

**Sentence**

‘Heaven and earth will pass away,’ says the Lord, ‘but My words will not pass away.’

*Mark 13:31*

**Collect**

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which Your Son, Jesus Christ, came to visit us in great humility, than on the last day, when He shall come again in His glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal through Him Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Isaiah 64: 1 – 6**

**Psalm**

**80:1-7 & 17-19**

**Epistle**

**1 Corinthians 1:1-9**

**GOSPEL**

**Mark 13: 24 – 37**

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

**Old Testament**

It has been mentioned before, but it bears repeating: there is nothing in religious history of any country or culture that even begins to parallel the Jewish line of prophets and their writings. Mind you, any reader needs to understand that Hebrew prophecy is no star-gazing future-predicting stuff, except in a strong but minor way. It is perhaps understood best when seen in terms the attempt to understand what God is saying to Israel in its history, and where God is aiming to take Israel. The whole business is essential down-to-earth, and focusses on matters of justice and compassion. My best description of Hebrew prophecy is the activity of the various authors to look back to see where Israel has come from, and what has happened, to see where God is going from there.

In this particular and vivid passage, it might be easy to assume that Isaiah is looking for some sort of miraculous Divine intervention to provide solutions to all of Israel’s problems, political and social. At the time of writing, Israel would have been in exile in Babylon, or on its way back from there: and the huge issue would have been of reconstruction of nation, faith and temple. In the wake of the Indonesian and Sri Lankan tsunami of late 2004, or the Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf States of the USA, the enormous task of rebuilding can be visualised even by those not in the thick of it. It is all so heart-breaking and vast.

One of the magnificent insights into the whole ‘God’ business shows up in this brief passage, where Isaiah writes of *no God besides You, Who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him*. In most religions, past and sometimes present, God is perceived of as both utterly distant and completely disengaged from the usual daily grind of life. Israel had never seen God in that way, and could point to all manner of events and situation where God ‘got His hands dirty.’

So Isaiah – like us in the Season of Advent – look for some sort of coming of God into our midst, to point the way, once again, to where real and lasting life and values are to be found. That is big enough agenda for anyone these days, is it not?

**Psalm**

This Psalm would appear to be either Exilic or post-Exilic, a time of great stress for Israel which was recovering from the harsh experience of first losing their homes and land, and then returning 70 years later to rebuild. The whole business was traumatic as you might imagine, and quite something of a learning curve. It was from the Exile that the synagogue arose, as an alternative to Temple for worship. And much of our modern approach to worship, with hymns, readings, prayers and sermons, stem from that harsh experience.

**Epistle**

It may well be assign of my cynicism, but I implore those who would go off with the fairies here, that, after reading this intro to the Corinthians, that you also read on. This flowery language sits rather strangely with the hugely important issues that Paul deals with, in writing to this Church. In other words, it needs to be said that, whilst this may be the language of hope, there needs also to be an air of reality as well.

Please notice the important thing: that discipleship of Christ is designed to lead to a maturity of personhood. This maturity is not for the individual but for the group, the congregation, the Church. One of the narrowing things that may ensue from *blameless* is that it may be taken somewhat personally and individually. Once again, the important outcome is maturity.

## GOSPEL

There is a strange capacity of Christians to somehow manage to fail to see the wood by missing the trees. Some denominations seem to focus almost exclusively on what we call the Second Coming, whereas I have a sneaky suspicion that the Biblical emphasis lies rather elsewhere.

When Jesus required His followers to observe the situations surrounding them, was it a question of 'keeping their noses clean' or was it for something more significant? It strikes me that, in this gigantic struggle between truth and falsehood that the People of God need first of all to recognize and follow truth. At whatever cost. For that is the real issue.

## Notes for a Sermon

If I had five dollars for every time someone, worried about the 'way things are heading,' asked me what I thought of the likely outcome for people, expressed their wishes that something or Someone somewhere would shake the living daylight out of everything, and bring more than a little peace and sense into life.

When we are faced by crises, big and small, we humans do long for some sort of suitable closure or resolution do we not? Is not the US invasion of Iraq an attempt, however misdirected, to bring some sort of closure and resolution to what the Yanks like to call 9/11? And you could probably add a huge and long list to the sorts of situations in your life where you would love to have some fulfilment.

