

Sentence

If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God

Col. 3:1

Collect

Living God, Judge of all, You have placed in our hands the wealth we call our own; through Your Spirit, give us wisdom so that our possessions may not be a curse, but a means of blessing in our lives. Grant his through Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Hosea 11: 1 – 11

PSALM

107: 1 – 9 and 43

EPISTLE

Colossians 3: 1 – 11

GOSPEL

Luke 12: 13 – 21

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

One has to go back a long way in Hebrew history to reach Hosea. This is all before the loss of the Northern Kingdom, so it is before 712 BC. It is important to note this, as this prophet lived long before, say, (Second) Isaiah and Jeremiah. So the imprint of the love of God is hugely significant, marking quite a sea-change from earlier Old Testament. Hosea's experience with his prostitute wife provides the stunning impetus to see JHWH in a very new and bright light.

The reference to the cities of the plain, Admah and Zeboyian, reflect Hebrew history – or mythology, - has to do with the previously-accepted view that God, in His anger, wiped out those towns near the Dead Sea. Even so, there is emerging here that remarkable characteristic that runs right through Jewish thought, that we are held responsible for our follies and may well bear the weight of them. How else do we learn properly anyhow?

Psalm

In such typical Hebrew manner, even the Psalmist underlines the need for us all to stop and review our own history and mistakes, and thus see the goodness of the hand of God upon us. This crying to the Lord is no panic-stricken response of an infant, but the recognition of adults that the path they had chosen so wilfully was not only foolish but very destructive. Repentance will always encounter forgiveness. I is the way God works with us, and we ignore that at our own risk.

Epistle

In my religious and spiritual youth, I was encouraged to understand this passage as the need to turn my back on ordinary life and to seek escape into the spiritual. It seemed to work for some of my friends, but it never really hit airspace with me. Small wonder! The entire faith, Hebrew and Christian, is very much the **incarnational faith**, for here and now – for here is where we are. Never lose sight of the fact that Jesus became one of us.

That which 'belongs to the earth' is describing the Adamic way of operating. Self-directed and self-obsessed. Out of this comes all those most unpleasant things listed by Paul. When one is 'raised with Christ,' those things which are above are really the different way of operating, no longer self-directed, but self-giving. It is the heavenly way of operating, if you like to put it that way. It is no easy path to travel, but it is remarkably redemptive, not only for the practitioner, but also for anyone on the receiving end. And as Paul indicates in that last verse here, it removes all of the false but damaging barriers that we humans tend to erect against each other. Pity Paul did not add the gender one as well here, as he often does elsewhere.

GOSPEL

If you are game, just sit and watch yourself as you read this passage. It is especially apt in this current day and age for us. It is strange how the hip-pocket nerve somehow shuts off, when Jesus mentions the cold hard cash thing, largely because it constitutes one of the last untouched areas of our discipleship.

If ever there is a time when family tensions become more taut, it is when the olds die and the next generation is left to divide the spoils. Dollars very quickly replace humanity, and the result is a far from pretty sight. We can argue all we like about the way – these days – one needs money, but it must still feel somewhat shallow when we can see on our TV screens that so many millions of others are so much further behind the eight-ball.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I am sure that I have told you the story how, after the passing of one of my most devout aunts and uncles, my sister and I had the task of executing the respective wills of our dearly loved departed. In the course of that clearing up, a large bookcase needed clearing, with the usual display of favourite books of those relatives. However, behind the bookcase, wrapped up in brown paper, was a copy of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. The book was banned four decades before, because of the vivid descriptions of sexual encounters between said Lady and her gardener. My sister and I smirked at each other knowingly. As the job in hand took a couple of days or more, I took the opportunity of reading the banned book, and was left wondering why –although vivid – this book was not allowed to circulate. It may well have reduced or even removed the impact of the sexual revolution of the '60s!

