

Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> August, 2006

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost  
Transfiguration

**Sentence**

Why do you spend your money on that which is not bread, and your labour on that which does not satisfy?  
Eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. *Isaiah 55:2*

**Collect**

Living God, Whose Son Jesus fed the hungry with the bread of His life, and the word of His kingdom: renew  
Your people with Your heavenly grace, and in all our weakness sustain us with Your true and living bread,  
Jesus Christ our Lord: Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**2 Samuel 11: 26 – 12: 13a**

**Psalm**

**51: 1- 12**

**Epistle**

**Ephesians 4: 1 – 16**

**GOSPEL**

**John 6: 24 – 35**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS .....**

**Old Testament Lesson**

Here is one of the most moving stories, as Nathan, a minion of the King had the horrific task of trying to bring the truth to bear on someone who had the power of life and death over him. It is a fascinating thing to see the wisdom and passion on the part of Nathan to convey the message by telling a story, and to watch the remarkable response from David.

The passion of the story was matched by the horror of the situation it was designed to combat. It is no easy task to point up to anyone the nature of the damage and injustice when it was what the French call a *crime passionell*. The adultery was added to the virtual murder of Uriah. And the outcome that was anticipated may well sound rather harsh to us, but that tends to be a matter of clear justice to those ancients. (We are rather too soft, these days, on the wrongdoing of people, finding all sorts of excuses, real and unreal.) David had the honesty to see the error of his ways, and while he was never perfect, he did manage to learn from the experience.

Two matters are underlined here, for me. First, the need for truth and integrity **especially** amongst those in a position of leadership. Second, there is ever the need for lesser mortals to raise the question of what is true and just and what is not. No human, high or low, has any right to overrule in issues so important for all..

**Psalm**

This is the psalm that tradition attributes of David's penitence after the Beersheba sin, and it certainly expresses the real penitence of a sinner. The sin issue, as I often ask people to see, is not so much the blotting of one's copybook, so to speak, but rather the injustice and damage brought about by such human failure. It is an issue terribly skilfully avoided these days. At least that attempt is made by David.

**Epistle**

One of the important aspects of life missed or avoided by moderns is the fact that our prime response and responsibility is to community, long before it is to individual. Paul, as a Jew from way back, was very much aware of this aspect of life, and we side-step it all to our damage. Community tends to be lost so very easily in the vast canyons of today's cities, and the huge increase in world population – it is so easy to be lost in the crowd. (This is one of the reasons the ancient Jews had very scant respect for cities. Community was hugely important to them – and should be so for us.)

Not only is community an issue, but the contribution each person should make to that community, be it Church or be it village. Each and every one of us has a contribution to make, and if and when we withdraw it, we diminish the whole. There lies tragedy.

## GOSPEL

This sequel to last Sunday's Gospel passage focusses, not on the bread of life, but the terrible capacity of humans to find excuse for avoiding what they know to be true. The modern Christian *might* be forgiven for not catching sight of the feeding sign parallel with Moses, but a Jewish person then had no such excuse. Moses was so much part of their vision of life and faith. And the very sign that they were looking for had been right there in front of them and they refused its validity.

One of the most appalling factors that the Gospels point to so often, is the failure of those who were supposed to be people of faith to recognize God at work so close to them, even though all the clear evidence was there. It is appallingly easy for people who *think* that they know and understand the Scriptures to miss the reality because they want only to remain in their own narrow, safe and uninvolved channels. The hardest thing is that while such folk may not see it at all like that, the reality is so.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

It was only yesterday that I had consulted one of my very precious colleagues, about an issue of integrity and honesty and simple care of people that is raising its rather ugly head. How in the name of fortune does one try and raise an issue such as this, with any expectation of the person taking the matter on board. Sadly. Neither my skill n or my imagination rates anywhere near that of the prophet, Nathan. It is true, is it not, that the telling of a story may well get through, when something more straightforward does not.

We are talking about Christian people here, and still the business of wondering if people would even care is critical issue. The response from that mate of mine was not all that encouraging. I am no sinless or perfect person, but I am aware of the possibility of great damage of others if and when I see myself as all important.

