

Sentence

Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit
Acts 2: 38-39

Collect

O God, Your Son made Himself known to His disciples in the breaking of the bread; open our eyes of faith that we may see Him in His redeeming work; Who is alive and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen

FIRST LESSON

Acts 2:14a, & 36 – 41

Psalm

116: 1 – 4 & 11 – 18

Epistle

1 Peter 1: 13 – 25

GOSPEL

Luke 24: 13 – 35

NOTES ON THE READINGS

First Lesson

Well, if this looks like the real dyed-in-the-wool evangelistic burst, then I would ask you to look again. We Christians tend to have a thing about ‘sin,’ and a rather short-sighted thing at that. Here is no ‘turn-or-burn’ challenge, but something with a rather more profound sting in the tail.

Look at that penultimate verse: ‘save yourselves from this crooked age.’ And what crookedness would be in Peter’s mind most of all? It would have been the immense injustice and untruth that had authorities recently executing someone clearly innocent. In spite of Israel’s knowledge and awareness of all that is just and true, its spiritual and political leaders succumbed to the very Adamic way of finding an easy way out of an impasse. Spend a while looking at the utter falsity and injustice of Jesus’ arrest, trials and execution.

The challenge that lies in front of all humans, as well as all Christians, is to see the Gospel in terms extensive enough so as to understand the enormity of the grace that offers a totally different (holy!) approach to life and relationships. This different way involves all that is just and true, all that is honest and above board, all that is open to any inspection and examination. If and when Christians begin to operate on such lines, then there will be rather less stupid criticism of the Faith, and the battle lines will be clearer for all to see. Taking up the comment in the Epistle, ‘born again’ has to do with making such a choice, a far more significant situation than the escape from imagined punishment.

Psalm

It has long struck me as remarkable to find psalmists and prophets and the like, in Israel’s history, who show themselves to be head and shoulders above *hoi polloi*. I guess it is ever the case, for there are those who just go along with the drift, and others who are the pathfinders.

Following on the thoughts emanating from the First Lesson, please look again at this interesting if plaintive psalm. Here, seems to me, was a person who was living through something of a desert in his time, tossed from pillar to post by rather unlovely countrymen. Whilst he was aware of the calling to be Jewish and the very real way of life the faith offered, he was also painfully aware of the extent to which his contemporaries discarded the ancient values. The same person was remarkably aware of the vast and precious value of the ‘faith once delivered.’ He knew that things could be far, far better, and he was very grateful to God for that reality. Thank God for God!

Epistle

Perhaps it is because we tend to have lost sight of the challenges that lay in the face of the first-century Christians that we also lower our own expectations and standards when it comes to our own discipleship. Most of us older people have lived through an interesting time in history, (and I have often commented that we have lived through the best of all possible times.) But with the increasingly clear evidence of the self-driven culture of our own day now, and the disintegration of culture, community and environment, the lines of demarcation between faithfulness and lack of faithfulness becomes clearer. So the author made it quite clear that the matter is serious, not only for oneself but also for one’s community. Never lose sight of the fact that the Gospel we profess is designed as much for the salvation of the

world as it is for you personally. Mind you, we still need to translate into modern terms what Peter was conveying to those of his own day and age.

Gospel

This rather fascinating cameo of one of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus underlines for us, once again, the clear and evident fact that none of the disciples nor other followers of Jesus ever began to expect the events in which they took part. While it may well be some sort of 'left-handed' evidence of the truth of the resurrection, it also conveys so very clearly how little of Jesus' teaching hit home at the time it was provided.

It is really another example of people only seeing what they want or expect to see, and that we humans are not all that clever at lateral thinking. We tend to see what we want to see, and never manage to take on board the implications of all that is there. One might presume that the disciples knew their Scripture better than we, but after an overall look at the New Testament, I am not so sure at all.

