

Sentence

At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father
Phil. 2:10-11

Collect

God of all, You gave Your only-begotten Son to take the form of a servant and to be obedient even to death on a cross; give us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, that, sharing in His humility, we may come to be with Him in His glory, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 50: 4 – 9a

Psalm

31: 9 – 18

Epistle

Philippians 2: 5 – 11

GOSPEL

Luke 23: 1 – 49

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

While it once was fashionable to wonder out loud why the Jewish people did not really seem to understand or take notice of their own Scriptures, it still seems true that far too many Christians either do not know or certainly do not understand much of either Old Testament or New. Perhaps it is because the Christian tradition is to look for miracle and ‘prophesy-fulfillment’ we put blinkers on ourselves and as a consequence miss the point.

This passage is one of Isaiah’s Servant Songs passages as the prophet tried to understand where God was leading Israel, and what was expected of it. To this point in time, Jewry seems to understand the ‘Servant’ to be Israel itself, whereas the prophet seems to have begun there but then moved forward to be looking for an individual servant. We tend to know that Servant as Jesus.

But look at what Isaiah expected the Servant to live like, and to operate! It is a salutary series of pictures (culminating in Is. 63). Whereas one may expect a strong, demanding and even military figure, Isaiah’s expectation is far different.

This Servant would be far more likely to have the truth He tried to point to, to be rejected out of hand, probably because humans have that fatal, damaging search for a **strong man**. Here, on the contrary, is One Who quietly persists in the face of huge opposition, One Who remains convinced of the veracity of His cause and method, certain that, in the final analysis, God Himself will vindicate His work and ministry.

Leadership, in Biblical terms, is always, ALWAYS, expressed in terms of humble service. Ponder that for some time before even thinking of reading further.

Psalm

We miss the point if we think that this Psalmist is burying himself in self-pity. Here is the somewhat classical situation where a simple person is trying to persist in following justice and integrity, and is being threatened with being wiped off the map so to speak. It is lonely being true to God, to truth and to justice, but the person who is like this remains aware, as Isaiah above, the God will vindicate at some stage or other.

Epistle

You will be sick and tired of me commenting that I find this one of the most significant passages in the New Testament. Possibly it had its genesis as part of an early Christian hymn, but it is certainly a statement of powerful theology even as it points to Christ.

You will need to be rather aware of the old Biblical sagas, and of Genesis 3 (The Story of the Fall) in particular. There, the nature of sin is conveyed in an apparently simple tale so sadly misunderstood by much of Christendom. As the tale unfolds, the man and woman in the story do claim authority with God, deciding that they knew better than God. *You shall be like gods* is the nature of the temptation, and that false choice led – and still leads humans of whatever culture – to determine to get on top of and control their fellows. As the story unfolds, the breakdown of relationships is illustrated by the pair being ‘naked and ashamed,’ unable to face what they have done to each other.

Small wonder, then, that Jesus operated and operates at the diametrically opposite angle, and works not as Boss but as Servant. Only at way – a much slower means to reach the goal – are people undamaged and helped forward. Relationships are nurtured, encouraged and have room to move and grow.

Gospel

There is really far too much in this Passion Narrative to comment on. May I simply ask you to look rather more closely at Pilate, who in his own ineffective way, tried to respond honestly to Jesus, but feared more for his position than the realities. It is a common human failing, and while that does not excuse the lapse, it does help to make Pilate's downfall more related to our own misdemeanours.

There is a vast amount of comment needed to get past so much of the present-day 'understanding' of the Cross and Atonement. The real and present issue is that the Cross of Christ is and illustrates the only practical and effective way forward for reconciliation, whether that is between God and me, or between me and you, whether that is on a personal, social, national or international level. That will give you something to think about eh!

Sentence

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Psalm 118.24

Collect

God of glory, fill Your Church with the power that flows from Christ's resurrection, that in this sinful world, we may signal the beginning of a renewed humanity, raised to new life with Christ, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever

Amen

FIRST LESSON

Acts 10: 34 – 43

FOR THE PSALM

Hymn to the Risen Christ

EPISTLE

1 Corinthians 15: 19 – 26

GOSPEL

John 20: 1 – 18

NOTES ON THE READINGS

First Lesson

Modern readers may well never catch sight of the huge learning curve that lay in front of the Apostles and other leaders of the Infant Church. Most of us are laden with baggage, cultural and otherwise, that requires attention, and even some of our deepest-held religious convictions require reconsideration and even revision.