So you can understand the longings and yearnings of the prophet when he put the words together that are our OT Lesson today. Isaiah was possibly in Babylon, expecting a return to Israel even if it meant one hell of a lot of hard work. ***He longed for a beginning to the action.*** He was aware of the fact that God was perfectly capable of bringing it all about, for had not JHWH brought Israel out of certain slavery and annihilation back in Moses' time, with a strong right hand and an outstretched arm? Isaiah – it has to be said – was right in the middle of a huge crisis for Israel, and had been for 60 years or more. When will it ever end?

And the Gospel today is looking in a very similar direction. In this apocalyptic section of Mark's Gospel – interesting to have it here in Advent, before Christmas! – there is another taste of a sense of doomsday and crisis, and shivers down spines. It is the sort of attitude that comes to the surface whenever people face an uncertain future. I have found it rather interesting to see how, for two or three decades now, the movie industry has produced quite a number of scary-scenario films. This is because the subject is a live one for many, many people; and it also provides something of a vicarious thrill where the audience can feel involved in something scary, and still go out from the cinema and have a nice hot coffee before going home to their warm and safe bed. But real life is not like that, for real life produces some real challenges.

There, it seems to me, lies quite some of the unreality that underlines so much of today's view of life. It is a push-button one, where huge problems are expected to be erased simply by pressing the delete key. And when that does not happen (because life is more real than that!) people come apart and seek some sort of solace in depression and isolation. Is this all that the Faith has to offer?

Notice in that OT lesson that Isaiah saw some of the genesis of such times as being the responsibility of ordinary humans. *'No one calls on Your name or strives to lay hold on You, ..... You have hidden Your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins.'*

It may sound all far too old-fashioned to talk of sins these days, but I reckon we need to have a whole new and fresh look at what the old Bible has to say on this subject. It is not a matter of me having dirtied my pure soul by sinning. It is very much a matter of if I disregard and turn my back on the old verities of justice, truth, compassion, integrity and love, then I am disconnecting myself not only from reality but also from YOU. And the more I do that, the more relationships disintegrate, personal, social, national and even international. And the answer to the huge problems is NOT to look for some small or big m Messiah who will do it all for me. The answer to the issue begins with me, and you, and each other individual person, to make the move back to truth. The reason for the shift back is not in order to avoid repercussions; it is so that life can become significant and valuable once again.

When Isaiah (or anyone else in Old Testament or New) looked to the God Who rescues His people from the folly of their own making, they did not expect some BIG GURU to come and do it for them. In fact, Isaiah himself, in his absolutely remarkable series of Servant Songs, saw ever so clearly that, when God is at work, it is invariably with human input. There is ever the Abraham, the Moses, the David, Mary, Jesus, Peter and Paul.

**So do not go looking for an escape route. Start wondering how the change can begin with you.**

As we celebrate Advent, celebrating the Lord Who comes among us, please stop long enough to see that when He does come, it is not with some sort of whirlwind, whiz-bang answer to amaze everyone and take their breath away. He comes in the quiet stillness of our conviction to follow Him into the enormous challenge that He puts in front of us.

**Sentence**

Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. For the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all peoples shall see it together,  
*Luke 3:4*

**Collect**

Merciful God, You sent Your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation; give us grace to heed their warnings and to forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer, Who live and reigns with You, and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.  
**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Isaiah 40:1-11**

**PSALM**

**85:1-2 & 8-13**

**EPISTLE**

**2 Peter 3:8 – 15a**

**GOSPEL**

**Mark 1: 1 – 8**

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

**Old Testament Lesson**

Perhaps because of Handel’s *Messiah*, these are remarkably familiar words, but because they come from the Old Testament, the point of the prophet’s exposition is missed. Small wonder that Israel’s expectation of Messiah became rather distorted and out of shape. Is it because no one expects Biblical prose to make sense?

Israel was in exile in Babylon around 550BC, and felt itself to be in a hopeless situation. Homeland ruined, capital and temple destroyed, and it meant final defeat for God and His Chosen ones. In wide perspective, it meant (to all intents and purposes) that evil had triumphed over good, as it always seemed to do. However, the prophet Isaiah <sup>1</sup> had managed to explore further than the popular perception, and pointed people to something they could hardly have imagined. That is, the Isaiah looked forward to rescue from this dead-end situation, a rescue brought about (in real time and in real life) by no one less than God Himself.