What an horrific challenge for Nathan the prophet, to try and bring the adulterous King to book! We humans can manage so easily to justify all manner of bad behaviour by finding excuses that we tend to call reasons. It was a very skilful approach that the prophet used, raising the ire of the King by telling a story of clear and unmitigated injustice. This was done in such a way that, once that ire was raised, the gentle but telling '*you are the man*' made the issue unavoidable for the King. Nathan could still have lost his life over the incident, but the King was rather more honest than that.

Each of today's readings seem to offer some clear thought about this issue of living honestly in a dishonest world, which leads me to a first comment. I find myself increasingly impatient with those who denigrate 'religion' as some sort of escapist thing. Part of their reason, I suspect, is because any good humanist would see themselves as perfectly capable of coping with whatever life throws at them. With that I have no fight, for the Faith has nothing to do with cringing and fear and all that demeans. The Faith does have to do with finding the most effective and true way to operate as humans, and that can mean a fairly constant struggle against whatever and whoever is trying to take people in the opposite direction.

And there we have it – in the Gospel passage for today. There is ever the call for humans to reach their highest potential (and that for the common good!) but, even amongst people who are supposed to be religious – and read that as **real!** – there is often the attempt to avoid that reality.

Spend a few moments to look at what was going on there. It is not only leaders and 'important ones' who have to be jollied into seeing what they would prefer not, it is also the 'little people. In other words, all of us are sadly capable of bias and even bigotry. For whatever reason, we hold on to some fairly narrow views about things, and that creates huge tensions and conflict.

So the message from today's reading can be rather powerful: it is not just a question of how do I get others to see further than their nose? It is also a question of how far past my own nose do I see?

**Sentence**

Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us.

*Ephesians 5: 1*

**Collect**

Grant to us Lord, we beseech You, the spirit to think and do always such things as are right, that we, who cannot do anything that is good without You, may be enabled to live according to Your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**2 Samuel 18: 5 – 9, 14, 31 – 33**

**Psalm**

**130**

**Epistle**

**Ephesians 4: 25 – 5:2**

**Gospel**

**John 6: 35, & 41 – 51**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

**Old Testament Lesson**

It is a huge pity that the entire passage is not included in today's Reading. In fact, for any who are not aware of the lead-up to this cameo, a chapter or two before would be even better. But how do you do that in a Sunday service? David's son, Absalom, had rebelled, but anyone having a wayward child knows that – regardless of the situation – your children are your children are your children.

There is deep and profound passion here, and it is a measure of how God must feel with His wayward ones, yet the passion often has little or no effect on the isolating ones. That is the nature of love: very often it hurts the loving one more than it reaches the loved one.

**Psalm**

There is not a lot of escape from sadness and strife in life, even though there are those who require God (if there is one!) to smooth the path and make things easier. However, God does not follow that track very often, and seems uncaring if a person is left in the mess.

Two things emerge: the first is that –if pondered sensibly – a lousy experience, like that of David above, can help the Davids of this world to a more compassionate stance. It is the old story that the wounded healer is of more use to a sufferer than the person who has never 'been there, done that.'

**Epistle**

There is a fine line, is there not, between the do-gooder and the genuine person. This passage looks as if Paul was simply asking people to toe the goody-goody line. That sort of approach is no good to anyone!

What Paul is asking of people is that they reflect the characteristics of the Father, not so that their little souls will be squeaky-clean, but so that life and relationships around them will be rather healthier and beneficial to all. *You must be like Him.* There lies the nub, ...and the rub!

**Gospel**

The conflict continues – which must be a surprise for anyone pondering the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. If you had ever thought that the life and ministry of Jesus was easy and effective, then stop and think again. There is a crazy irony about the Faith Jesus came to offer. On the one hand, it is, without doubt, the very thing that people and life and history needed, and still do. On the other hand, there is and always has been a strange resistance to the Gospel. How easy it is to be like a pouting child, who refuses the very thing that he knows will be to his benefit!

It may be worth exploring this 'bread from heaven' business. Sure, it traces back to Moses and manna, and there is something of a dichotomy in the illustration. The manna was certainly God-given then

and saved Israel's skin. However, it was perfectly normal and natural stuff. Nothing whiz-bang here. However, 'God-given' means 'significant,' and that is the line to follow.