Everything in Peter's background would have screamed against the possibility of permitting a Gentile and a Roman at that, into the fold of the young Church. As a Galilean Peter would not, perhaps, have had the same vigorous hold on that approach, but all of the new Church would have been careful not to raise the ire of the synagogue and Temple. But here, in this matter of the Roman centurion, was presented all the classical evidences of a person of faith, and specific faith. So the centurion (and his family) was baptised.

This business of the acceptance (or otherwise) of Gentiles into the Church was a very vexed question, (see Acts 15) and Peter was often ambivalent in his support or otherwise of this new direction. However, the outcome as expressed here is wonderful and refreshing, and it is a strong reminder to all moderns of the need to remove our own particular blinkers, and *thing as God thinks, not as man*. It can be a painful path to follow sometimes, especially when our contemporaries find it hard to warm to what we emphasise.

For the Psalm

This ancient hymn of praise is largely from 1 Corinthians, and encapsulates some interesting aspects of resurrection theology. (I find it fascinating that people of the Infant Church, somewhat naïve one might have expected, seemed to have a better grasp of realities than a lot of modern Christians.)

Time and again, the New Testament contrasts Adam and Jesus. Do not fall into the trap of thinking that 'Adam' was the first man and that is where our troubles began. 'Adam' is a generic Hebrew name for 'humanity' and in Hebrew thought, 'adam' is made up of ish and ishshah, male and female. Humanity has turned its back on God, on truth and justice, and in Biblical terms destroys relationships by demanding priority. Jesus, on the other hand, comes as *servant*, and that poses a totally different life-style and approach to relationships, each of which bring life. Here lies the challenge: whom shall we follow, Adam or Jesus?

Epistle

I have to express some disagreement with Paul, and this may well drive you mad. In that first line of the passage, Paul declares that if there is no resurrection, then we are 'most to be pitied.' I would have to say that, even if there is no life beyond this, I must still follow Christ as He is the only One Who makes the slightest sense of life here and relationships here. For that alone Jesus is well worth following NOW.

Whilst there are those ever ready to find the slightest sign or 'evidence' that the times of the End are near, I find it important to ask you to note that what Paul (and Jesus and the rest of the New Testament) is expressing is the fact that Jesus is and always will be the canon, the rule, the measuring stick of what is best, true, honest and valuable in life. **Never**, in Biblical terms, will evil have the final say.

Gospel

Where would we be without the ladies? Mary of Magdala and the other women show up as being the most practical, caring and down-to-earth people. No one, not even the Eleven, even began to imagine the possibility of Jesus' resurrection, but at least the girls were going to do what needed to be done for Jesus. Whilst the men came and had a look, - and then wandered off – for a fag and a drink? – the ladies remained focussed on the task they felt they had. OK, they told the men, but then got back to work.

Dear old John seems to have been the one doing most of the thinking: *he saw and believed*. Quite what he believed is anyone's guess really, but it was yet another stage on his path to understanding Jesus and His ministry. (Do not imagine that, for John, the scales suddenly fell from his eyes and he understood it all. That would be totally untrue to the facts and totally unfair in the Apostle.

Back to Mary. There is a fascinating insight into that lady, and the Risen Christ was not going to allow her to remain in the past, so to speak. On the one hand, Jesus had no difficulty in offering Thomas, who needed further evidence, the possibility of touch and feel, but not to Mary of Magdala? And why? Almost certainly because Mary wanted things to go back to the way they had been over the years of Jesus' earthly ministry, **But there was no turning back – there could be only the looking forward.** *Never lose sight of checking the fine print of the stories, and ponder the questions that the texts clearly raise.*

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I really must be a nuisance to lots of people, but as a priest having been involved in taking very many funerals over the years, I am amazed at the conflict in people's minds so apparent at such times. On the one hand, people will get all cynical about the possibility of life after death, and on the other, if you bother to read the death and memorial notices put in the paper, there is the constant expression of a far more certain expectation of seeing their loved ones again. In fact, many such adverts are actually addressed to the dear departed. (I find that really quite odd And interesting. And ambivalent.) All very human indeed.