So there was our Lord, spelling out to the two on the road to Emmaus, what Scripture had been saying all along. They were thrilled at the exposition but seemed never to look sideways to see just Who was their educator. It was only at the 'breaking of the bread' that daylight came to the pair.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I don't know if you have the same sort of querying mind as me, but this tale of the couple on the road to Emmaus has long bothered me. The bother stems not so much from the story itself as from the illustration it offers of the strange tendency of spiritual or religious people to be *so turned inwardly that they overlook, avoid or otherwise miss the real point and purpose of the exercise*. I dare you to re-examine many of the incidents between Jesus and the Twelve to see how often Jesus had, quite deliberately, to push the disciples to get them past their comfort zone and to look for further horizons..

So look again at today's Gospel: this incident should be well-enough known, and we may well allow for the incapacity of the followers to catch sight of the reality of all that was happening. However, it strikes me that these two dear disciples seemed far more concerned with the apparently negative outcome of the previous couple of days or so even to recognize their Lord when He was talking with them. Even when His exegesis of Scripture 'burned in their hearts,' they were still unable or unaware of the impact of what He was talking about. In other words, there seems to be that capacity for introversion amongst so many Christians that they miss the fact that the faith is as much for others as it is for them.

I have told the story before of a quite devoted and retired pastor who insisted, at every chance offered to him, to preach what he called the Gospel, and demanded that his hearers repent. It became an exercise singularly boring, I must confess, but no amount of discussion or debate would get him past his hang-up. The huge pity of all this is that many remain hung up on such a view of the Gospel, and because of that, miss so much of the main issue.

'*Repent!*' is a rather emotive challenge, and for most of us old ones, it has to do with the sawdust trail, the ranting evangelist, who demands that those to whom he addresses himself 'accept Jesus and be born again.' Perhaps my main issue is against the rather introverted narrowing of where this process is pointed, for in most cases it has to do with escaping eternal damnation. (I was rather glad to see that my own theological alma mater has begun to see past exactly that narrow view.)

Repentance. But from what?

Mostly we tend to assume that the matter has to do with our own failures, peccadilloes, and sins - or rather with the somewhat expected outcome from them. Like the Pastor mentioned earlier, we somehow expect great penal results and look for some greater holiness. Even my dear old Mum, not all that long before she died, was bothered by the terrible thought that she, who had a Methodist background and a singularly strong conscience, might have done something in her lifetime that would disqualify her from Heaven.

The matter is rather more profound than that. Yes, more profound. The real grace of the Gospel lies, not in providing an escape from eternal retribution, but offering a far more significant choice of life and life-style **here and now**. The whole Biblical revelation underlines the contrast between a way of life self-obsessed and ego-driven as Adam in the story, and the self-giving, serving way of life as Jesus presents in the Gospel. The former way is, to quote St. Paul, the way of death (in that Biblical sense); the latter is life. And repentance consists in turning one's back on the former and following the latter. And it seems to me that there are not a lot of Christians who seem to understand that. Being a Christian is not so much a matter of believing as it is of following.

Sentence

‘I am the Good Shepherd,’ says the Lord. ‘The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.’

John 10:11

Collect

God of all power, You called from death our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep; send us as shepherds to rescue the lost, to heal the injured, and to feed one another with understanding, through Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

First Lesson

Acts 2: 42 – 47

Psalm

23

Epistle

1 Peter 2: 1 – 10

Gospel

John 10: 1 – 10

NOTES ON THE READINGS

First Lesson

It is a fascinating and touching story of the way in which the early Christians related to each other with great trust and commitment. It was a very risky path to take, but one that should be possible for committed people. However, as one might be rude enough to expect, it all fell apart because of the cupidity of one couple.

On the one hand, the Gospel points us all to such a close involvement and commitment to each other that sharing according to need is the norm¹ - and on the other we have the clear and present danger of human unwillingness to head in the Gospel path.

Psalm

If you are unable to make your own comment on the 23rd Psalm, you might like to look back to previous comment.