My reason for mentioning this here, is that the author also had a great deal to say about the economic strictures of the times, that kept poor people reduced to misery, whilst the wealthy thrive on their poverty. Lawrence was livid about the disparity and injustice, *and that may have added to the reasons for the banning of the book.*

Even Christians have little difficulty pondering matters of faith, as long as it all stays in the realm of what we like to call the 'spiritual.' But the moment it all invades our privacy and other important areas, we find all manner of reasons for putting up the barricades. Not least is this defensiveness obvious when it comes to our reserves of cash and other assets. Blind spots emerge in very large lumps.

Not so with Jesus. He too, was unimpressed with the tendency of those well off to defend their wealth, in spite of the sight, right before their eyes, of those less fortunate. Certainly there seemed to be a remarkable absence of the belligerent poor such as are in evidence these days. But Jesus was quite in line with the early OT prophets in demanding a far more honest approach to fairness and equity in dealings with fellow-humans. To refuse that was to stick one's neck out for a cultural or civilisational disaster. And who has not made the comment that the Third World War will be between the have-nots and the haves!

Sentence

Watch and be ready, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

Matt 24:42

Collect

Kindle in our hearts, Father, the same faith that impelled Abraham to set out from his home and to live as a pilgrim in a foreign land. As we, like him, look for the city that none but You can design and build, keep us watchful of Your Son's coming, that we may be found faithful stewards. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Isaiah 1:1 and 10 – 20

PSALM

50:1 – 8 and 23 –24

EPISTLE

Hebrews 11: 1 – 3 and 8 -16

GOSPEL

Luke 12: 32 – 40

NOTES ON THE READINGS.....

Old Testament

Although Isaiah may be one of the best-known names of the OT prophets, one suspects that precious little is known about him. And one of the factors concerning this man, once known, may well add impact to all he said, did and wrote.

Isaiah was one of the upper echelon in Jewish life during the reigns of Uzziah *et al.* One of the first families, involved in the political and religious life of the time, and therefore a person of some power and prestige. However, anyone ever involved in such circles will be most aware of the fact that any attempt even by such a person to point to or to suggest change, however minimal, would create enormous uproar. *Status quo* is guarded religiously in such circles, and all this makes the prophet's words and efforts stupendous.

Try offering change in any religious or ecclesiastical circle these days, and you are likely to be confronted with the proverbial brick wall. It is all about immovable masses and irresistible forces. *Been there, done that?* Anyhow, the point is to watch with bated breath – and maybe try to head in similar directions. Isaiah's problem was not the lack of observances of the faith; **it was an almost total absence of reality in whatever was offered.** *Those who worship must worship in spirit and in truth*and none of that was going on here.

Psalm

Although the Psalmist covers the same or similar territory, he was aware of the need for complete honesty in worship.

Epistle

This stunning passage points up both the backbone of faith and the fact that it operates in the real world and not in some dreamtime. It almost needs no comment, but to say that it is worth taking the time to read the whole of Hebrews 11, and a little more to boot.

Gospel

Two thoughts come to mind, reading this: the first is that Jesus never seemed to worry about any need for 'big battalions.' Just a handful of faithful and honest souls can change all sorts of things. But they do need to be committed and almost one-eyed, alert and watchful. *And know what they are on about.*

NOTES FOR A SERMON

Quite a large number of years ago, - 25 or more – my wife was working in a Convent for elderly nuns, who were confronted with the fact that, in that provincial city where there were, even then large

convent buildings, instead of 200 hundred or more trainee nuns, there were but four. It was heart-break time for those dear ladies who had given their lives in the service of the Lord, and who could see absolutely no future for nuns, even after centuries of history and commitment. What does a person do when they are faced with what appears a dead end without hope?

The answer was really quite remarkable – and a delight really. They had prayed about things and decided that, since God was clearly not bringing womanhood to an end **MUST** have something just as interesting and rather more challenging in line. The basis for their confidence lay in the fact that whilst it may be a change of direction possibly difficult to cope with, if God was in it, then what are we waiting for,

For very many Christians in rural areas especially, there is the rather scary business of watching little old congregations die off, and young people apparently uninterested in either community or Church. Service Clubs, around here at least, are struggling with the same dilemma, and are closing at really a rate of knots. One may pontificate on the fact that less and less people are interested in serving the community in any way much, and that the lack of responsibility it all but appalling. Whilst there may be a certain amount of truth in that, there is also something rather more radical going on, I suspect.