It strikes me that Isaiah reached this position, not by observing current political and historical trends, but by examining Israel’s history. For Israel the Exodus was formative to its understanding of itself and God. And there, God rescued His people from almost certain extinction. He had something more for Israel to do.

So the prophet encouraged Israel-in-exile to see that there would be life after this exile, and that while human strength was limited and mortal, God’s power was something else again.

History itself proved Isaiah to be correct.

**Psalm**

Notice, please, the emphasis in this psalm on truth and righteousness (justice.) If there is one thing to which most of the OT prophets pointed and jumped up and down about, it was precisely that. Never, never lose sight of that emphasis.

**Epistle**

It is a sad and strange thing that modern Christians often are unable to see beyond the literal, and so miss or misunderstand so much of Biblical comment. There are a couple of very powerful and significant things to notice in this passage.

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<sup>1</sup> Second Isaiah if you can cope with that appellation.

The first is Peter's reference to the patience of God. If God operated the way humans tend to do, then He would have wiped out everyone who failed the test of truth. Those 12 legions of angels would have had a field day just before the crucifixion. So why did He not? Because (a) that would have multiplied the evil and (b) given perpetrators no opportunity to realize what they had done, and repent from it. Please read that again.

The second is just as important. When Peter (and other apocalyptic writers) write about suns and moons falling and heavens disappearing with a roar, they were not asking you to read them literally. Here is poetic (more than poetic) stuff, which translates better if you understand this as referring to the collapse of a culture, community or civilisation. Peter was writing about the certain outcome for a culture or country that operates on lies and falsehoods and injustices. It may take a while, but collapse they will, as John also makes very clear in his *Revelation*. Once again we have the almost sci-fi before its time recognition of the great human battles between truth and falsehood. The People of God need to be aware, and to be on the side of truth.

## **GOSPEL**

*You* may not have been aware of the Exodus/Exile connection referred to above in the OT Lesson section. But the Biblical writers like St. Mark certainly were. The beginning of the Gospel was the fresh and most significant rescue by God of His people. Notice the significance of the connection that Mark made with Isaiah 40 and Exodus. In other words it is important to catch sight of the entire work of God towards humanity to understand properly whatever He does.

Mind you, I think you may have had difficulty coping with someone as one-eyed as the Baptist. His message tended to be quite unequivocal, which is probably why John later was unsure whether his Cousin was the real McCoy or not. John expected a very rough outcome for people refusing the truth. Jesus' approach would have seemed somewhat ineffective as far as John was concerned.

## **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

It was almost 50 years ago, when I was in Theological College training for the priesthood, and experiencing twice-daily services in the Chapel. Monday mornings was always the time when staff members preached, and I recall vividly the day when the Vice principal, later to be Archbishop, preached on the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> verses of today's Psalm.

*Mercy and truth and met together: righteousness and peace have kissed each other.  
Truth shall flourish out of the land, and justice shall look down from heaven.*

I do not remember all that Don Robbie said that day, but he certainly made me look very much closer at the nature of the Faith and of the Gospel. Spend some time, will you, pondering the nature of a world here those particular aspects of life did flourish, and think of all the differences that would be made to relationships. This difference would be most noticeable in family relationships, in civic ones, national ones and most particularly, international ones.

It would have been almost 40 years afterwards that I was embroiled in a discussion with an avowed and very heated atheist, who was denouncing the pointlessness and purposelessness of a religion he despised. He had gone to an expensive Anglican College, so he knew it all, of course. After his tirade about useless religion, I asked him what aspects of life he was concerned about. He was a medical man of quite some distinction, so he was not short of education, articulation, ... or cash. He was no angel, which perhaps explained something of his anger at what he thought was narrow and limiting.

His answer did not surprise him, but my response did unsettle him! What that man saw as hugely important in life were the issues of justice, integrity and truth. And he thumped the table as he listed those items. When I drew his attention to the fact that we were on the same side, it almost took his breath away.

It is when religious people, and Christians among them, manage to avoid the real issues of life and relationships and history, that they lose credibility with the world at large. If that is where you are, may I be rude enough to suggest that you spend some time reading the OT prophets, especially the Minor Prophets – if only because they are shorter and quicker to absorb.