Epistle

I wonder if many people are aware of the almost total quotation from the Old Testament that peppers this passage from the epistle. Apart from anything else it is a stark reminder that the faith of the OT looked in the same direction as the New, and that both challenges and promises are the same.

Just take a look at your Bible provided it has reference to OT quotations: the living stone is one clear reference and that is from the Psalms. The Holy priesthood stems from **Exodus 19: 3-6**, and surely is one of the least recognized challenge for Israel and Church. Even from that point in Hebrew history, Israel was called to be outward looking by expressing its priesthood to **the whole world**. I was ordained priest 45 or more years ago, but I am unable to ‘priest’ unless I have people to whom I ‘priest,’ if you follow me. It is not some sort of advanced status; it is a call to outgoing care and ministry. May I repeat, it is not some sort of advanced status as Israel long considered it. From Moses – even Abraham – the People of God were meant to reach out, and not be concerned about their own safety.

Those final passionate words come from the prophets, and I suggest that you look up the passages for yourself.

Gospel

In today’s urbanised Australia, there will be fewer and fewer people who have any more than a sentimental picture of sheep, but that would be of little help in catching sight of the impact of Jesus’ parables on the subject. Even graziers with their large or huge flocks and little contact could perhaps be bothered with the imagery. Time and money render that outdated.

I have referred elsewhere to stories of past history in this neck of the woods (Port Augusta SA) and the commencement of sheepherding in country to the north. Not only were shepherds involved with small flocks, but their commitment was total, 24/7 in today’s expression. Their labour included finding fodder and water, and shelter from wild dogs and from aboriginal folk who were angered by the European intrusion. There are tales of shepherds killed,

¹ Note that this is not far from a pure form of communism! That comment would have raised great ire some decades ago, but that is the truth. However, communism has never stayed true to its vision for exactly the same reason that the Acts experiment failed. Human sin!

aboriginals also, and of course sheep themselves. The point of course is that shepherds gave their lives, virtually, to tending the animals.

Perhaps now something of the picture becomes clearer. Add to that the capacity of sheep to be stupid, and occasionally wilful. The hands of the shepherd were quite full, and their role a lonely one. On the other hand, the shepherds' knowledge of the individuals in their flocks would have been remarkable.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

If there is one particular image from Old Testament and New that recurs constantly and vividly, it is this one of shepherd and sheep. Perhaps the initial impact came from the story of David, later King, whose working life began in that trade. So the King was seen as shepherd extraordinaire of his people, an image that was widened to include the perception that 'this is the way that God operates, too.' Prophets reiterated and expanded on the imagery, being highly caustic of those leaders spiritual and political who were **meant** to be shepherds to the people, but who instead were 'ravenous wolves.' Each of the major prophets expressed their anger, as did the minor ones as well. It is well worth noting the extent to which the ire of such people was raised when the very people whose task it was to be shepherd rejected that role and responsibility to feather their own nest.

It is not only Old Testament figures who blasphemed their roles; Christian history is littered with people, from Popes down, who disqualified themselves from their God-given role in such selfish and destructive directions.

I would be rude enough to suggest that these modern times have seen the growth of similar attitudes that have people in places of responsibility becoming very much self-servers, ensuring their own wealth with almost complete disregard for those whom they are supposed to serve. The outcome is not so much that their own nests are feathered, but that this happens at the expense of those around about them. It is many decades since the challenge was raised that World War Three would be about the increasing gap between the haves and the have nots.

Run that up against that remarkable illustration of the people in the Infant Church sharing their resources, in a way not dissimilar to which indigenous folk in this country had done with each other for hundreds of generations. Like the Acts experience, there would have been rather sad exceptions to the rule, but that does not devalue the point and purpose of the exercise.

And when it comes to priests and pastors throughout the Church, the very sad emergence of such people refusing the Biblical responsibility, then it is of small surprise that increasing numbers of people seem to be shaping their ministries in a less than Biblical and shepherd-like way. This has been a concern for quite some years, but appears to be coming more to the fore lately.