With Jesus, and the loaves and fishes, we can follow along the line of 'miracle,' and miss the point. What Jesus was underlining in this *sign*, σημεια – a pointer, not a miracle is how John described it, was that what He had to offer was more significant than that which Moses had to offer. The 'from heaven; business is not so much a matter of 'from up there' as it is a case of 'this is hugely important'

It was to avoid having to consider this 'bread from heaven' that many people stepped back. This reversal was not due to some 'theological' problem, though they tried to raise some. It was a simple and vital issue. Think on.

'The bread which I give is my own flesh, given for the life of the world.'

Stop and see that this is really rather threatening stuff. Here is the Lord not only saying but also doing: that reconciliation is found only by giving oneself away. Now that is dangerous. If I do that, I run the risk of losing the lot (of what is important to **me**, but may not be important in the overall scheme of things.) Any challenge to 'give myself away' has the potential of my losing the lot. On the other hand, my refusal to operate in this way means that each and any relationship into which I enter will be totally unsatisfying either to the party of the other part, or even to myself.

Please spend more than a little time pondering the value of the forgiveness mentioned in the Psalm. It is a factor that tends to be seen only in this Faith once delivered, and with all due respect tends neither to be understood properly nor acted upon significantly. This is no trite or easy path. This is the path that takes everything into account, and requires significant action both from both perpetrator and victim.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

It may well be hard for someone reading this to see how the particular subject under review stems from the Readings for today. However, I ask your patience, and your thought, as we head in a direction I suspect those readings lead us.

Over the years, I have had great difficulty standing in front of a congregation and reading that tale of Absalom's death and David's powerful lament. The very reading of it brings tears to one's eyes, as the profound sense of loss is conveyed so powerfully and passionately. How does a person cope with the loss of a child, especially when all the hopes and dreams for that young person have vanished. (My middle sister died comparatively young and when my father was still alive. To see the pain in my father's heart was moving beyond belief. 'Why was it not me rather than her?' he cried. And did so till his own death.

There may well be those who can simply let the deceased go, putting it down to life, or stiff cheese, or whatever. But if that sort of situation is encountered, one is left wondering where love is in all that. In the OT story, there appears to be no lack of love, now does there!

What is love, really? It is a strange question to ask many moderns, who – from what I see and read – consider love something that 'I deserve.' It is a requirement for ME, and if the lover does not offer when I need, then I will go looking somewhere else. The fact that I will never find what I am looking for tends to be regarded as a matter of the failure *of other people*.

There lies the rub. Love is NOT something I can demand or require from others. It is only something that I can (and should) give. However, if that giving is required of me, what happens when I run dry? The answer is rather fascinating. You don't run dry – for you find, to your surprise and delight, that refreshment comes back to you. But this does not become evident until you stick your neck out.

I have told the story, previously, of a pastor of a Church who was ejected because of a rather large problem that he had. The fact that he was disqualified as pastor came as a terrible blow, for it meant the collapse of his position and role, and the apparent rejection of himself as a person. According to his gospel, this was the end, there was no more, nor was there the slightest light at the end of the tunnel.

When the chance came to talk with the man, I offered the consolation that, in my experience at least, as with others, there was a strong chance that the outcome of this quite bitter situation could be that his capacity to care for and pastor people would be hugely enhanced. Because of this tragic situation, he would

be able to feel and know how others felt when they, too, were going through the 'valley of the shadow.' I found it appalling that he could not even begin to see this. His was a triumphalist Gospel, and if things go wrong, it was obvious to him that God had turned His back on him. *Isn't it strange the extent to which people can narrow their vision of God and Scripture to their own very narrow ideologies.*

The very thing that could release this bloke was the very thing that those turning their back on Jesus in today's Gospel for the day. Those people who complained about Jesus 'giving Himself' were not worried about what Jesus was doing. **They were deeply concerned that they would be required to operate on the same wave-length. Give yourself away?** In today's world this is seen to be the absolute idiocy. In reality, it is nothing of the sort.

**So** when a person begins to see that Jesus gave Himself away, not to be nice but because that it the only process whereby we humans can relate at any depth, then the apparent idiocy becomes the remarkable wisdom. Here is the only process by which forgiveness and reconciliation is possible, because it is the only level at which we can really rest and relax and trust each other.