Whenever the Season of Advent returns annually, I will often ask people to stop and see where the emphasis lies. It lies in the theme of **the Lord Who comes**. However, we often put on our blinkers and look backwards to the Lord Who *came*, or the Lord Who will *come again*, and miss the real and present emphasis on the Lord Who comes constantly into the right here and now, with the challenge to respond to situations or perhaps to challenge the status quo with a Gospel reaction to whatever the challenge.

I think that poor atheist had been hoist on the petard of his own propaganda about the Faith. To be fair, there remain quite some Christians who would demand a strong obedience to a narrow perception of the Faith. This certainly seems to be a period, historically, of fundamentalism in all sorts of directions, and that is profoundly sad. It is a defensive approach, and defensiveness tends to be a singularly unappealing thing anyhow.

SO the question is where is this Lord coming, and how does He come, in the right here-and-now. And the answer tends to be a surprising one, for it has become fashionable to think either that God no longer exists, or that He exists only in the fantasy of some people's minds or memories, and that the whole business can be consigned to the dead pages of the past. Dead Gods cannot be met in the present, and certainly not in the real world and in real time. *Or so the theory goes*

My experience on this subject may well be somewhat limited, but I find that, in all sorts of experiences and situations in life, this Lord comes, and presents me with an opportunity, or a challenge, or even sometimes an enigma. This 'advent' may come in the form of someone in difficulty, needing help of some sort. It may be a chance encounter, where the challenge is to respond honestly and Christianly. It may come on the form of deeply serious illness on myself or someone else, with the enormous question of 'where does this fit with a God supposed to be loving?'

One of the factors I find almost constant in these advents, is that there is no fuss or bother, no wide-screen, bold advertising let the world know thing. It is usually very low-key, so that I tend to be the only one even vaguely aware of the fact that anything is going on at all. It is often 'to the least of these my brethren – and only that brother or sister and I are even aware of the challenge.

On the other hand, it may be something on a wider canvas that calls for me to do some solid thinking through. I remember, for instance, when the pill first became available. It was a long time ago now, and its genesis raised the ire and antagonism of a huge range of Christian people. It is still anathema for the Catholic Church ..... though not of all its adherents. Those days we used to have adult fellowship groups on Friday nights once a month, and those adults asked what was my attitude. Did I think that it offered people the chance to be promiscuous? The answer to that was, yes it does, but then anything in life has both its advantages and dis-advantages. At that time, world population was exploding and it seemed to me that, right at the time such a crisis was looming, in God's good time, there was an answer, somewhat simple and effective. The pill is like so much else in life: when things are used truly and properly, there can be enormous benefits which I would see as God-given. But anything in life can be misused, abused, treated with disdain – and it has to be said that the way a person deals with things says little about the good or bad of the thing concerned, but does say a great deal *about the integrity of the person choosing*. And is not that the real issue?

So what I am trying to emphasise in this short but pointed address, this: that if we see in Advent only the celebration of looking way, way backwards to the Lord Who has come (at Bethlehem) --- or looking way, way forward to the Lord Who is coming again, then we will be spending time in never-never land, and missing sight of a Lord Who comes to us constantly, to challenge us to follow Him.

**Sentence**

Bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, the day of vengeance of our God.

*Isaiah*

**61:1-2**

**Collect**

Eternal God, You sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for the coming of Your Son; grant us wisdom to see Your purpose and openness to hear Your will, that we too may prepare for Christ Who is coming in power and glory, to establish His rule of peace and justice, through Jesus Christ our Judge and Redeemer, ne God, for ever and ever.

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON  
FOR THE PSALM**

**Isaiah 61:1-4 & 8 – 11**

**EPISTLE  
GOSPEL**

**The Song of Mary  
1 Thessalonians 5:12 – 28  
John 1: 6 – 8 and 19 – 28**

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

Old Testament Lesson

One of the things about Christians that amazes me constantly is our failure to take notice of the very Scriptures we hold so very dear. Whilst most people are happy to delight in this, amongst others, of the Servant Songs of Isaiah, not very many are prepared to travel the journey that both Isaiah and Jesus put in front of us. For this servant song is not only in anticipation of Christ, but is a statement of how the People of God themselves need to operate. *And the failure in that is enormous.*