When all is said and done, it must be said that for something as hugely important as the resurrection of Jesus, it seems strange that there is not some irrefutable evidence for the event. If it is so damn important, why does God not offer some tangible proof? And I find one of the answers to that rather interesting. It seems to me to be rather a constant that, in Scripture, no one is required to believe! However people are encouraged to ask the questions, begin the search and find out for themselves if things are real and true, *or not*.

The real answer to this business of resurrection is not so much a matter of do you believe in it, as it is a matter of are you game to act upon it. Before you wonder what in the name of fortune I am talking about, I ask you to take something of a wider view of things. Connected things.

If you are a farmer, or even a gardener, you will know the truth of one of Jesus' sayings about 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it lives alone.' Now clearly that is a truism of agriculture, and it is also true of human relationships. Live life self-centredly, and you will wither on the vine. It may take a while, but that is what will happen. Give yourself away somewhat, and you will find that out of that (sort of) death comes a remarkable life and living. Once one starts thinking along these lines, (and there is nothing airy-fairy about this,) a whole vista of aspects of life where this is true, opens up. Night and day; one generation to another; summer and winter, and the list goes on. There are rather more factors than these, but they all illustrate the reality of 'out of death comes life.' *And it is only as I stick my neck out, and **act and live** on this basis, I find that both life and relationships become far more valuable and interactive. If I turn away from this, then life tends to close in on me.*

What I find to me rather more interesting and even startling is that as I watch life and history and even relationships, there is a constant resurrection of things like truth, and justice and integrity and compassion. All manner of attempts are made by business, politics, and even organised crime, to deal death blows to all of those ancient values mentioned above, and in spite of the greatest pressures, truth will re-emerge, as will justice, and so, on. You might put them to death for a while, but they will never stay dead.

For me, it follows quite straightforwardly that as I ponder the resurrection of Jesus, I find enormous encouragement to keep going regardless of the contrary pressure, just as Jesus did, because of the sense of certainty that just as Jesus did not stay dead, nor will truth and justice and integrity.

If nothing else emerges from this fascinating evidence, it is that there is room for reality, sober reality sometimes, but also for optimism that evil will never have the final word and upper hand. It is no Jesus that was finally killed, but evil. Sheer stupid selfish human evil. Yet, in the Divine scheme of things, evil is not destroyed by the elimination of the human perpetrators, but (in a constant Biblical expression of things,) **by evil being shown up for what it is.** Run that past yourself again and ponder it.

So many people complain that God cannot be real because all the nasty, lousy violent things that happen. If He is a God of love, then He must be impotent. The reality is rather more fascinating: if all was sweetness and light, we would end up being the most weak, immature animal that walks this earth. It may not be politically correct, but it remains totally true. **If I do not take responsibility for my choices and decisions, then I become a shadow of what humanity is designed to be. Only with responsibility comes any sort of maturity.** So much for religious escapism, for there is absolutely no room or space for that in following Christ.

So resurrection is a life choice, not the crossing of fingers and hoping for something or someone out there to lift me out of the mess of my own making. And – with all due respect – if and when it comes to life after this, I am quite happy to operate on the basis that this Jesus makes so much sense and practicality when it comes to matters within my experience and purview, that I am quite content to leave matters currently outside of my experience to Him Who has been there, done 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

Almighty God, Whose Son Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life of all who put their trust in Him: raise us we pray from the death of sin to the life of righteousness and justice, that we may ever seek those things that are eternal, where He reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

FIRST LESSON

Acts 5: 27 – 32

PSALM

118: 14 – 26

For the EPISTLE

Revelation 1: 4 – 8

GOSPEL

John 20: 19 – 31

NOTES ON THE READINGS

First Lesson

One needs to remember that the Apostles were really rather uneducated people, and as such would have been somewhat overawed by the ‘important people’ in Jerusalem. For them to have stood up against the leaders of the nation and synagogue would have taken very considerable bravery. (If you do not think this to be so, when did you last stand up against the majority about an issue you considered to be important?)