Mind you, the risk level does remain high: for reconciliation to be accomplished still does require the similar and significant action from both sides of the argument.

**Sentence**

*Jesus said, 'Those who eat my flesh and drink My blood abide in Me, and I in them.'*      **John 6: 56**

**Collect**

Almighty God, You have given Your only Son to be for us both a sacrifice for sin and also an example of godly life: give us grace that we may always thankfully receive the benefits of His sacrifice, and also daily endeavour to follow the blessed steps of His most holy life; through the same Jesus, Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**1 Kings 2: 10 –12 & 3:1 – 14**

**Psalm**

**111**

**Epistle**

**Ephesians 5: 11 – 21**

**GOSPEL**

**John 6: 51 – 58**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

**Old Testament Lesson**

You may find this rather naughty of me, but I have long found difficulty with this tale of Solomon. Is all this a story of Hebrew propaganda, or is it the terribly human business of a person so idolised that he believed the garbage himself. There is enormous tragedy in this humble King who started off well, but became not just victim of his own propaganda but a person so insecure as to go searching for witches and wizards.

Perhaps the lesson here is precisely that: beware the fascination of false advertising, beware the danger of idolatry, and for the huge capacity for such stuff to lead you up 'garden paths' that are very damaging indeed. You have far too many modern examples of such disintegration to miss the point, do you not!

**Psalm**

I wonder quite how this Psalm (and most of the others) strike you, and what you make of them. One of my pet hates is the modern tendency to talk about (and sing) praises to God, when such talk and song tends to be little more than --- *am I allowed to say 'drivel?'* All the right and holy words are there in such songs, but I am sure that the singers have no idea what they are on about. It all tends to mimic modern 'love' songs, -- which have less to do with love than with selfish goals.

Stop long enough, please, to wonder quite what is exciting the author of this psalm. Yes, it is God and yes it is His wonderful acts and covenants – but I suspect that few moderns would see past their almost self-imposed narrow vision. Acts, covenants, justices and commands. What is the focus?

We live in a world of scam, spin, cover-up and propaganda, do we not? In a world where it is not easy to discover what the real truth is. Not only does this situation produce angst and anger, but it also is hugely productive of uncertainty, lack of trust and injustice.

Now read this Psalm again and see just *what* the author focusses on. What he is rejoicing in is the fact, as he sees it, that as long as God lives, the old verities will remain solid and sound. And since God is for ever, the old verities are for ever, and with that the author can cope in a lousy world.

That *is* something to be glad about.

**Epistle**

If you have followed me so far, then I suspect that this snippet from the Epistle says is all with quite some clarity. The reason that the Christian soul should live out these characteristics is because they reflect the character of God Himself. And people are far more likely to understand people's actions than they are likely to understand Christian jargon!

## Gospel

One of the saddest things, it seems to me, is the extent to which the Christian Church in all its fragmented parts, have missed the point of these powerful and moving words of Jesus. He Who is Bread of life to all fragmented humanity and Who points to it all in Eucharist and Sacrament, has been turned into the standard of division because 'if you do not believe in the Eucharist the way I believe in the Eucharist, then you and I have nothing in common.' The abuse of the sacrament in this way has been little less than blasphemous.

Is it a matter of Western inability to comprehend things other than literally? What did Jesus mean when He talked about flesh and blood, bread and wine? Surely the great point in all this is Jesus' *giving of Himself*. This is diametrically opposite to the usual human way. That human delusion runs something like 'trust me and do what I tell you to do,' which translates roughly 'I will rip you off even as you think I am barracking for you.'

Do you now see how Solomon **started off** the Jesus way, and prostituted himself into the good old human way. This process is pathologically easy to follow, and easier to justify to one's self. Thank the Lord that Jesus did not, but also be aware of the fact that part of the resistance to Jesus, in His own day and age, came from the fact that people were not even prepared to listen to this 'giving' business. They wanted only to GET.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

I have often commented about this strange business of being a parish priest, and one of the most fascinating aspects of the role is the contact with people. Ordinary human people, of all shapes and sizes, colours and creeds, attitudes and actions. Best of all has been the long contact with so many, over years and sometimes decades, in watching them (and me) grow and develop, and often their children. In all this life and observation, there has been delight and sadness, for we humans are very much a matter of the choices we make and the directions we head. There are times when our choices are limited; there are other times when the choices facing us are so wide that they can be frightening.