The real emphasis in all this surely lies in its strong reminder to all who follow Christ, that He, the Good Shepherd Himself, is ever the pattern for our actions and life-styles.

Sentence

I am the way, the truth and the life, says the Lord. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

John 14: 6

Collect

Saving God, Who called Your Church to bear witness that You were in Christ reconciling the world to Yourself; help us so to proclaim the goodness of Your love that all who hear it may be reconciled to You and to each other; through Him Who died and rose again, and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.

Amen

First Reading

Acts 7: 55 – 60

Psalm

31: 1 – 5 and 17 – 18

Epistle

1 Peter 2: 11 – 25

GOSPEL

John 14: 1 – 14

NOTES ON THE READINGS

First lesson

I wonder if you have stopped long enough to catch sight of a hugely important aspect of this story of the execution of Stephen? The story and its telling runs so contrary to so much of today's demands for litigious retribution and revenge. And Stephen? He prays for his murderers' forgiveness.

It is rather fascinating to notice that Stephen was chosen to be 'deacon,' server and waiter on tables, whose role was mainly to care for widows and other people in difficult situations. He was not chosen to be evangelist, but his gifts made it clear that here was one of his strong points. Following the pattern and experience of his Lord, he was martyred – and here is the sticking point: it was all in the hope, like Jesus, that thinking and caring people would ponder the importance of the martyrdom. There was no pushing the killing down people's throats, no demand for recompense – but the quiet patience in hope that there will be people who recognize the importance and value of the tragedy.

It is even more interesting that one of those deeply affected by the event was a person most unlikely to have any other thought of the event that glad delight at Stephen's demise. Saul, later Paul whose role was watching the belongings of the killers, obviously spent quite some time later, and heart-burn to come to the point of recognizing that *he* was wrong and Stephen was right. In spite of popular theory about Saul's sudden conversion, there are not many people who change so dramatically without a lot of forethought and pondering.

Psalm

If you are game enough to see this, this psalm addresses and expresses the tensions and problems faced by those who have been misrepresented, maligned, aspersed. It is a rather hideous position to be in, knowing that others misunderstand, either deliberately or because they have been misled. No amount of protestation will prove the point to those of deaf ears, and the only (valid) alternative is to be patient and wait until the truth emerges.

It will not take a lot of imagination on our part to recognize that this was a huge issue for Jesus, for His execution would prove, to most people's satisfaction, that He got His just deserts; and only those who examined the facts, pondered the realities, and thought for themselves, would arrive at the real and true conclusion. Jesus was not the One to protest, to yell and scream, and to jump up and down. It makes you think, does it not?

Epistle

And now perhaps you might see this epistle in a subtly different light. Right responses to people, regardless of popular posturings, is always the responsibility of the Christian. Veracity and integrity are the issues, and sadly these days, are not always evident.

One of the rather more significant issues that emerged in the first century was that matter of relating to the 'powers that be.' As with a number of other theological issues, it is important to see the development of thought amongst the Apostles when it came to the perception of the Roman Empire. Initially, the Church seemed to follow the basic Jewish perception that government of whatever system was one of the means whereby chaos was held at bay – by God!. Chaos, of course, was the ultimate threat to all communities and cultures, for without order, life becomes impossible.

However, as time went by and the Empire showed its cracks and downsides, there grew the recognition that whilst chaos was to be avoided, there was still little room for increasingly hostile responses from what was becoming a paranoid power.

Out of that stress and strain emerged the experience of increasing numbers of Christians who were paying the penalty for that paranoia. It was not only Christians of course. I seem to remember reference to the law that demanded no more than four or five people permitted to gather together, which rendered even fire brigades (or their First Century equivalent) banned – and one can only imagine the outcome of that approach to life. As in all political systems, as power becomes more focussed in the hands of fewer people, those in power became increasingly harsh in their determination to keep power in their own hands. Add to that the increasingly unstable (mentally) situation with the Caesars, and you have a recipe for disaster(s). Notice however, that the Christians response to that process was not one of violence, but rather a matter of simple reliance on consistent and gentle behaviour. Not the easiest of reactions in the real world!

