

Sunday 1st August, 2008

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Sentence

The Lord is near to all who call on Him in truth; He fulfils desire of all who fear Him, He hears their cry and saves them.

Psalm 145: 18

Collect

O God, giver of life and health, Whose Son Jesus Christ has called us to hunger and thirst for justice; refresh us with Your grace, that we may not be weary of well-doing, for the sake of Him Who meets all our needs, Jesus Christ our Saviour, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever,

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Genesis 32: 22 – 31

Psalm

17: 1 – 7 & 16

Epistle

Romans 9: 1 – 8

GOSPEL

Matthew 14: 13 – 21

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

The ramifications of Jacob's experiences at Beth-El and now at Jabbok have rather more to be considered than tends to be observed. This apparently odd encounter with angel or man has much to explain about God and Israel: and most of it tends to remain hidden. Apart from anything else, please notice the struggle and the name given to Jacob subsequently. 'You have striven with God and with mortals, and have prevailed.

Israel: striver with God. *Although it may not be very obvious, the whole construct of Israel's theology stems from the experience of striving with life and with God. That is what constitutes faith. Not some banal acceptance of dogma and tenet, but by the asking of questions and searching for answers, and the struggle to find out how things all fit together. And never forget that, please.*

I find that the constant complaint of scientists who denigrate 'religion' – and even more the battle from the side of faith – is that faith is nothing other than a very similar struggle, search and looking for answers than is the process of the (so-called) antagonists! I have to take sides with the former when Christians offer little but dogma when asked to see past their noses. We Christians can be appallingly naïve – and that shows up so often when our sacred cows are questioned and/or threatened. Comfort zones seem to be more important than pilgrimage.

Here is a story, which is designed not so much to focus on some event, but to uncover a most important issue, not just for Jacob, but for all of us. God is to be found in the most unexpected places and situations, but does not give Himself away all that easily.

Psalm

If you find it strange or rather depressing to find psalmists offering their complaints about the struggle to remain true to God, then perhaps you have never had your equilibrium disturbed by events or by unbelievers. Here is the 'testimony' – if you dare – of someone who as found life very difficult trying to remain true to his or her perception of God and what He calls us to, in the situation where all the pressure from contemporaries and life itself is to chuck it all away. 'Curse God and die!' was the challenge of Job's wife to her spouse. 'Get it all over and done with.' But do stop and see that you, who may well find being loyal to God-in-Christ has its sharp edges, please stop and realize that you will never be on your own!

Epistle

It may seem a strange thing to encounter the Apostle yearning for his fellow countrymen who had turned their back on the God of their forefathers. What strikes me as so remarkably similar is the extent to which so many modern Christians seem to have turned their back on the faith in spite of having exactly the same benefits as old Israel.

They are descendants of Israel, chosen to be God's sons; theirs is the (shekinah) glory of the divine presence, theirs the covenants, the law, the temple worship (liturgy), and the promises. What strikes me for

Anglicans in particular is that in our formularies and way of looking at things, we have all there is needed for decision, for growth and for development as Christian and as Church and so often we, like other believers, put heads into the sand in order to avoid the challenge of *striving with God and with mortals*. Come on, you lot!

Gospel

Again we tend to look only at 'miracle' and miss the point sometime entirely. Put yourself in Jesus' shoes, and remember that Israel was not a large community and news would travel very fast indeed. I refer particularly to the execution of John the Baptist. Jesus' attempt to find a quiet moment was shattered by a crowd of lost people, themselves yearning for some sort of hope in a world where such injustices as execution on a whim could occur. And the response of our Lord to that yearning is as interesting as it is remarkable.

The Feeding of the Five Thousand has far less to do with miracle than it has to do with making a clear and unequivocal statement. *I shocked a congregation once, talking about this passage, telling them to forget miracle so that they could see what was being said. They were outraged, mainly because they did not want to move outside their comfort zone. Miracles are easy to handle when you know you are unable to reproduce such events.*

What was Jesus doing? Pointing to their great leader in Moses, who also fed people in the wilderness. Moses' feeding you may recall was only just sufficient for the day. Nothing remained over after all were fed. Here, Jesus does 'the same thing,' underlining the difference with the twelve baskets left over. Here was connection with Moses, and yet a surpassing of that ancient worthy. In other words, here is Someone Who offers more than even Moses, --- in spite of the fact that Moses was seen as almost be-all-and-end-all of the Jewish Faith. Again here was Jesus offering the same sort of 'striving with God' to find answers, as recorded in the Old Testament Lesson this morning.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

You shall no longer be called Jacob but Israel. You have striven with God and with mortals

I can hardly go past such a profound statement without comment. It is a fascinating observation of where Israel, seems to me, ought always to have operated, and what is more relevant to any readers of this material, it is where the Christian ought always to have been. One of my great disappointments in reality is that the dear old Ecclesia Anglicana has the aura of being exactly what the readings today point to, and yet manages far too often to fall back into some sort of banality and mediocrity, And then wonder why people remain unimpressed.