‘We must obey God rather than humans’ is a catch cry that needs to be heard more often in this rather shallow day and age.

Psalm

This Psalm may sound rather olde worlde and passé, but it must be said that the author, like Peter in the first reading, was convinced totally that God was the One with all the answers. That conviction, in Hebrew life, stemmed not from some sort of credal or ideological statement, but from life experience. This is a factor often forgotten by those all very critical of Bible and faith.

Epistle

This last book of the New Testament provides either mystery or bemusement to many Christians, or simply has an aura of foreboding and fear. That is a great pity and the author would have a fit if he knew that his writings were so misunderstood. John was actually writing from the conviction that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, the faith and understanding of life and its outcome as taught and preached by Jesus and as lived by Him constitutes the very basis by which all human life and history can be understood. (If that sounds an overwhelming statement to make, then, sorry, but them’s the facts.)¹

Gospel

There are two rather major comments to make on this passage, familiar as it is for this time of the year.

The first is that John, quite clearly, offers you the perception that Pentecost occurred on the day of the resurrection. Just read the story again and see if that is not so.

The second is that I have long fought the battle for Thomas – who is NOT repeat NOT being castigated for lack of faith, in this incident. Notice the contrast between Jesus’ refusal to allow Mary Magdalene to touch Him early on the day of resurrection, and yet here, a week later, Thomas is given the opportunity to do just that! And the reason for the difference? Thomas was, obviously,² not going to depend on someone else’s word or experience about Jesus’ resurrection, for a most significant reason. If it were not true, then he was not going to be led astray by someone else’s mixed emotions or views. If it *were* true, then nothing could ever be the same again, but it all had to

¹ For an excellent commentary on John’s *Revelation*, try GB Caird’s work, in the A&C Black series © 1986, 1996. It is not cheap, and may be difficult to track down but it is a balanced and very readable explanation – and should widen your horizons *enormously*.

² Remember back to the incidents where Thomas majors – and see that he was ever the one to ask the question no one else dared, for he required the real answer. He would take no one else’s word for it. And that heavens for people like Thomas.

be based on reality, not on fluff. (Pity far more modern Christians do not look for their own answers and assurances.

This not very usual view of Thomas is one that should change the parameters of our own pilgrimages quite dramatically.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It has long appalled me that in this most cynical of worlds, something is considered to be true if a person believes it to be so. There is no call for outside or empirical evidence. If I think that I am handsome, then that is the truth. My beauty or lack of it is not a big issue of course, but this same process is used to try and prop up some of the most ridiculous or totally invalid statements, and the more important the issue the more virulent the argument is waged.

However, truth, of what ever sort, must stand on far stronger bases than that! And the more important the issue, the greater the requirement for strong and tangible evidence. If there is no such strong evidence, then the so-called belief will, sooner or later, be shown to be nothing more than castles in the air.

Like the rest of us, I was brought up from my youth with an attitude of snobbery, I guess, about poor old Thomas. It may have been the spirit of *that* age and its views about faith and believing, but Thomas always had very poor press. Here was a guy who claimed to be one of Jesus' Twelve, and yet wanted rather more and tangible evidence of Jesus' resurrection than simply the words of the rest of the gang. So he was side-lined, looked down upon, and his failure to 'have faith' was turned into a sad and sorry example of faithlessness.

Little could be further from the truth.

One of the most fascinating factors of the Hebrew faith, and the Bible it produced, was that it bore very little semblance to any of the contemporary faiths then, or even now. In spite of Christians attempts to reduce it all to 'you have got to believe this,' Hebrew faith emerged from the fascinating fact that, from Abraham on, it was led and encouraged by people who asked the hard questions. And searched until they had answers that stood up to all the rigours of real life. Here was never some sort of escapism religion. Here was a clear and determined exploration to understand what it means to be human and alive and part of a community. Abraham began his search because, fairly clearly, he was quite unsatisfied and disgruntled³ about the vision (or lack of it) of the moon worship of which he would have been a part in Ur of the Chaldees. Moses' experience at the burning bush would not have come out of the blue, but because there was a man who pondered the real issues, and the challenges that faced him and his people.