Had you lived in Isaiah's time, you had a double whammy. Not only could Isaiah see an end to all that had been traditional, he was also faced with the community of faith doing little more than going through the motions. The second whammy – more to do with Second Isaiah – was the threat of exile if and when the nation collapsed, and that was only a matter of time. In other words, the reality faced by people of the 8th and 6th Centuries BC was the challenge to be really the people of faith, or face enormous and powerful changes.

As we are more aware 2,500 years later, God is Lord of the life and defeater of death, and what looks like *kaput* becomes the pathway to something newer and fresher and far more significant. The problem lies in our terribly human *penchant* to fight to retain the traditional way of doing things, and so avoid the move away from our comfort zone.

In other words, we all need a rather closer look at the process of rebuilding after the Exile, and after the Resurrection. What is harder and harsher, is the need to realize that there **cannot be a resurrection without a death**. Nor does that make it clear what is likely to follow after that death, however long-drawn-out.

Sentence

‘Is not my word like fire?’ says the Lord, ‘and like a hammer that breaks rocks in pieces?’

Jeremiah 23:29

Collect

Ever-living God, increase in us Your gift of faith, that, forsaking all that hinders us, we may run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Isaiah 5: 1 – 7

PSALM

80: 1 – 2. and 8 – 19

EPISTLE

Hebrews 11: 29 – 12:2

GOSPEL

Luke 12: 49 – 59

NOTES ON THE READINGS

If you want to know what the emphasis is, in today’s readings, then it is screaming at you, is it not? And it has to do with faith, faithfulness and tenacity in the face of whatever contrary pressure. Most of all it is about realizing that you have a God Who hangs in there totally. And that is both moving and encouraging.

Old Testament

I still remember the first time that I read this passage, however long ago it was. It brought tears to my eyes and still does, sixty-odd years later. What a passionate and powerful parable it is, and what idiots those ancients must have been to miss the point. Trouble is, we remain idiotic somewhat as we fail to learn or even listen to the lessons of history. And the Lord looks, not for pious religiosity, but for justice, truth and equity. Where will He find that, today?

Psalm

For all the parodies you see and hear about the Hebrew-Christian Faith, there remains the stunning (to me at least) evidence that even way back in early Psalms, people realized the need for them to take responsibility for the faith and its proper practice. If I fiddle with it, leave out important parts of it, I will enter into a desert of my own making. I may try to blame God for it, but I fool only myself.

Epistle

So great a cloud of witnesses the translation of the Authorized Version still echoes in my memory as this powerful passage comes to life once again. What stalwarts there have been in the history of the faith, Hebrew and Christian, and often they must wonder whether they wasted their time. We do NOT live in a noble time, now do we, but in an age that seems to worship mediocrity and selfishness. If ever we wonder why the Church is having a lean time of it, I suspect it has a lot to do with the lack of commitment of so many of its followers.

Gospel

And here is the challenge *par excellence!* No room for a gentle Jesus meek and mild here, as the Lord confronts the entire culture and civilisation of His day. There is no room for apathy here, but rather decision and choice. It is a side of Jesus from which, all too often, we turn our back. If and when we do turn our back, we slip into some sort of mediocrity.

The Faith is not designed as some sort of eternal self-protection. It is about changing the world in which we live, for the better, but gently and not with force. The change needed by this torn-apart world of ours begins inside each human being, and that means me And you.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

Back at a time when dinosaurs ruled the earth, I was a clerk in an accountancy firm in Sydney. One lunchtime walking up Martin Place (as it was then known) towards the popular Presbyterian Church further east, I was confronted by an older adult when demanded to know if I was saved. My Scripture Union badge, duly polished out of its brain, must surely have been evidence enough, but that bloke wanted my answer in clear and ringing terms. As a shy 15-year-old, I was not sure how to deal with the encounter, except to comply with the pressure and answer in the affirmative. It was a singularly unpleasant experience, and I can only wish it had happened when I was more mature in the Faith. The reason for telling the tale, ancient history though it is, is simply to underline the utter poverty of that particular and narrow view of what it means to be Christian. Sadly, although it is long since time when those dinosaurs disappeared, that antediluvian view of the Faith remains – in spite of being so out-of-touch with the Biblical realities.