It seems to me that – in Israel's long history, - whenever it was on pilgrimage in the desert, it continued to grow and develop, because there were lots of harsh realities to face. Lots of big decisions as well, and lots of things happened there. However, almost from the time they settled in the promised land, that striving seemed to cease as what passed for their religion became little more than forelock-tugging to a remarkably set and narrow set of rules and regulations. *It all gets a bit close to the bone, does it not!*

One of the very sad discoveries that I have made over the course of four or five decades in ministry, much of it in the country, the extent to which congregational life in small towns and districts has been almost closed down by what can only be described as peer pressure. So close are family ties that sometimes go back a number of generations that any attempt at movement or growth tends to be cut off at the knees, so to speak. Grandma this or Grandpa that exercises control, and no one dare step outside those artificial boundaries. If anyone from outside tries to become part of the congregation, then the pressure to conform is applied, and the outcome is little more than a dead mediocrity. (Yes, you can yell at me if you like, but if the cap fits,))

As I have mentioned in the notes above, one of the other 'battles' that seem to face many Christians is that still-persisting and totally unnecessary battle between science and religion. Whenever I see the Creationists' vehicle I confess to shuddering. The sad capacity of such people to fail to see beyond their remarkably introverted view of faith, life and God, worries me enormously. The battle they fight is not even a real one, for the Lord Whom we serve is larger than both science *and* religion, pardon me. The real outcome of the 180 year old battle – surely – is to see that what Christians are called on to do, as are scientists, pardon me, is **to search for the truth in whatever field is their particular discipline**, to test out the theories, - and be prepared to discard them if necessary! – and to grow towards greater maturity, understanding and development.

I have a habit – whenever this sort of issue emerges for discussion – to remark on the fact that Charles Darwin managed to marry into the Keynes family a long time ago. On top of that, he had been a candidate for Anglican Orders before choosing the path he did, and remained Christian, to my knowledge, to the end of his days. His support of the SAMS continued as long as he drew breath. Darwin was a searcher after truth, and if you knock someone for doing that, then you can expect little sympathy from me.

When I came to this State forty five years ago, I was determined to use the time here to convert not only the locals of the parish to which I was appointed, but also the rest of the clergy of this most remarkable of Dioceses. As those who know me well will remember, the opposite process occurred as people of this Diocese converted me. It was they who drew my attention, lovingly and gently, to the remarkably narrow and rigid view of the faith, took my blinkers off, and led me into the sunshine of that very 'striving with God' that they, too, were continuing. None of us were perfect, and we certainly did not have to fit into the same regimented sausage skin, but the fascinating outcome has been a pilgrimage that has continued to this day, and widened my perception of God and of life, and (I suspect) helped to make my preaching and teaching far more relevant to those around me. (Don't get me wrong: I have not yet reached the goal, I am simply heading in the right direction! No one could ever charge me with being perfect!!!!)

Sunday 10th August, 2008

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sentence

The disciples cried out in fear, but Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart! It is I. Do not be afraid.'

Matthew 14:26

Collect

Mighty God and ruler of creation, give new strength to our faith, that we may recognize Your presence even when all hope seems lost. Help us to face all trials with serenity, as we walk with Christ through the stormy seas of life. We ask this though Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Genesis 37: 1 – 4 & 12 – 28

Psalm

105: 1 – 6, & 16-22

Epistle

Romans 10: 4 – 15

GOSPEL

Matthew 14: 22 – 36

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

It may come as a shock for some people to find that the Revised English Bible translated what most of us learnt that the many-coloured coat of Joseph may well have just been a long-sleeved one. In the final analysis it matters little, but the obvious preference for the youngest son seemed to provide what we might describe as a dysfunctional family. For starters, it produced a precocious boy, and that resulted in tensions amongst the siblings What deep bitterness must have been harboured among the elder children, not helped by the prattlings of the kid.