One particular person with whom I have had to do was a young bloke who was far from stupid, and had both brains and imagination. It must be over 35 years since I met him, in a situation that was very far from pleasant. 'The oldest teenager in town' he described himself, and he was then just into his thirties. He had the potential for almost anything he chose, but for reasons best known to himself, tended to select the lowest common denominator. So life tended to be something of a tragic mess, with some bright highlights, and it is only in his later years that he has matured in any way.

What is it that determines what we humans do with ourselves? Recently, in our State, some of the most horrific crimes have been sheeted home to a person's childhood or traumatic events back then. It is almost as if any personal choice or commitment has nothing to do with the situation. Removal of even the slightest hint of responsibility seems to be the overriding direction that courts and perceptions go. "It has to do with genetics, not choice. It has to do with trauma, not decision." Or that is what is sold to us. And while it has to be said that life can be very much 'a bugger' the real question, surely, is what do you do with it all?

The old story of Solomon should be fairly well known even among present-day Christians. Few of the baby-boom generation would have had a lot to do with Sunday School, so the tale would have had to be read to them, or oblique references to it made known.

Solomon would certainly have been a child of his day, and being the son of a king even then would have had both its advantages and dis! All sorts of opportunity would have been there, and little of today's gold-fish bowl situation would have applied. His father was not the squeakiest clean one would ever imagine, but he did have a lot of redeeming features. It could be said that there was some sort of balance there, as there tends to be for most of us humans. And the start that Solomon has, as the tyro king, bade well, as today's passage illustrates. Early in his reign, the young man may well have been somewhat overwhelmed by the challenge in front of him. It is one thing to grow up in the shadow of a great person; it is a very different thing to find yourself in the same role. There is both a simple honesty and a touching humility in this tale of choice. It goes without saying that the choice Solomon made that day was wise, and sensible, and very considerably self-less.

But the tragedy lay in the choices that this same person made, as the years passed and the vicissitudes of life made their marks. It was not easy being king, but then it has to be said that there are disadvantages in being *anyone*. I do not know how long ago it was that I discovered that the question was not 'what have you got?' but 'what matters is what you do with what you have got, with what you are made of.' For instance, one of my life-long mates was born with all the disadvantages you could possibly think of. His great gift to me – even as a child – was to be able to see past disability and disadvantage. He would have had every right to decide that the world owed him, and some of our mates in Primary School were quite certain that this is how he operated. Far from it. This most remarkable of men long know that you could only deal with the clay with which you were 'issued,' so to speak. So his choices, from early youth, have been very much part of his development to a stunning maturity. His story is quite a contrast with Solomon, and with that other man I have known for half the time.

It is easy, perhaps, to dissect someone else, and decide where and what went wrong. In Solomon's case, it is surely a matter of increasingly self-protective reactions to events and people, and a downward spiral into what these days would be classified as mental illness. The last state of this man was far, far worse than the first. I may well be damned for saying it, but his refusal to accept responsibility for his actions, and his tendency to blame others, left him more and more out of touch with the very reality that would have given him the chance of redemption. The further I move from reality the closer I get to the fairies. And most of that process, whilst designed to be self-protective, becomes very much the opposite.

Self, or others. It is the primal choice. And it contains within it the seeds of growth or of disintegration. The ancients knew that, and have done for millennia, and sadly, one of the lessons we learn from history is that we do not learn the lessons of history. The real issues that provide life and future and stability for humanity, individual or corporate, are simple matters like integrity, and justice, fairness and compassion. Give those away and all you have left is ..... what you see around you, rather too much of the time.

So much of what really is Gospel tends to be lost these days, in the almost trance-like mantra of 'justification by faith.' The next time I hear someone preach that 'Jesus has done it all, You need to do nothing but believe!' I will scream. That sort of Gospel tends to reduce to nothing less than a refined form of utter selfishness. And Gospel it is not.