So to Thomas. Notice how it was always this man who raised the difficult questions. (Why is it that we modern humans are so afraid to go out on a limb and ask the difficult questions? Is it not because we do not want others to think we are ignorant or silly? If we dare ask, then how often does it turn out that others **wanted** to ask the same question, and dared not for the same reason. *And we wonder why we finish up, all too often, in pooled ignorance.*

'How do we know the way?' Thomas asked, as John records in Chapter 14. Thomas is the only one even slightly aware of the impact of Jesus going into the lions' den at Bethany when Lazarus died. 'What the hell is He doing?' Thomas asked himself, highly aware of the dangerous path Jesus was taking. The rest of the Twelve were blithely unaware of the realities they were confronting. And here. 'Unless I see the marks ... I will not believe.' **And you call that faithless?**

Thomas was one of the blokes who may not say a lot, but think a very great deal indeed. And he was extremely aware of this fact. **If** Jesus had defeated death, then the entire landscape was altered utterly and finally for ever. More of that anon. On the other hand, **if it were simply some sort of story**, then nothing at all had changed, so there was no point getting excited or worked up. *No point whatever.*

So, for such a hugely significant issue, Thomas was certainly not prepared to take the word of other people, and he may well have been quite un-prepared to take the word of the women. It was cold hard fact that was required here, not some lovely, however fluffy tale.

³ A bit of trivia. Have you ever wondered what it means to be **gruntled**? It is like 'couth' and 'uncouth.'

Faith always requires evidence, and never you forget it. Faith is not some sort of passionate crossing of the fingers and hoping against hope. I find that the sometimes contemporary view of believing that seems to hold that the more impossible the thing you believe in, the more faith you have is stupidity taken to its most utter extreme. That is not faith! That is gullibility – and for a supposedly educated generation, I find such gullibility widespread and **very** dangerous.

Now Jesus knew His Thomas quite well. He chose the man, did He not? And I would dare to suggest that the reason Thomas was chosen was for precisely that quality about the bloke. Inquisitive, questioning, nobody's fool. Is not this the man that in the years and decades after the Crucifixion, carried the Gospel to the land we now call India? When I was in college training, we had with us a member of the Mar Thoma Church, whose existence stunned missionaries very many centuries later when they came across that Church on the western coast of the sub-continent.

Thomas required evidence, hard evidence. And Jesus was perfectly content to provide it. And those words appended, about blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe, was to be of support to later generations who did not have the opportunity afforded to this Apostle.

Thank the Lord for Thomas, I say, and have done for decades. I can relate to this bloke, like I can to an exploring and questioning Abraham. And – like them all – I look for and discover the evidence that a latter-day disciple needs to be sure of the Faith once delivered.

The point of all this? If you have some hard questions (and you must be a rarity if you do not,) never be afraid to be like Thomas. Out with it! Ask the question, and do not be satisfied until you have the answers you need.

If Jesus is risen from the dead, then evil is defeated, and so the landscape of life is altered utterly and finally. If He is not risen, then lets put the whole thing behind us and look for some other answers.

Sentence

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

Collect

Almighty God, through Your only Son You overcame death and opened to us the gate of eternal life; grant that we who celebrate Christ'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 –6

PSALM

30

FOR THE EPISTLE

Revelation 5: 6 – 14

GOSPEL

John 21: 1 – 19

NOTES ON THE READINGS

First Lesson

This is a very well-known event, and the conversion of Saul would have been a cataclysmic event for the Infant Church. However it perhaps need to be said that there would have been more to it than a sudden and complete turn-around. From the time of the martyrdom of Stephen one suspects that Saul's mind and conscience would have been working overtime.

Nonetheless, it speaks volumes for Saul that – even as a one-eyed Pharisee – he was prepared to do such a massive rethink as this tale relates. This is not the easiest thing for anyone to do, especially if that person is as hardened in their point of view as would have been Saul's case. Pride is a great destroyer of flexibility and freedom of thought.

Without him who was to become the Apostle Paul, the Infant Church would have been very much the poorer.