On the other hand, the ghastly things that later happened to Joseph seemed to bring the lad back down to earth, and the resultant adult became a hugely significant factor in the continuation of the tribe of Israel. This passage opens a series of readings that ask us to look at the exigencies of life that can devastate a person, with most of the suggested responses being that most regular of Biblical suggestions, 'Fear not!' Check a concordance some time to see how often, in Old Testament and New, this challenge is offered. Here is no panacea; here is the constant reminder that God is to be trusted, even if it is far from clear at the time. *Be careful to ensure that you catch sight of the whole context of each of the instances.*

Psalm

Although there is only part of this psalm used today, it should be a reminder to the modern reader that these songs were sung regularly as a means of reminding the people who they were and why they were in existence. *Rasion d'etre* is hugely important for life and living.

It is also a great underlining and emphasis that God is ever to be found in the ordinary and sometimes banal areas of life, although bread, staff of life, would never have been seen as very ordinary then. No bread, no life of course.

Quite recently ABC TV presented a series on the Biblical stories, especially Old Testament ones. There is no hard physical evidence, it seems for the Exodus – big deal after 3,500 years or a little less have played havoc with the 'wilderness.' Did researchers think to find remains of tents, or animal manure or suchlike? However, when events so formative as the Exodus are part of your popular and cultural history, such evidence is hardly part of the deal. This is not to say nothing happened! This is to say that (probably) countless other experiences in Israel – and beyond – simply served to underline the validity of the perception, giving encouragement to keep going and with greater strength and conviction.

Epistle

I do not know whether you are prepared to see further into what was written to see what is being conveyed here. Can you follow me when I ask you to see that Paul is not talking dogma here, but asking you to see, as Israel always did see, that the things of God are not to be found out in the ether somewhere, but rather right at your feet.

And that factor leads us to see clearly that there are some immediate and sometimes less popular aspects to this immediate God with His immediate 'religion.' This Hebrew-Christian faith never was designed for some elite few, **but for all humans looking for truth and a more enriching way of living.**

Gospel

Last Sunday the feeding of the 5,000 – an extension of the manna and quail from Moses' time; this week, the crossing of the sea in Moses' time and the similar story here. It appears that Jews had never been all that keen on water, especially in such large lumps as the Mediterranean Sea. (The only character who seemed to get near the water was Jonah, and he was most unimpressed!) Seas in particular, and even rivers and lakes seem, in Hebrew thought, to be more aligned with evil and/or with slavery.

So what is really being pictured here is not so much a miracle proving Jesus' power over nature, but rather pointing to the Gospel where even human sin is cut down to size, so to speak. The real import of this incident is that Jesus tries to reassure His disciples that they 'need not fear what man can do to them.' Here is no escape valve, but the capacity to cope with whatever rap comes their way – or ours.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

A decade or two ago, people of my then parish were asked to pray for a younger person who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness, - a request that had crossed all denominational boundaries. The concept was lovely, having all sorts of folk concerned for one of the wider family. Being somewhat unsure about such a call, I asked what would be the outcome if the patient should die. With fingers raised in admonition, I was told that I was the problem – lack of faith was likely to bring about the decease of the person concerned. Anyhow, I was assured, God answers people's prayers, and my lack of faith would have no effect. (I find that a rather typical ambivalence with some Christians!)

After all the brouhaha, I must have been at fault, for sadly, the patient died. Although no one was silly enough to lay the blame at my feet, my concern was for those people likely to be dismayed by the apparent failure of God, of faith, and of healing. And there were a lot of people disillusioned, and who turned their back on such an apparently ineffective, untrue, unreal faith.

Quite some of the critics of the Faith speak disparagingly about the apparent dependence of believers in a God Who is expected to keep them from harm and make sure that life goes on with serene and unshakeable strength. Nothing untoward is allowed into the picture, and if it does, then someone's faith is said to be questionable. The saddest thing about this nonsense from both sides of the fence is that such utopian expectations have never – *yes never!* – been part of the Biblical faith.

In fact, something quite to the contrary is closer to the facts. That Old Testament story about Joseph and his jealous brothers, (and somewhat inadequate parents,) is not some story of the believer's protection from harsh reality, but rather of his support through some very ugly vicissitudes indeed. If Joseph had not hung on, apparently unsupported, then the subsequent story and history of Israel may well have been very different indeed. In fact, you may never have heard of it at all, because it would have collapsed into the pit of wasted endeavour.