Look again at the Jesus of today's Gospel, a Jesus Who commits and gives Himself totally, in direct and utter contradistinction to the mores of life today, and then. Ponder again the Jesus of the sacrament Who gives Himself totally (if I give you my body and blood, I have absolutely NOTHING left to give!) Line this sort of stuff up against today's cheap gospel that misses most of the point and all of the life.

This wider Gospel is still, and always will be, a matter of grace. Divine grace. Any other god would have decided that humans are so stupid and self-obsessed that the only way forward would be to wipe them all out and start all over. Divine grace chooses the far harder path of gentle persuasion. And offers life, not wipe-out.

And, as the old Psalmist saw so very clearly, that is something to get REALLY excited about.

**Sentence**

Jesus said, "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life."  
*John 6:63*

**Collect**

Creator God, You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in You: teach us to offer ourselves to Your service, that here we may have Your peace, and in the world to come. May see You face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord  
**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**1 Kings 8:22-30 & 41-43**

**Psalm**

**84**

**Epistle**

**Ephesians 6: 10 – 20**

**GOSPEL**

**John 6: 56 – 69**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

**Old Testament Lesson**

It is a great pity that some of the readings, Sunday by Sunday, are not far longer, especially if and when people are unaware of the context out of which the readings come. Here we're presented with part of Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple so recently (then) built.

It is well worth looking closely at this prayer for it is indicative of what we may call the theology of the author of these words if not of the particular time in Hebrew history. There is a wide recognition of the nature of God, which points to the nature of human response to God. There is also a wider vision of the world than may have been expected, especially when it comes to the acceptance of people of other cultures.

One of the saddest things, from where I sit, tends to be the failure of religious people (of whatever Faith) to be true to the vision presented by that Faith. I have to include myself in that comment, too, by the way. I find that being a disciple offers little other than wider and wider learning curves!

**Psalm**

I recall, even as a tiny choir boy, being affected by the vision in this psalm of swallows and sparrows. The unexpected connection between the mundane factors of life such even as birds, and the worship and place of God, brought everything down to a startling reality for me, even then. Nothing is outside the care of God, nor the sweep of His vision. Many, many years later, I met a remarkable Jewish lady (who would make an excellent Christian and Anglican) who quietly offered me her vision of the intimacy of God for the tiniest aspects of her life, and even of her fowls. Nothing was left out or unimportant.

**Epistle**

The imagery in this passage ought to be very well known, and while swords and breastplates may be passé, the point of the imagery is not. One thing that I find difficult, for many people miss the point, is all that talk about the devil. I have long had the strong conviction that – in spite of centuries of Christian tradition, that whenever Scripture, Old Testament or New, refers to Satan, Devil, Lucifer or similar, it is not on about some fearsome force from outside us. Satan, in Biblical terms, is always on about our terribly human capacity for choosing evil. Whenever I set myself up against God and against you, then I am being Satanic. Adamic, if you like. I can never blame anyone or anything else for my sin and failure. I can do nothing other than put up my hand.<sup>1</sup> I find this to be both enormous release and greater responsibility. In other words, please think through Biblical imagery.

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<sup>1</sup> If that gives you the horrors, please feel free to get in touch.

## GOSPEL

This passage may well provide some confusion for people today. On the one hand it is not hard to see how folk then may well have been put off by Jesus' words about eating and drinking *of Himself*. On the surface it sounds horrific. But was that what alienated people from Him? I doubt it very much, for it would hardly be the sort of challenge that Jesus would have offered. So what is really being said?

If I give you my body and blood, metaphorically speaking, then I give you everything that makes me 'me.' We become more and more similar in some ways. It all implies both a giving and a receiving, and it implies closeness or even an intimacy. But the greatest challenge is that to which Jesus calls people: *to be giving sorts of people*. Now this is another sort of challenge indeed, and it is a particularly unattractive one especially in the sort of world we live in. It is a very risky path to travel, it makes a person rather vulnerable to others, and one is left wondering if there is any benefit for me in such a mode of living. Small wonder that people decided that Jesus was 'too much.'

The difficulty for people like the Twelve was that they were aware of the fact that, whilst there may well be disadvantages in following Christ, there was no one they had encountered before Who had anything like the breadth of vision or the solidity of goal. (As I have often said to people, if there is no life after this, I still must follow Christ, for He alone makes so much sense for living right here and now. No one else, none that I have ever heard of, even begins to make as much sense of life and relationships as Jesus.)