Gospel

In spite of the general perception that this passage has so much to do with heaven, the reality, seems to my small mind, is very much more immediate and down to earth.

A couple of items seem to press for my attention far more than the heavenly escape from reality. My admiration for dear old Thomas increases almost every time I read the passages referring to him. Whilst popular opinion, over the ages, has reduced the poor man to the level of doubter, the reality is that here was a bloke who was always prepared to ask the hard questions that no one else would voice. On top of that, his quest was always for the real evidence on which to base his faith and confidence, to understand quite clearly what were the important issues. If anyone considers it to be an exercise of faith to believe something without evidence or in spite of it, then they need to look again very closely. Faith is never a matter of believing the incredible, for that is not faith but stupidity. The Faith may challenge us to follow in an apparently impossible (or very difficult) path, but neither stupidity or gullibility is ever part of the scenario.

As this passage indicates, Jesus was trying to make clear to the Twelve that whilst the path ahead was studded with difficulty and challenge, the answer to each and all of them was to follow the Leader they knew and loved, and to understand His responses to whatever circumstances arose. Our Lord was painfully aware of the fact that His followers were totally unready for the crisis of cross and execution, and that they needed to step onto the steep learning curve towards preparedness for it all. Thomas was profoundly aware of that – which is why he posed that remarkable question. And thank heaven he did!

NOTES FOR A SERMON

Call me for anything you like, but I have increasing concern that so many of the more enthusiastic of Christians are more and more likely to retreat into defensive mode and hide behind barricades of – to me – rather foolish and indefensible ‘theology.’ In the light of today’s readings I ask you to come on a journey that may not be all that much to your liking.

I have lost track of the number of quite dedicated Christians who point to the resurrection and demand utter and unquestioning belief in the Biblical story, and call it faith. Not to head in such a direction is dismissed as lack of faith. In other words the challenge offered is to accept the Biblical account of the resurrection, and not to waver. My problem with such an approach is first, that it tends to demand both the acceptance of miracle, and second to go on in that direction and look for continuing and miraculous events to prove the former.

It strikes me that to follow such a path is to reduce almost everything to something very minor, and what is more, it is to remove almost any relevance of the Faith to present-day living. Let’s spend a few moments looking at the passages, as I try to explain what I mean.

In that story of the stoning of Stephen we have a rather powerful illustration of what I point to. It is very sad to see us in a world where human life is valued very cheaply, where disagreement over large or small issues can result in feral and often fatal violence. You know and I know that violence produces no reconciliation, but rather the escalation of the issues. (As I write this, the sad but ridiculous climax of the Second Test against India produces insanity in all sorts of directions, both here and on the sub-continent.) So the fascinating, if remarkably tragic outcome of the execution of Stephen, is that it seems to have made one of the hard-headed onlookers to begin to reconsider his views about the emerging and infant Church. Make no mistake about it; Saul’s conversion was no instant response on that road to Damascus, but rather the outcome of a long and heart-searching consideration of what he was observing right here..

In other words, do you see, both the import of Stephen's preaching and his preparedness to carry the cost of his faithfulness made Saul furiously to think. Part of that remarkable business of forgiveness requires repentance, and that is a matter of change of direction in life that emerges from a change of attitude to a whole range of things and people. In even more other words, here is yet another illustration of the way in which God works through the most ugly and disastrous of events, to bring what is hugely beneficial out of something most ugly and hateful. Of course, this is, if you dare, something of the Cross revisited. And as in both cases, it requires first and foremost, the utter faithfulness of the two men involved to what they knew to be true and incontrovertible.