As has been reiterated a number of times in past notes, Israel's growing perception of the real reason for life stemmed not from their distorting of harsh reality, but of working their way through it. All circumstances and events went into the pestle and mortar of discerning where truth lay and spin tried to lead into tangents. A closer look at the history of Israel and the stunning perceptions and statements of the prophets, major and minor, continue to show how utterly honest and realistic were those ancient worthies. Of course, they led themselves up occasional garden paths, but life and reality ever brought them back to basics. In fact, one of the constants that those old prophets reiterated was the fact that much of the responsibility for lousy outcomes was sheer human cupidity, greed or folly. (Not the sort of information that is welcomed much these days.)

Look again at the Psalm for today: last Sunday's focus on the feeding sign has echoes today, bread being held up as an essential for life. Not just for the body but for the whole person. Bread = staff of life = *raison d'être* – point and purpose for living. Thus, without bread, humans are somewhat bereft of meaning, direction,

purpose. At this point of my life, moving from familiar country to unfamiliar city has – for me at least – precisely that threat of loss of purpose. I am not built to sit on my bottom, physically or mentally, but at this stage, there seems not a lot in front of me. So watch this space!!!

However that same psalmist, with what may be seen as the wisdom of hindsight, recognized that in spite of the lousy and long-extended nastiness that happened to Joseph, somehow or other God managed to bring His purpose to the situation, not only for Joseph but also for the tribe of Israel, ...and through them right up to us. This is far from ‘pretty story’ stuff. This is ‘keep your eye on the ball stuff.’

(It is donkey’s years ago now, but one of my best mates had noticed how one area of my life lacked any real warmth or value. Stunned that anyone had noticed, I shared my sense of grief at the fact, and wondered ‘what I had done to deserve this!’ I was far more than stunned when that un-theologically-educated friend of mine told me that I was asking the wrong question. ‘You should be asking “what are You saying to me in this, Lord?”’ And the question was answered almost before it was asked. Had I had the sort of relationship for which I had longed, my ministry and priesthood would have been remarkably foreshortened and useless. One of the things essential for a pastor is to have ‘been there, done that’ in situations of life that tear people to shreds. ‘The wounded healer’ is the only way to go! And does not our Lord Himself fill that role and ministry to its absolute limits?)

Sunday 17th August, 2008

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sentence

Thus says the Lord, “Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon My salvation will come, and My deliverance will be revealed.”

Isaiah 56: 1

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

Genesis 45: 1 – 15

Psalm

133

Epistle

Romans 11: 13 – 32

GOSPEL

Matthew 15: 21 – 28

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

There is so much to observe and learn from in this remarkable little cameo from the life of Joseph. He seems to be one of the more observant and thoughtful of the patriarchs, and perhaps that was because of the severity of his experiences. Note how powerfully Joseph understood God at work in his life and not for himself at all, but for his tribe and family. What is more, there is that clear compassion for his brothers, even after their bitter mistreatment of him.

In the light of the rest of today’s readings, notice how broad and encompassing was Joseph’s theology. He had no difficulty, even in those early days, of understanding that God was at work, not just within the tribe and family, but in the rest of the world of people. *Then common perception was that the gods had control only within the realm of the believers – remember Jacob’s dream, and surprise. Remember, too, that it takes several reminders of some progress for a person or people to take hold of and absorb the lessons of life.*

Psalm

Such a lovely and brief psalm, with its homely touch about beards and things. And it is not just about families, but communities, and – if you dare – all people of the world. It is not an ‘if only’ thought. This is the point and purpose and direction of the entire Hebrew-Christian Faith!

Epistle

For anyone who despairs of the Church, take notice of this passionate chapter from Paul. Israel was not the be all and end all; it is God. It is not the Church that is the be all and end all; it is God. And the reality from the human point of view is the call to serious response to the truth of the faith and of God. Institutions can fail, but God will not.

The real point, seems to me, of this long exposition from the Apostle, is to stop and realize that the all-too-often human point of view about 'religion' is so short-sighted, narrow and divisive, that it makes utter mockery of the realities. Any division that humans create between themselves and others is nothing but a blasphemous misuse of the truth – of whatever source. This seems to me to be the powerful and unavoidable lesson from today's readings.

Gospel

One of the sad things about so many people's readings of the Scripture is that the main point or issue is missed because the readers' eyes are fixed firmly elsewhere. I mention often an emphasis today on the uniqueness of Jesus, and His miracles. The real point of today's cameo has nothing to do with miracle, (yes, I mean what I say!) and everything to do with a huge punch in the eye of the bigotry of the disciples and others.