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

I find a tremendous sadness for so many people of our own day and age, for there seems to be both a longing for something to make substantial sense in life, and yet a willingness to commit to the most shallow and even idiotic schemes that others come up with. It seems to have started a long time ago, with that large community of people from the USA who were followers of Jimmy Jones (I think it was) who suicided together in one of the Latin countries. The Branch Davidian group seems to have been not dissimilar, and there is certain to be mobs of other such groups.

The quotation has been offered before, even in these notes: someone far wiser than I first penned the words. '*When people stop believing in God, they do not go on to believe in nothing. They will go on to **believe in ANYTHING**.*' It may not be quite as bland as that, but I do know of lots of people who talk about their spirituality, and yet they attach themselves to whatever seems easiest and as least committing as possible. Then they try and fill their lives with all sorts of frantic business, in order to hide themselves from the unsatisfactory nature of their chosen ism. I have more than a sneaky suspicion that this particular path has been chosen, because of the conviction that there is nothing at all substantial to fill the perceived gap.

How do the readings for today offer any substantial answers? Well, I suspect part of the answer is look at what we have and think about them.

That OT Reading reporting the blessing of the Temple of Solomon has something to start us thinking. Part of that is Solomon's perception of God. One of the great difficulties I have *these* days, is the way lots of Christians get their nickers in a knot whenever the very idea of God is questioned, holy hands go up in horror! It is a sad state of affairs if things are not permitted to be questioned!

What really is Solomon (or his reporters) saying? That they are convinced that there is a constancy in life, so that a person or a community can rely on certain values being important. As Solomon looked back not only to his father's time, but also as far as Abraham<sup>2</sup> he was aware that the faith he professed (or the sense of constancy in life) had considerable validity. One can only make such assessments when it is based on experience. Such things are of little help if they are simply a latest fad. One of the more fascinating things about the Hebrew Faith is that it was based, not on some sort of castle in the air, but on the sum total of all that happened in real life and experience. It was by observation and experience that Israel gained its

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<sup>2</sup> From Abraham to David would be something like 1,000 years – not long in one way but sufficient to establish some realities!

knowledge of God, and tested that knowledge constantly up against the realities of its life and history. Hebrew Faith was not primarily a set of rules at all. Those things stemmed from that prior experience just referred to. The point of this exercise is simply to remind ourselves, if reminder is needed, that God is to be found in the ordinary business of life and experience – rather than in some isolated and rarified atmosphere.

The Psalm then takes us on a similar journey, into reality and not into poetic nonsense. On occasion, there have been birds trapped in Church buildings in the middle of services, and people tend to see that as distraction – making worship difficult. Surely the Psalmist experienced similar ‘invasions’ at worship, and tended to see this quite natural and normal phenomenon<sup>3</sup> - that even birds were part of the scheme of things and ought not to be left out. The Psalmist’s joy tends to be based on his (or her!) sense of certainty that God’s way of doing things is of far greater benefit to humans than the sorts of lesser values that humans tends to choose.

Even Paul, in this memorable passage from Ephesians, points up his preference for what might well be called ‘God-values’ to ‘Adamic’ or more destructive human ones. When it is all boiled down, the struggle, for the Christian, is to live and uphold God-values in a world that prefers more self-driven ones. It is the classic good versus evil scenario, and if any Christian wants to side-step that, then the Gospel is emasculated. Such a situation is the classic satanic minimisation of the Gospel and Faith.

So, as we have seen, today’s rather passionate Gospel is actually underlining exactly the same thing. **If** I am to choose to follow Christ, then I also choose to give myself away for the sake of others, to leave myself vulnerable – but also well aware of the fact that selfish (ie satanic, devilish, cosmic) living is in the end self-destructive, and that God’s way of doing things is ultimately beneficial to all.

Once I get past thinking of the Gospel as my passport to heaven, and see it as offering such a different way of living as to be redemptive for the whole world, then my blinkers are removed, and the Gospel seen more truly. It is a great challenge to the status quo.

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<sup>3</sup> I guess the word here should be occasion or event.