It brings us back to a subject dealt with previously here, too. The prime reason for the Faith, Hebrew and Christian, was not to get people to heaven, but to redeem the very world in which we now live and move and have our being.

There is nothing new about people's perceptions of the mess which best describes the disaster of human relations, from personal to international. Some have called it 'the human dilemma,' while more people, I understand, seem to regard it as the reason why the chaos theory seems to hold sway. However, this is the very bullet that the ancient Hebrews bit, so far ahead of their time were they, and expressed their answers to the question in the old creation stories. Moderns make fun of their sagas, but that only illustrates the failure to listen to what is being said there. It is the stunning attempt to diagnose the source of that human dilemma, and thus to move towards an answer relevant and effective. Such a project as that is not to be sneezed at!

Today's OT Lesson also faces the same issues. Here is not simply a tale about a god who does his charley because his people do not obey him. Here is a yearning JHWH who longs for people to be honest enough to see the damage and havoc they create when they refuse to respond truly to life and to other people. It is a stunning thing to realize that, way back in the centuries before Christ, alone of religious societies, Israel was aware of the need for justice, truth, and balance in relationships. Here, in Isaiah's parable of the vineyard, is a profoundly moving illustration of the sensed need for reconciliation, even within the Jewish community.

Even the Psalmist for today is aware of the stresses and strains of ordinary life, and the tenuous nature of Israel's existence. Mind you, I suspect that the same author is wanting to place the responsibility for Israel's mess on Israel's God, --- and he is not alone in that myopic view. However he does, at least, see the result if not the cause.

Now while the author of the letter to the Hebrews does not focus much on the critical issues, he does underline the need for those of faith to be willing and committed to the overall crisis, and be prepared to do whatever needs to be done. Faith is never a matter of blind obedience to *je ne sais pas qua* – but is very much a matter of being aware of the basic and important issues, and remaining true to them whatever the contrary pressure.

A recent illustration of that showed up not far from here in recent years. Two priests, one of whom is a valued colleague and friend, raised the issue of child abuse and the need to deal with the enormous damage being done. Both men, and doubtless other supporters of them, were denigrated and despised, in the attempt to have the matter disappear into the ether. I suspect it may have been easier for those guys to give in to the great pressure, but, thank God, they did not. It must have been utterly exhausting, mentally and physically, but they persisted, and the whole ugly business is in the process of being resolved. Thank God for faithful people.

Now do we begin to see the wider impact of Jesus' words about having come to set fire on the earth. No satisfaction with *status quo* here, but the clear and sensed need for radical change and movement. Not only so, but Jesus saw clearly that even people closely related and tied together would react differently to the need and challenge of change. So there was great forcefulness in Jesus as He pointed to the need for such movement, and yet there was a distinct lack of force in the process He pointed to.

The first step, if this passage is any guide, is the need to be aware of the situation in all its nuances and aspects. Jesus' emphasis on this need to be aware of events and factors and ramifications tends to be

downplayed by many Christians, and diverted into strange alleyways by some others. I remain appalled at the extent to which 'end of the world' scenarios seem to fill the vision of some groups and sects. So here is a call to get our own focus and activity straight – and take time to do so wisely.

Sentence

You, O Lord, are my hope, my trust from my youth. Upon You have I leaned since my birth

Psalm 71: 5 – 6

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, there here we may have peace, and in the world to come, may see You face to face, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Jeremiah 1: 4 – 10

Psalm

71: 1- 6

Epistle

Hebrews 12: 1 – 29

GOSPEL

Luke 13: 10 – 17

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

It is more than a pity that we tend to be less than familiar with the Scriptures, because that is to miss out on so much information and so much of our calling. That business of being called ‘*before I formed you in the womb*’ was not so much a case of being special, but rather it was (and is for everyone I suspect) a matter of *having a purpose in life* even before life begins. Not all are called to be prophets, of course, but each person has her or his role to play – not as some self-centred individual but as a contributor to the community.