Read the fine print please. 'A Canaanite woman of the region of Tyre and Sidon' should be enough warning for the most cursory of readers. Here is no Jew nor even someone slightly connected with the Hebrew faith. Here is a person who was at least twice disqualified from Judaism, on the grounds of her race and her gender. Add a sick child to the list, and she was an outsider of the outsiders.

With that apparently strange (to us!) response of Jesus to the woman's request, it would have been rather less brutal than she might have expected. When our Lord seemed to brush her off, the disciples were all too ready to act on their bigotted view and send her off with a flea in her ear. However, what Jesus was doing in His apparently odd reaction was to give the disciples a strong lesson in listening with more than a bigotted ear. Here was a person of faith, in spite of the fact that every other indicator pointed to the impossibility of such depth. For Jesus, here was a human being and one in need not for herself but for her child. As far as our Lord was concerned, all those ancient disqualifications were nothing but what Paul described as 'crap,' if you know the verse I am talking about.

Here is an incident in Jesus' ministry designed to tear the veil from our eyes, in order to see humans in their very humanity, as well within the range of the care and compassion of the Father. And we do well to learn the lesson in this day and age when there is so much bitterness and anger because other people are different to me. No Christian can be party to such discrimination. *And that is a hard path to travel.*

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It may sound like history these days, but it is not all that far back that I was asked by a couple to celebrate their marriage – about which I was delighted to do. However, one party was Catholic and the other Anglican. As we prepared for the big day, the Catholic members of the family were informed that they would be excommunicated if they so much as dared to set foot in the opposition's Church. It was an appalling dilemma for all concerned. So to cut a long story short, the marriage was celebrated in our Church by a rather lovely young Catholic priest, and my Bishop informed afterwards. This is no shot at any Church in particular, but rather the illustration of the extent to which Christians of all persuasions and none have so avoided the challenge of the Gospel by creating barriers between people when no real barriers exist.

It is not only Christians who manage to be so bitterly divisive. People of other faiths and none; people of other cultures and none so often seem to manage to put up artificial barriers in order to keep us all separate. Oddly enough, it is exactly that *penchant* of humans that the ancient Hebrew faith was designed to overcome. And yet we have not learned.

It is the difference, when you think it through, between 'religion' and 'faith.' The former tends to become a false but formidable barrier to keep you in your place and out of my face. This is not some ugly thing limited to Christians, but it makes mockery of whatever faith it represents, and in fact it is one of the most potent turn-offs for a vast number of human beings. And regardless of what faith or philosophy we are talking about, it constitutes denial of the cause it represents.

Only a day or so ago, I was rung by a friend of many years, a Jewish lady for whose Anglican husband I took his funeral. From that very sad time we first met, we have found so many points of theological contact – which is not at all surprising when Christianity owes its existence to the Hebrew faith. That call the other day continued to be spiced with the similarities between the respective Faiths, and the joy and delight in exploring both faith and life and God. (We decided some years ago that she would make a jolly good Anglican; and that I

would make a good Jew.)

Spend some time, will you, on re-reading that remarkable passage from Genesis, to catch sight, once again, of the enormous breadth of faith that was Joseph's. Perhaps that breadth was born out of the severity of his life-experience, and if so, thank God for that, and learn the lesson for yourself. But in spite of his long and serious involvement in what amounted to an alien culture, not only did he retain his understanding of God, but enhanced it. No doubt quite something of Egyptian culture and thought rubbed off on him; and no doubt the process went the other way as well. There is no great issue here; except that I suspect that many modern Australian Christians are so enchanted by today's Generations X and Y's value as to fail to see the false directions in which they lead.

That challenge seems to be underlined in Paul's thoughts on Israel and the grafted in Church. There is no room for pride on anyone's part; there is room only for real response to the truth of the situation wherever a person is. Believer or unbeliever, there is no room for pride or sense of superiority. Nor is there room for sense of inferiority. There can only be the humility of being fellow searchers after truth. And gratitude when something of that truth is discovered and related to.

Sunday 24th August, 2008

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sentence

Jesus said to His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Matthew 16:15

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 find peace, and in the world to come, may see You face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Exodus 1: 8 – 2: 10

Psalm

124

Epistle

Romans 12: 1 – 8

GOSPEL

Matthew 16:13 – 20

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

If this story is not very, very familiar to you, I am very sorry for you. It is well worth spending some time reading the old sagas, for these stories have been singularly formative for Israel, ancient and modern. It is the old Hebrew thing of the God Who breaks into human history and brings salvation, but only through human agents.