Now do you see why the Psalmist says what he did? In his own day and situation, he was aware of living in a world that refused to see the truths and realities, and whilst he recognized the loneliness of the path in front of him, he was aware also of the faithfulness and utter reliability of God, Whose truths and verities outlast any human attempt to destroy them.

If you have followed me so far, you may be able to move a step or two further – an important step if you find me hard to cope with. In that most interesting of Gospel passages comes that statement from Jesus so often used by people of more fundamentalist persuasion to impose remarkable limits on the acceptance of the Gospel. You have guessed it: those well-known words of Jesus that *no one comes to the Father but by Me*.

Rather sadly to my mind, these words become the perception that unless your view of the Gospel is the same as mine, you have Buckley's hope in hell of getting to heaven. Unless your experience of Jesus is the same as mine, unless your vision of the Biblical truth is as limited as mine, then I am in and you are out. **Nothing could be further from the truth.**

What Jesus was making quite clear is that all that He is on about, all that the Biblical revelation is all about, is that life does not work unless and until you are operating on the same wavelength and under the same modus operandi. His is the pattern by which all modes are judged, and unless we follow that pattern, then we are pushing wind uphill.

Put this another way: if I operate on the basis under which Adam (ordinary humanity) operates, then I will be self-driven, self-obsessed, self-directed. I will do all I can to make you follow my pattern, and if necessary, use violence to gain my ends. On the other hand, if I follow Jesus then my whole *modus* changes. Like Jesus, my care and concern is to encourage the other person, to serve rather than demand, to offer and not require. It is an open-ended process, and rather more likely to take a lot of time to reach a goal, but it will not damage or bend the other person in the process.

If you can take a quantum leap, you will know that you have encountered other souls than specifically Christian ones that have reached the same self-giving conclusion. And if you are honest, you will see that –even without apparent knowledge of Jesus – they are 'coming to the Father by Him.'

One of the great discoveries that came to me oh! so many years ago, when I realized that all religions and even philosophies are attempts to come to some understanding as to what it means to be human and alive on Planet Earth. Whenever searchers of whatever persuasion reach out towards the truth, it will not be at all surprising to find them heading in a similar direction as Jesus.

That may well be enough for you to chew on today, eh?

Sentence

Jesus said 'Those who love Me will keep My word, and My Father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them.'
John 14:23

Collect

O God Who has prepared for those who love You all good things beyond our understanding, pour into our hearts such love towards You, that loving You above all else, we may obtain Your promises that we an obtain Your promises, that exceed all that we can desire. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

First Lesson

Acts 17: 22 – 31

Paul stood up before the Council of the Areopagus and began: "Men of Athens, I see that in everything that concerns religion you are uncommonly scrupulous. As I was going round looking at the objects of your worship, I noticed among other things an altar bearing the inscription "To an Unknown God". What you worship but do not know--this is what I now proclaim. The God who created the world and everything in it, and who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands.

It is not because he lacks anything that he accepts service at our hands, for he is himself the universal giver of life and breath--indeed of everything. He created from one stock every nation of men to inhabit the whole earth's surface. He determined their eras in history and the limits of their territory. They were to seek God in the hope that, groping after him, they might find him; though indeed he is not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move, in him we exist; as some of your own poets have said, 'We are also his offspring.'

Being God's offspring, then, we ought not to suppose that the deity is like an image in gold or silver or stone, shaped by human craftsmanship and design. God has overlooked the age of ignorance; but now he commands men and women everywhere to repent, because he has fixed the day on which he will have the world judged, and justly judged, by a man whom he has designated; of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

Psalm

66: 7 – 19

O bless our God, you peoples: and cause His praises to resound
Who has held our souls in life: Who has not suffered our feet to slip.
For You have proved us, O God: You have tried us as silver is tried.
You brought us into the net: You laid sharp torment on our loins.
You let our enemies ride over our heads, we went through fire and water: but You brought us into a place of liberty.
I will come into Your house with burnt-offerings: and I will pay You my vows
The vows that opened my lips: that my mouth uttered when I was in trouble.
I will offer You burnt-offerings of fattened beasts, with the sweet smoke of rams: I will sacrifice a bull and the flesh of goats
Come then and hear, all you that fear God: and I will tell you what He has done for me
I called to Him with my mouth: and His praise was on my tongue
If I had cherished wickedness in my heart: the Lord would not have heard me
But God heard me: He has heeded the voice of my prayer
Praise be to God: Who has not turned back my prayer or His steadfast love from me.