I do not think I need to spell out the implications for those of us here and now. Isaiah in his wonderings and musings as to what God was doing with Israel in his day remain valid and demanding for our own day. Whilst none of us can even begin to come into the same category as Jesus, in terms of our capability, we all are called into the *imitatio Christi* when it comes to how we behave and operate as servants of all. Far too often Christians are prostituted into what I would call Adamic modes of leadership, *being like gods*, which results in the complete downfall of what the Church is on about. I dare you to think all this through

**Psalm**

Again, I suspect that it is true how we Christians become familiar with something Biblical, like this *Magnificat* as we used to call it in Evening Prayer, and very largely miss the point! Certainly we recognize that this Song of Mary tells us a lot of how she tended to see her life as Mother of our Lord, but there it stops. In part of the Church, Mary is lionised (if that can be done to a woman!) and elevated to something halfway between human and divine, which is precisely the *opposite* direction to that which this canticle takes us. Just as in the OT reading, this is a song about servanthood, both in Mary and in the God Who called her. It is a song about reversal of expectations, where the rich are (to be) reduced and the humble exalted. It is not about reversal *per se*, for that, like revolutions in the political sense, do nothing but reverse the roles of persecutor and persecuted, and nothing else changes. It is about the celebration of servanthood as the most beneficial way to go.

**Epistle**

How is that first verse in the Epistle today as an encouragement in exactly the opposite direction of the 'world' today! In fact the atmosphere of this reading looks almost too passé to be contemplated. However, that is nothing other than a clear and vivid statement as to how far our present world has moved from a *modus operandi* that values each one of us in all our differences. These readings are becoming somewhat disturbing, are they not? And that is the point of Advent (and Christianity) anyhow, is it not? Or, to put it in other words, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

## Gospel

John the Baptist! Nutcase or disturber? Sometimes there is not a lot to choose between the two!

It is a strange and terrible thing to see people of whatever race or culture trying to find ways to sidestep realities in life. We call it 'spin' these days, knowing we are left with the enormous task of sifting truth from baloney. However we all tend to do it, as we defend ourselves – especially if that defec is designed to protect us from heading in a direction unwelcome.

The challenge to John from the religious elite of Jerusalem was nothing other than diversionary tactics to free them from having to take any notice of this man's rantings. They were certain that it was invalid because it had no connection with their control and leadership of nation and faith. And it was that control and leadership they were determined to maintain in spite of any real or imagined threat from outside. They saw strength in control, and *their* control in particular.

And Christians still do this blasphemous thing to each other .....

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

I may have told you this story before, so you can sleep a minute or two if I have. But quite some years ago I was asked by a branch of Mothers' Union if I would give a talk on the *Magnificat* at one of their meetings close to Lady Day. I was quite happy to do so, but wondered out loud if they were ready for some of the material that is embedded in Mary's Song. (I wonder if *you* know that someone else, long prior to that time, sang a song so similar that I suspect Mary of knowing it and valuing it. Dear old Hannah, mother to be of Samuel, sang a song very similar around the birth of her son.<sup>2</sup>

When the time for the talk arrived, the ladies expected a lovely, heart-warming chat about dear old Mary and her spiritual (and therefore ineffectual?) pilgrimage. Not that motherhood is an easy thing, but if it was about the Lord then it could not possibly be at all challenging and certainly not threatening.

So we chatted on about that Magnificat, and all expected, I think, emphasis on '*all generations will call me blessed*' so that they could bathe in the reflected glory of their patron. But we went on to see what this Gospel of servanthood was all about, and the reversal of position that would ensue from embracing this faith. We talked about removing kings from thrones, and that in terms metaphorical as well as literal. We talked about the revolution in the real sense, of little people being valued, and elevated people having their pedestals taken out from under them. And the outcome of that chat was not at all in the direction or expectation of that little old ladies. 'We have never heard anything like this!' they stuttered, all a bit taken aback by something so unexpected.

We modern Christians, with all the wisdom of hindsight, tend to be rather scathing of the Jews of old who looked for a Messiah Who was going to solve all their problems with a wide sweep of his hand, and, as a consequence, did not recognize the Christ when He came. How could they be so foolish and so short-sighted, we sigh, when all the evidence was there.

And then we proceed to do exactly the same thing with the Christ, 2,000 years later, managing to miss (or avoid) the harsh realities of Gospel because we do not like the harsher realities of the world in which we live.