One can begin to imagine the bravery and faith of some of those oldies, determined to continue despite the fearful and genocidal actions of dictators. Perhaps we need to consult some present defiers of dictators, to enter in to what it takes to go ahead regardless.

It is a fascinating yarn, not entirely unlike that of Joseph of whom we have been discovering in recent weeks. There is also the added factor of the daughter of the Pharaoh whose maternal instincts overrode her loyalty even to her father. The outcome for Moses was – like St. Paul many centuries later – the experience of having feet in both camps, as it were, being part of two quite different cultures. But the real point is to see that, regardless of contrary pressures and even ugly situations, the People of God can persist, however quietly and with whatever constraint.

Psalm

I have reminded readers fairly often that, in spite of some Biblical reports to the contrary, the tribe and later the nation of Israel was never a big player in the overall scheme of things. In fact, the nation was usually quite powerless, often a pawn in the hands of surrounding kingdoms and empires. When one is aware of impo-

tence, it can lead either to hang-dog and dependent, immature personality, or it can produce a strong and determined character. This author is such a person as was able to recognize the *Realpolitik* but also to be aware of the fact that God, guarantor of all that is just and true and honest stands behind those who remain true to the ancient verities whenever they are challenged.

Epistle

In the light of the earlier readings for today, do you catch sight of the remarkably balanced and genuine response to life that is called for by the Apostle. Here is encapsulated both the humble and balanced view of oneself a person needs to have in order to mature, and the clear presentation of service to others that should be the hallmark of true humanity. It hardly needs mentioning that the world in which we live presently would regard much of this passage as passé and demeaning. Today's seems to demand far greater emphasis on 'me' and ego: I am left wondering why, when the outcome of such an emphasis is so divisive and destructive. Paul is not calling people to be goody-goodies, but is asking them to be real. We have lost sight of the enormous value of being humble – *which translated means being fair dinkum. Honest. Real.*

Gospel

Do you not find it so fascinating to watch Jesus forcing the pace somewhat with the Twelve, and doing it in *Gentile* territory? First of all, note that Jesus, here, is pushing his men to get past the warm fuzzy factor of the Faith to the real, hands-on, feet on ground reality crunch.

It was only as Jesus did so push that any progress was made. Sadly, whilst we moderns congratulate Peter for his 'confession,' – *progress of a sort* – it was still quite minimal and marred by Peter's somewhat narrow understanding of 'messiah.' It must have been quite gut-tearing for Jesus to step outside the box, so to speak, to radicalize the disciples' perception of Messiah. Here was no whiz-bang leader, but a figure of far deeper import and challenge, Who would call people to 'follow Me' not to overwhelming victory, but to humble service.

One of the vastly important issues to consider, with that call to Peter to be the rock, is to recognize that the man was nothing of the sort. Whilst – as far as Jesus was concerned – he had the potential, and with the passing of time that was illustrated well, he was after all nothing but a fisherman, which is not to denigrate fishermen in the least. In other words, here was no Great One who was to be entrusted with the future development of the faith and Church, but one of life's little people. If there was anyone who might be considered great, it could have been Paul, but he would have discounted the epithet immediately. 'I am the least of the Apostles, not fit to be called an apostle'

NOTES FOR A SERMON

Whilst I could be charged yet again with cooking my cabbages twice, it has to be said that these readings evoke a response, not just from them but also from ordinary life as it confronts me in early 2008.

Those of us who carry a number of decades may well recall the sort of stuff that was related to us as Sunday School children – in fact, when I think about it, - as children at School. In the former situation, we had presented to us those characters from Biblical times, from Old Testament and New, in what may be described as 'in Biblical proportions!' There above the altars of our Churches were the Apostles, gorgeously apparelled in vivid hues of red and purple and white. We were taught how full of faith and obedience they were, and how they knew all the answers and responded with purity and loyalty.

When it came to day School, similar evidence was offered about all the great historical figures in English history and in others, but there was never mention of the dalliances of the Duke of Wellington nor of Napoleon and Josephine. Even Churchill, in those dark days of the war, was ever the untouchable and invincible one, with no reference to his mistakes in World War One nor his irascible and often unpleasant nature.

