of other doors, including the loving accommodation by Jesus to Peter, right where he lived at that time. No jumping up and down; no powerful antagonism or criticism, but the careful and gentle loving acceptance of a bloke who broke under pressure. And all that left a real and substantial future for Peter who became the rock that, up to that point, he was not. If there is room for the Peters of this world, **there is room for you, too, is there not?**

⁶ Didn't 'miserable' then mean 'to be pitied' anyhow?

Sunday 25th April, 2010

**Fourth Sunday of Easter
St. Mark's Day
Anzac Day**

Sentence

The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Rev'd 7:17

Collect

God of peace, Who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant; make us perfect (complete) in every good work to do Your will and work in us that which is pleasing in Your sight, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

First Lesson

Acts 9: 36 – 43

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd: therefore can I lack nothing.

He will make me lie down in green pastures: and lead me beside still waters.

He will refresh my soul: and guide me in right pathways for His Name's sake.

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for You are with me, Your rod and Your staff comfort me.

You spread a table before me in the face of those who trouble me: You have anointed my head with oil and my cup shall be full.

Surely Your goodness and loving-kindness will follow me all the days of my life: and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever

For the Epistle

Revelation 7: 9 – 17

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

GOSPEL

John 10: 22 - 31

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe.

The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."

The Jews took up stones again to stone him.

NOTES ON THE READINGS

First Lesson

Here is a simple and moving cameo which would seem to indicate the caring way in which the Infant Church looked after its own. Dorcas was a simple person, and most of what we know of her is embedded in this short passage. Here Peter takes the leadership role, and prayed for her recovery. Nothing more is heard of this lady, but obviously she was important in that little congregation near the coast.

Psalm

I doubt if I could add anything much to what you already understand and appreciate from this most familiar of the Psalms.

For the Epistle

If anyone sees the need to refute some sects' views that the population of heaven will be limited to 144,000, then please read this passage – and the verses before. In John's writing, the former number refers to the people of Israel who will be found there. Bear in mind of course that the number is somewhat 'mythical,' indicating, in apocalyptic style, that 12 x 10 x 10x 10 is what is offered. 10, in Hebrew parlance, was a lot; 10 x 10 was a vast mob; 10 x 10 x 10 was a remarkable large pile.⁷ The 12 would indicate equality amongst the twelve tribes, do you see. And that is just Israel. This passage refers to all non-Jews, the goya, the Gentiles – and that includes, I suspect, you and me. 'A great multitude that no one could number.'

And the real point of reference in this passage has to do with the martyrs, lit. The witnesses are those who bore witness to the Christ and sometimes paid for that with their lives. At this point in modern times, there have not been too many of those.

Gospel

In retrospect, from the Jewish angle, it is not all that surprising that the Jews⁸ found it impossible to consider the claims of Christ. If there is one thing that I have discovered over the past 50 years or so, it is not really possible to people who shield themselves from other views but a persistent refusal to think outside of the square. They see that as strength and loyalty. To move is to be traitor. (If you wonder why this thought occurs to me, it is because I found myself in precisely the same situation, and yet moved from the stringent views. And I have tried, in many and various ways, to encourage my friends and others to see past their noses. It can be an utterly hopeless business, let me tell you.

It was partly tradition and partly bloody-mindedness that kept otherwise sound and serious people from looking past their noses. (Anyone involved in the debate about the Ordination of Women will know exactly the problems and strains.) The boiling point for those of fundamentalist vision was Jesus claim to be 'one with the Father.' Both the claim and the terms of it were anathema to the orthodox.

⁷ For future reference, too, relate this process to the 1,000 years – which likewise was not real and actual, but apocalyptic! In other words, a vast period of time.

⁸ In John's Gospel, 'the Jews' always referred to those of that Faith who did not and often refused to, respond positively to Jesus. That 'subtitle' did not refer to other Jews more open to the possibilities about our Lord.