Epistle

1 Peter 3: 8 – 22

Finally, be united, all of you, in thought and feeling; be full of brotherly affection, kindly and humble. Do not repay wrong with wrong, or abuse with abuse; on the contrary, respond with blessing, for a blessing is what God intends you to receive. As scripture says: If anyone wants to love life and see good days he must restrain his tongue from evil and his lips from deceit; he must turn from wrong and do good, seek peace and pursue it. The Lord has eyes for the righteous, and ears open to their prayers; but the face of the Lord is set against wrongdoers. Who is going to do you harm if you are devoted to what is good?

Yet if you should suffer for doing right you may count yourselves happy. Have no fear of other people: do not be perturbed, but hold Christ in your hearts in reverence as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence when anyone challenges you to justify the hope which is in you. But do so with courtesy and respect, keeping your conscience clear, so that when you are abused, those who malign your Christian conduct may be put to shame. It is better to suffer for doing right, if such should be the will of God, than for doing wrong.

Christ too suffered for our sins once and for all, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God; put to death in the body, he was brought to life in the spirit. In the spirit also he went and made his proclamation to the imprisoned spirits, those who had refused to obey in the past, while God waited patiently in the days when Noah was building the ark; in it a few people, eight in all, were brought to safety through the water. This water symbolized baptism, through which you are now brought to safety. Baptism is not the washing away of bodily impurities but the appeal made to God from a good conscience; and it brings salvation through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is now at the right hand of God, having entered heaven and received the submission of angels, authorities, and powers.

GOSPEL

John 14: 15 – 21

Jesus said "If you love me you will obey my commands; and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another to be your advocate, who will be with you for ever -- the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because the world neither sees nor knows him; but you know him, because he dwells with you and will be in you.

I will not leave you bereft; I am coming back to you. In a little while the world will see me no longer, but you will see me; because I live, you too will live. When that day comes you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me and I in you. Anyone who has received my commands and obeys them--he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father; and I will love him and disclose myself to him."

NOTES ON THE READINGS

First Lesson

This story of Paul at Athens has long fascinated me, and perhaps very many others. Yet somehow the breadth of Paul's vision shown by this cameo tends to be overlooked and not understood.

Think carefully as you read Acts, and just as carefully when you read Paul's letters, for you have here the thoughts and actions of a man of wide vision and intellect. Here was Paul in a culture rather foreign to him, though he was brought up in a Greek-speaking city and educated in that Graeco-Roman culture. In his address to people there, he showed quite clearly that he knew where they were coming from, -- and it seems he was aware of their propensity to be more interested in argument than in conclusion! But there was no sense of judgement, but one of *meeting those folk where they were*. Perhaps the most brilliant part of this encounter was the knowledge and capacity of the Apostle to know enough about the locals and their poetry and views to point out how in their own view of things, they were searchers after truth, at least in potential.

Before modern readers get too myopic about the latter part of the passage and its reference to judgement, please do understand clearly what Paul is saying – in fact what the whole Faith is saying. Here is no 'you will cop it in the end' but rather he was emphasizing the fact of human responsibility for (our) their actions. Here is no fear pressure at all; rather it was a matter of underlining that being human includes being responsible – to each other as much as to ourselves. Hopefully this may provide you will something of a rethink.