None of the above is to knock those old worthies, but it is to remove the stainless saintliness that seemed to raise them head and shoulders above the rest of us mere mortals. They became so impossible to emulate that we tended to be left in some sort of shameful sideline. It seemed to render us incapable of being of any use in the Great Commission, and of being, as my old Parish Priest would often describe in Biblical terms as 'unprofitable servants.' It was the old put-down, like the great sinful thing, and denigrating to those of us quite ordinary people. *(On the other hand, you might notice the opposite emphasis in this day and age. Is it not true that the 'great ones' of this world are lauded for their failures and breakdowns. I suspect that this is saying something equally horrifying, reducing us all to the lowest common denominator.)*

The answer to both these conundrums enforced on us was to read history and Scripture. Information, not bias, was the saviour, as often it is. When I began to read the Biblical stories myself, the scales fell from my eyes, as they say. When I read history or began to think for myself, the challenge was much clearer. I recall - quite early in my adulthood - realizing that the American myth about treacherous Japan and Pearl Harbour was dispelled by learning what preceded that horrific event.

This is no tirade against the Yanks, but a plea for far greater veracity and transparency in dealing with life's people and issues. If there is one thing that the Biblical stories underline, again and again in almost monotonous regularity, it is that **God has always, always, always worked through life's little people** and often without regard to their faults and failures. I suspect that part of the reason why is that little people tend to be rather more honest than the great ones of this world. Before you go one step further, stop and ponder and see if there is not quite some truth in all this.

I find it enormously sad that the Roman Church (and ours, too, sometimes) turns Mary, Mother of our Lord, from the humble faithful soul that clearly she was, into some enormous demigod who is so far above the rest of us that she become isolated from us and from reality. The point is that God worked through Mary, bless her, ordinary as she was, *and that means He can work through us also, with all our scars and failings. Now ain't that something?* It does not make us perfect; it can help us to be real. (Humble is another word for that!)

Have found, in my own ministry with people, that if I am honest enough to face the facts, unpleasant and otherwise, about myself, then I am far more likely to be of some assistance and encouragement to people. If I were saintly, (and thank God I am never likely to be that!) then I would be of no @#\$%^& use whatever.

Is there not great encouragement in all this?

Sunday 31st August, 2008

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sentence

If you would become a disciple of Jesus, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Him.

Matthew 16:24

Collect

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things, graft in our hearts the love of Your Name, increase in us true religion nourish us with all goodness, and of Your great mercy, keep us in the same, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Exodus 3: - 15

Psalm

105: 1 - 6 & 23 - 26

Epistle

Romans 12: 9 - 21

GOSPEL

Matthew 16: 21 - 28

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

It is a bit rough to complain about Sunday School curricula from 60 or more years ago, but you may well recall the story of the burning bush and the call of Moses, but not remember anything about the Divine Name. That was a huge pity, for it meant that the real reason for the story was missed, as was the case in so much else of our early teaching.

The real point here has so very little to do with burning bushes, and everything to do with far more significant matters. Yes, there was the Call of Moses, but there was also a great issue for that ancient worthy, when he asked for God's Name. JHWH. 'I am Who I am; I will be Who I will be.' It is the remarkable use of the Hebrew verb 'to be,' in which you will find echoes when Jesus described Himself as 'I am.' Door, Good Shepherd, Vine etc. For Moses, this name surely became almost a rebuke: 'Who the hell do you think you are, asking such a question?'

In Hebrew thought, whoever knew your name had some control over you. And there was no way that mere Moses would control the Creator. It was a salutary lesson to people in a world that considered that the gods were there to be manipulated. (That is the main view of the occult - and quite much of more recent resurgence of superstition. It is seen as a means of getting on in the world, a sort of latter day cargo cult.)

Psalm

There was comment in today's paper (Advertiser 09.02.08) about the powerful and effective use of story and myth in Maori culture, an art that is almost completely lost in today's Western mind (or what passes for it.) However this process was alive and well in Hebrew culture, and I suspect is still. History is never some pointless exercise, for we are all 'where we come from.' Without a past, we have no star to guide into the future, and that is becoming rather drastically obvious as time passes.

Epistle

Now pardon me, if you want yet another contrast between the Pauline and Christian view of relating to people, and that of today's world, hang on to this little lot. It is a delightful – and hugely important – vision of how relationships best operate, and remember that Paul was not living in any Utopia. Contrast this caring about the other, and today's dog eat dog (with whatever compunction) – and I dare any thinking person to describe Christianity as having no solid contribution to make to today's world. Oddly enough, so much of today's relationships may well give some sort of lip-service to Paul's comments, but only as long as things go the way of the person concerned. As the Gospel for today indicates, one cannot have it both ways.