Psalm

It may be because we do not expect it, but here in this Psalm from way back in Hebrew history comes the recognition of someone who had passed through what amounted to a personal death and resurrection. Certainly it was a metaphorical experience, but it was also very much in the line of thought which presaged Jesus' death and resurrection. In other words, God is at the heart of all life – and death.

Epistle

Goodness me, so many people are either afraid of or are mystified by – or are misled by those who *think* they know it all – in this rather fascinating book of John's. Without going into enormous and extraneous detail, the imagery that John puts forward is really a manner or way of conveying that 'the Lamb Who is slain' – the only one who can open the scrolls – is *the only One in Whom and by Whom life and human history can ever make sense. Alpha and Omega is how John describes Jesus in this book, the One in Whom all begins and all ends – and that includes the middle, too.* It is as stunning a description of Jesus as is that prologue to the Fourth Gospel, In the beginning was the Word. *Εν αρχη ην ο λογος.* Logos can be translated 'reason for existence' as much as 'Word.'

GOSPEL

It would be rather easy to focus on the great haul of fish, but that would be to miss most of the point. Here in this fascinating post-resurrection appearance of Jesus, we have a series of cameos that reminded the disciples to keep their feet on the ground, actually. The challenge to throw the nets back in at a time when most fishermen would have considered it silly, came as a reminder and challenge to Peter. It recalled the initial encounter, and the challenge to be 'fishers of people.' It was also a reminder that, while Jesus may not have been a professional fisherman, He was no fool when it came to human skills and awareness.

The real crunch for Peter was that triple-pointed call to 'feed my sheep.' Here was both challenge and commission. Peter had failed His Lord just before the Cross (and after!) and while this was 'rubbed in' by our Lord,

it was also the statement that past mistakes and failures – when not hidden from oneself – can be the impetus to move on and leave that arid past behind.

Some commentators make no real comment about the differing words in Jesus' questions, 'do you love me?' but it strikes me that the point is significant. Jesus' use of 'agape' the first time was followed by a lesser word, so Jesus appears to have been prepared to meet Peter where he was, rather than where Jesus would have liked him to be.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

There was a time when the expressed demand on Christians, when it comes to the Resurrection, was to believe in it. One lady who attended a Church in which I was involved was castigated because 'she did not believe that rubbish.' She horrified her contemporaries, but I doubt if any of them could have given a sound reason why they were so disturbed. Faith perhaps was the issue, but faith is not blind, or it is negated. You may think I am being awful, but I ask you to look in another direction.

It has always impressed me that Thomas, the so-called Doubter, was the one who helped me most. He was not prepared to take someone else's word for the Resurrection, and required hard evidence for himself. That was not a matter of disbelief, but rather the opposite. **If** the resurrection was real, Thomas decided, all the ground rules were changed, and the goal posts moved. **If** it were not true, then nothing had changed. Thomas needed hard evidence, and please note – Jesus gave it to him. And I am sure that Jesus gave it to him precisely because Thomas saw that the event was life- and world-changing.

This is the point of the Readings today, as I read them. First there is that tale of the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus; and then the great levelling experience that Peter had, that morning on the lakeside beach. Nothing could be the same for either of those men; and that is the same message for us. **Nothing can be the same again.**

A moment with Paul⁴ (Well, Saul then, for the purists.) Here is a person who has come a hell of a long way, from his absolute Pharisaism to a life- and world-changing view. Then as now, intensely religious people tend to have planned themselves such a tight and impenetrable view of life, God and whatever that was almost impossible to breach. You know well that Paul had witnessed the execution of Stephen, - and it must have shocked him somewhat! – and wanted to bring all the heretics to book, and even to death. (It is a tragic reality that all too often religious bigotry leads so many people to the most highly unreligious actions!) However, there was obviously quite some conversation going on between God and Paul on that fateful trip to Gentile territory. (Even then, it seems, Jews stepped well outside of their boundaries to ensure their safety and integrity.) Now it is not so much the experience of Paul that needs focussing, but the outcome.