Psalm

Perhaps what is written earlier helps us to catch sight of what the psalmist was getting excited about. When people of evil intent seem to have the ascendancy over us, it must feel as if being faith-full is a fairly useless way to go. So often the evildoer seems to come out on top. And that sense is what the author is saying about being 'tried in the fire.' However, when all is said and done, says this author, it is far better to follow the truth, maintain the convictions and express them, for, sooner or later, the balance will be restored. Here is no internalised 'religion,' but a far broader perception of life that takes the wide and inclusive view. To see this psalm as 'devotional' is to miss the point of the psalm And the Faith!

Epistle

There is remarkable resilience and honesty in this passage from 1 Peter. The author is recommending that his readers follow what must have been somewhat odd directions for people from the normal culture of the day. This is a remarkable reminder that he Judaic-Christian Faith has always held up in front of people the necessity for honest, genuine responses to each other, and the living by important and eternal verities. This is not for the benefit of the believers alone, but for the whole community of which that Church was and is a part.

The honesty of the author shows up in his recognition of the fact that 'being good' will not necessarily result in safety for the believer, but quite often very much the opposite. Such an outcome is not illustrative of the impotence of God, but rather of the often basic evil nature of many humans. So, as in the other readings so far, here is the challenge to remain true, in spite of the pressure to the contrary.

In fact, this is the point of that petition in the Lord's Prayer which dismays some: save us from the time of trial. It is a prayer that we may not encounter faith- and life-threatening situations in case we may succumb.

Gospel

If there is one thing that I ask you to note it is that gift to which Jesus was pointing – **the Spirit of truth**. Christians have been rather narrowly arrogant in assuming that this gift is for but one section of the human race, when the entire Faith, Old Testament and New, clearly directs us to see that we are but part of God's activity towards the redemption of the world. **All people**.

And that great gift of the Spirit is available to all, believers and unbelievers I ask you to see, for truth is not the monopoly of Christians nor of anyone else. But this truth tends to come quietly and subtly, waiting for mere humans to respond with real depth and conviction. If you look you may well find that the very people with whom you find little connection may be closer than you think as they search for, find and follow the truth themselves.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

At the time I am writing this, the enormous conflict between Indian and Australian Cricket is filling the pages of the papers and the TV and radio news. It is a sad commentary on humanity that the issues that brought the controversy to light, and the process by which it is being promulgated is so entirely bitter, divisive and destructive. What is worse, to my small mind, is that the real facts of the matter are not being displayed. It seems it is far more 'fun' to snipe from behind barricades, using only that part of the information that shows the argumentative side in a good light. Both parties are embroiled in that sort of action. The process is highly unlikely to produce any real reconciliation, but will – almost certainly – be used to continue the controversy well into the future. *As I often say to folk, beware the person who takes the moral high ground.* Their argument will, almost certainly be false, and truth may well be the first casualty. Please ponder that again.

One of the rather more pathetic illustrations of this facet of human nature shows up, it seems to me, in the recurring debate between Christians (or believers of any sort) and atheism. People seem to yell and scream from their defensive positions, fail to listen at all to any opponent, and go away satisfied that their case has been totally justified and proved. If such folk really began to listen to each other, they may well find that, although there are differences between them, they are in fact far closer than they are prepared to acknowledge. (Try me out on a few stories if you dare.)

The real point of these readings is that throughout the long history of Jewish and Christian faith, the challenge has always been not to isolate people into blocks of belonging or of failing to belong, but to open people up to the fact that, as Jesus said, 'the truth shall make you free.' It is such a recurrent theme through both Old Testament and New, and today's readings push us in exactly that direction. Truth = reconciliation = harmony and peace. And why do we never seem to get there? Simply because we are too proud to allow the truth to emerge; it might just make us look silly or sinful. *What fools we mortals be!* Is it not time to get rid of spin-doctors and false all sorts of things, to get back to reality in our dealings with each other. This should be one of the great marks of the Christian **and of the Church also**.