Not even youth or inexperience was seen to be negative: for how can we have experience unless we have experience, and once we have it, there is an opportunity to be that sort of contributor mentioned above. (Note, mind you, that even prophets were not valued in their lifetime.....)

Psalm

Why ever is it that the general perception of believing in God is that it provides some sort of comfort and support? There is very little in Biblical writings to encourage that sort of view. Not even here in the psalm, for what is really being said, seems to me, is that here is a writer who is aware of the fact that God represents all that is permanent and valid in a world where very little of those values are held. I guess it is support in a way, but it is also an awareness that to be a disciple of JHWH is to be running somewhat against the stream of contemporary thought and life. Not to be contrary, but to point to and uphold rather better values.

Epistle

Never be surprised if you find the writings of this epistle rather difficult to follow. I imagine that one would need to be a first-century Jew to catch sight of most of his references and nuances. However, from this distance in time and culture, it is possible, is it not, to draw his conclusions: whilst there is no fear in responding to God, there remains considerable responsibility in standing for what ever remains true and eternal. One may muck around with minor things, but one can never really bend the truth or other ancient verities without running the risk of damage either to oneself or to those around us. *This reminds me of the quite interesting confessions of those who led the ‘flower power’ movement of a generation ago, who now are more than sorry that they led so many up garden paths.*

Gospel

This passage (or similar ones from the other Gospels) often hit airspace in the argument against myopic religion of whatever sort. I do not know quite why it is, but there is often a trend that makes ‘super-religious’ people into quite supercilious and narrow individuals. Is it the pressure to conform to some narrow way, or is it the sensed need to control others? Jesus was really very tart about that capacity of narrow Judaism so to distort the faith that it failed to see humans as humans, and reduced them to test-cases or something less than human anyhow. In our day and age, the persistence of fundamentalism is showing up as

increasingly dangerous, and that applies whether the fundamentalism is expressed in religious, political, scientific or economic terms. People are people are people, whatever the situation and regardless of the risk.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I was watching something on TV recently, in fact a couple of somethings, which had to do with the Holocaust and with war generally. Much of the theme of the documentaries had to do with the almost basic necessity for those who indulged in such hideous activities to reduce their competitors to sub-human levels or less, in order to justify (to themselves) their course of action in destroying them.

There is nothing new in this: anyone who lived through WW2 will know the fact of propaganda, and its capacity to bend the perception of ordinary (unthinking) people to what was held to be the country's best interests. It goes without saying that the same process is clearly visible in our own day and age, when it comes to smaller scale wars being run around the planet. The huge and living danger is the *reductio* of humans to such a hideous degree that none of their arguments or actions are valid and so they need to be destroyed by us who are supposed to have the monopoly on the truth.

There is nothing new in this: and this is why today's Gospel comes with such impact if we are prepared to explore exactly what is going on. In any day and age, those in power and control exert enormous leverage simply by being where they are. In uneducated days, one can imagine *hoi polloi* being hoodwinked into suppression, but one would expect less of that today. Mind you, the ancient art of subtle and secret force can still weave its ugly magic, even in 'democratic' societies. So just watch Jesus, in that stronghold of narrow religiosity, as He bearded the lions in their den, and pulled the rug from under their feet. He offered no show of force to do it! He simply made them look in directions from which they must have hidden themselves for quite some time.

There was a person in great need, whatever the reality was concerning her illness, but most of all **there was a person, a human being, someone of inestimable value.** The matter that required attention was her disability, and that was faced and overcome, and we might well have said 'the better the day, the better the deed.' But not so to those studiously bigotted religionists. Rules are rules are rules, And those who think that way tend to be thinking, not of people but of control. Their own vested interests. *Get me to tell you about control freaks sometime. They seem to be all over the place.*

I have a sneaky suspicion that all the above leads in the direction of a significant and serious sermon. So I will leave it right there.