Paul found it absolutely necessary to do a complete *volte face* – **a 180° turn** – not only in his thinking but in his entire life style and direction. Not only did he have to change sides, he had to do a complete and utter rethink of his theology and of all that motivated him. It must have taken enormous courage to leave behind his set and rigid theology and life-view⁵ - and who knows what effects that all had on his family, friends and colleagues. The point is, that the **change of direction** was enormous. Thomas could see that, long before, hence his need for clear evidence.

Now do you catch sight of the vast change that Jesus presented to Peter? It is one thing to be fisherman among other fishermen. They know you, you know them. You know your trade, perhaps having learnt it all from you Dad and Granddad. The lake and the district is familiar, and you are reasonably content even about handling storms. But what Jesus had in line for Peter was a completely different scenario. Who knows what people he would meet and what sorts of situations encounter. What sort of wisdom and tact would be needed from this blunt and brusque man? He who had known (earlier, certainly,) a sure and steady income would be cast on the generosity of those whom he would be serving. And who knows what sorts of rethinking and learning faced this person as the future unfolded. It must be said that these sorts of challenges are rather easier for someone young and flexible. Who knows Peter's age, but he certainly proved his flexibility, and more than he would have wanted of his 'unredeemed' features. Peter always did seem to be the sort of bloke whose tongue seemed to get well ahead of his brain.

⁴ Most people will be aware that 'Saul' is the Hebrew nomen of the Apostle, and 'Paul' the Greek equivalent.

⁵ Paul himself described how he spent three years in Arabia to work his way through all the necessary alterations.

So the reality of the resurrection, to those men and to us, is the strong likelihood of a challenge to rethink the whole of life, of occupation perhaps, and certainly the matter of thinking through all manner of ramifications of Jesus' rising from the dead, *I remain quite impatient with those Christians who see only their future salvation as dependent upon the Resurrection. There is far more to it than that.*

So the pondering has to do with you and your life, me and mine. And more often than not, in this day and age, one of the directions that the Resurrection points is the certainty that nothing and no one can kill permanently the real issues of life and relationships: love cannot be destroyed, nor can justice. Truth will for ever rise again, as will compassion. And the real challenge for the modern Christian is to be steadfast on the side of truth, love, justice and compassion, even when the rest of the world is in opposition.

Damn risky, isn't it!!!!!!

Sentence

The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes. *Rev'n 7:17*

Collect

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

FIRST LESSON

Acts 9: 36 – 43

PSALM

23

FOR THE EPISTLE

Revelation 7: 9 – 17

GOSPEL

John 10: 22 – 30

Notes on the Readings

First Lesson

Many years ago I was fortunate to have a New Testament lecturer who spoke of his experience, years before, of being involved in a situation where a person was raised from the dead. In other words, I have no great difficulty with the possibility of such events. However, I have a couple of difficulties with the situation here: (a) what is the real point of it all, and (b) those people I have had to do with who became believers because of miracle have a sadly narrow view of the point and purpose of the Faith.

For instance, I have often wondered why Jesus raised Lazarus – for the poor coot had to die again later on. Certainly it was some sort of living parable pointing to Jesus' own resurrection, and that I understand. But it changed little for Lazarus, really. It all seems to end with more questions than answers – or maybe I am not very bright!

Psalm

Pardon me, but if this Psalm does not speak to you already, then little I can do with add to that!

For the Epistle

Here is one book that has been of enormous encouragement to me, but not in the normal(?) sense. John's view of God, life, faith and history is absolutely stunning, and was designed to help people of his day and age to cope with the apparent ineffectiveness of the Faith in a self-centred and luxuriating world. (Not unlike today, eh!) John's emphasis in the entire book is to encourage people to see that – regardless of the contrary pressure from outside, – following Christ is the only sensible path to travel. All Jesus represents is bound to show up, in the final analysis, as outliving and surviving whatever ills that human selfishness and sin can possibly offer. This is the real and stunning message of the Resurrection of Jesus.

Just as an aside – are you aware of the fact that the Greek word for 'victory' is nike?

Gospel

If you were put out by my comments about the First Lesson, then this passage may help you to understand where I (and Jesus, too actually!) am coming from, One of the huge tragedies of the Incarnation has always been that the very people who should have been most aware of Messiah (Suffering Servant, Son of God and all those other titles) when He came seemed not only blissfully unaware but even antagonistic to Him. The reason is both simple and complex: they were looking in the wrong direction, because the extreme narrowness of their vision precluded the slightest chance of recognition.