Gospel

Comment was made earlier in these notes of the apparent unsuitability of Simon Peter to lead anything let alone the Infant Church. One suspects that the beginning of the huge learning curve for that man began right here: on one hand he was called the Rock, and here 'Satan.' And there is ever a bit of both in all of us. Being aware of that tends to help in a person's development, seeing the need for good and sensible choices, and taking responsibility for those choices.

Rather more serious is the challenge of Jesus to be really quite one-eyed in deciding Whom to follow, Jesus or self. (Some folk find difficulty seeing any difference between the choices, and that is drastic!) Take up your cross is no 'spiritual' activity but very much a down-to-earth one. As mentioned previously, there is no room here for today's emphasis on ego – it is a matter of being open and caring of your neighbour. In other words, the real role for the Christian is to reflect the character of the Father.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

You might find it in your heart to forgive this stick-in-the-mud, dyed in the wool Anglican a moment, if I make the comment about the great difficulty I have when similarly dyed in the wool Christians talk as if they carry God around in their pocket, with Him ready to do their will. Whilst the expression of intimacy is marvelous, many of the suppositions are not. In some cases, they verge on the blasphemous.

You will know what I am talking about. Someone talks about having prayed about something and knowing what God wants of them or for them. People have constantly required me to go along with their protestations and use all manner of emotional and spiritual blackmail – to get their way. "I have prayed about this" they will bellow sometimes, as if there is no other path for the rest of us but to comply. Ask then about the outcome later, and they will have forgotten they applied any pressure. In fact, they will often forget the entire challenge.

I refer again to my lovely Jewish friend, who will be horrified if anyone ever dare use the Divine Name as mentioned in the Old Testament Lesson for today. All manner of periphrases are used for the simple reason that God is God and the rest of us are not. This is no put-down of humans, but the clear and balanced acceptance of the greatness and omnipotence of the Creator, Who is the Potter and the reality is that we are the clay.

This is something that seems almost built-in in the Anglican scheme of things. There is no way that humans are degraded: sinful yes and not all that crash hot at making choices. This shortcoming shows up very often when in the vicissitudes of life, we complain about outcomes until we stop and see that our own choices fall somewhat short of the way that the Father would operate. This factor opens us up, not to judgementalism, but to a learning curve, that will be all the more effective if we are prepared to see the reasons behind any such better choices. And that, surely, is the purpose of the exercise.

If I may beat the Anglican drum yet again, I confess to absolute delight at the opening sections of the Eucharist. First comes the prayer that reminds me that I need to be totally and brutally honest when I come before God. I can fool you; I can even fool me, but there is no way I can begin to fool the Almighty. He knows me inside out, and there is considerable comfort in that. He even loves me – and you of course.

Then comes confession and absolution: nothing automatic about this at all. Only within the atmosphere of forgiveness am I able to look back and ponder my boo boos, unafraid of the Father, or even you come to that. And it is then, and only then that I have been freed to learn from my mistakes. No yells, no screams. Only learning curves.

So when you look at the later readings, here come no demands that you echo the attitudes to somehow keep your pretty little souls clean and glistening. These guidelines are there in order that you and I can reflect the characteristics of the Father: **and that way we can make His character rather more visible**. It is for others' benefits, not ours. As this may take a little time to ponder and absorb, we just might leave it at that.

I think I have commented often enough that 'religion' is a word that I tend to despise. For 'religion' read 'the Faith,' please.

If it bothers you, do not read on: but dates and ages of some of the patriarchs and their families have various readings, and so the numbers are quite questionable – and make a mess of literalist expectations.

If you dare to see it, in Revelation, the 'sea of glass like crystal,' is the sum total of human evil – not some pretty image at all. And in Rev 21., you will notice that 'there is no more sea' has any trace of human evil removed from the scene entirely. All very significant, including hymns that refer to 'the crystal sea, pardon me!

And it still emerges from time to time, even between Christians themselves!

He was far too holy to accept the 'priest' role!

It may be of no interest to you at all, but this Collect was used to introduce Scripture lessons at School by a 70-year-old layman when I was in 2nd class Primary – 1942. His description of the parables produced pictures I can still see, and that Collect (and others) have been embedded in me.

It may be of some challenge to people to realize that, in Hebrew language, 'Satan' was not some demigod out to get you, but your own human capacity and mine to choose and exercise evil.