Another of the tragedies of the present – seems to me – is the strange capacity of the more intense Christians to lock themselves away in some sort of isolation, regarding themselves as the only pure ones, or others again see the Faith purely in terms of being of benefit to them. They are 'saved.' Blow anyone else. Both these extremes have no contact whatever with the Biblical reality. Both those issues are the things that blinded the Jews of Jesus' day; *when will we ever learn?*

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It really is a fascinating time to be alive and Christian. Or anything come to that! From international crises like that presented by Iraq, to the lesser conflicts and big issues, it seems to me that a lot of clarification has to be the order of the day before any sensible way forward can be discovered.

In recent times (10.06) the Pope has had to back-peddle somewhat after comments about Muslims from centuries ago. Raising issues like that meant that the similar and bloodthirsty actions of the Church of the Middle Ages were remembered, too. The Inquisitions and the Crusades are not the sort of activity that anyone likes to be reminded. The real point of mentioning all this is simply to underline the extent to which even the Church can be so blind to the Faith's realities as to go off the rails in monumental blunders. While we are for ever reminded that humans are fallible (and so are Popes for heaven's sake) we need reminding that even the Church needs to check back its references in all periods of history, to ensure that as genuine and true expressions of the faith as possible are in evidence.

As a person who is getting on in years, with over 60 years of Christian and Church experience behind me, I have long been appalled at the extent to which the Faith seems to be subjected to whatever whim or fad happens to be current at the time. (Mind you, the same bemusement applies to ordinary life, as fads and fancies rule for a time, to be replaced by even more idiotic ones.) However, it strikes me as essential to have our feet firmly planted not only in Holy Scripture but also in a balanced and biblical understanding of that ancient book. I am for ever grateful for the Anglican 'thing' about Scripture, and the invalidity of interpreting or understanding of Scripture piecemeal. (Article XX *et al*) Everyone needs to be aware of our very human capacity to grab some little bit and make out it has to do with the whole.

You may well feel that this is a strange 'notes for a sermon' in the Easter Season, but that Gospel for today underlines the tragic capacity we humans have to narrow our vision down to what we can handle, what suits us, our 'comfort zone' as we call it these days.

As a youngster, I remember wondering why-ever it was that Israel of Jesus' day could have been so blind as to miss all the clear evidence of the reality that was Jesus. But that fact is reiterated often and especially around the time of the Crucifixion. Here it is again, in John 10. Not only was the evidence clearly available in all that Jesus was saying and doing, it was also embedded in the stunning writings of the Old Testament prophets, especially Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. How could they possibly have missed the impact of all those ancient worthies write?

The answer is awkward and awful. Most of us humans only see what we **want** to see, to hear what we **want** to hear, and to understand in a way that **does not involve us too deeply or commit us too much**. Sadly, it is in what is called 'religion' that this blindness seems to operate at its most dark. In other words, I find that most of my ministry to people is not so much a case of taking them further along of the road of maturity, as it is to go backwards and attempt to get their feet back on the right track. *And that is a minefield let me tell you.*

What appals me more is the clear evidence that Jesus was caught up in exactly the same bind. He was dealing with religious, even super-religious people, who stubbornly held to their narrow-gutted views of God and of life, turning their back on the very clear evidence that Jesus' life and teaching offered them. It is almost impossible to offer anything better to such people. They **choose** to remain blind.

What is left to the rest of the People of God? In this day and age of increasing retreat in our culture and country, from the things of God, it is a matter of remaining true to the Gospel imperatives. John in his *Revelation* was painfully aware of what he saw as the incapacity of the Church of his time to stand firm against the inroads of selfish and luxuriating living, and pointed to the huge need of the people of his day to widen and deepen their understanding of God and Gospel, of life and its alternatives. He saw the only antidote to that disintegration was for the People of God to stop mucking around on the surface, and to learn – perhaps relearn – the basics of their Faith.

It strikes me that whoever chose today's Gospel reading for this particular Sunday had a very similar agenda in mind for us here and now.