Like the Jews before us, and shamans and other cult figures before and since, we have been unable to see past power and control as a solution to issues, missing the most powerful and poignant part of the Gospel.

Many more years ago, the men of our parish were invited to a meeting of a group wishing to form a branch of their so-called non-denominational pressure group in the town where we lived. I knew the instigator of this gathering, a friend of my brother's. The meal was very pleasant and the company reasonable if a little rarified, and after a talk from the leader we were asked to apply for membership. On one side of the paper, our details of name address and phone number were requested. On the other side

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<sup>2</sup> Read 1 Samuel 2 if you would like more detail

was a sort of credal statement to which we were asked to append our signatures. On reading it, I found it not really possible to assent to some of the very narrow views of the Faith. I withheld my application. When asked why, I simply mentioned that I could not put my name to such tenets. That was responded to with something that really horrified me: 'Don't worry about that, Ron. We only have it there in order to control members.' At that point I exploded somewhat, advising the person concerned that that made it far, far worse, not better. As you might imagine, I did not enrol.

The whole *ethos* of the Faith is of service, not control, not even power. Or if you wish to put it another way, the only 'power' that is involved is love. Even John the Baptist had to come to terms with that most remarkable variation to the Gospel. You might recall that, during his imprisonment, John sent emissaries to Jesus, because he was not sure he had pointed to the correct person in Jesus. 'Are you the One Who is to come, or do we look for another?' It is a stunning question in the light of some Christians' assertion that they know it all, when even John did not. Jesus' response was to point, not to Himself, but to the words of the prophet, Isaiah. To point to the Servant Song where even that ancient and long-dead prophet could see that God's work is done through quiet service and not through violent power and punishment.

This Advent maybe a good time to stop, look and listen again to the readings, and to see if there is any need for us to change focus, direction or understanding of Jesus and Gospel. After all, that is why Advent exists, does it not!

**Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> December, 2005-**

**Fourth Sunday of Advent**

**Sentence**

This Child will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.

*Luke 1:32-3*

**Collect**

Gracious God, Whose eternal Word took flesh among us when Mary placed her life at the service of Your will; prepare our hearts for His coming again, and keep us steadfast in hope that we may be ready for the coming of His kingdom, for His sake Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**2 Samuel 7:1-11 & 16**

**Psalm**

**89:1-4 & 19 – 27**

**Epistle**

**Romans 16: 25-27**

**GOSPEL**

**Luke 1:26 – 38**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

**Old Testament Lesson**

Everyone in my family tends to call me unrealistic, but this passage from Samuel seems, at first glance, to be quite out of place in an Advent setting. So I ask you to come on a journey with me.

It would seem to me, on the other hand, to be remarkably apposite, when one has time to ponder. There is an almost inbuilt human thing to be associated with large and demonstrative buildings, and these days it tends to be almost phallic. So there was – almost certainly – that trait in David's mind that he could be forever associated with a large and expansive Temple. His plan was stalled, and in the light of what follows, it may be a pity that it ever got off the deck.

Notice the protestation from God! The Almighty was not only quite used to living in a tent, but saw no great need for any huge building. On the one hand, a tent was a constant pointer to the need to be moving, growing, pilgrimming. A large building would tend to point to an institution that was settled, static, unmoving.

It has long struck me that, as long as Israel was on the move, there was growth; as soon as things were settled, all became static, inert, unmoving and unmoveable. There is a lesson there, is there not?

So, you now know the story, so what do **you** make of it?

**Psalm**

If the Old Testament lesson seems to be emphasising the small scale, then please notice that the Psalm is doing the same thing. It may not be all that important these days, but then anyone remotely connected to rule or reign was expected to be 'wide-screen' and big time. If your country or tribe was to make a mark on others, then it needed to be a BIG mark. Large is impressive, is it not?

Not in Biblical terms, for the simple reason that 'big' becomes so easily ego trip.

Now look again at the story of Samuel choosing David<sup>3</sup> - or any other call – and notice how the emphasis was on being servant, not being boss and lording it over people. Remember this is why Samuel did not wish to anoint Saul as king, for kings so easily lose their way.

**Epistle**

In the light of what we have been considering, there is something of an irony here. If the coming of Christ, in fact the entire revelation, is to help people believe (and follow!) we might have expected a whiz-bang show to convince people. However, whiz-bang things do not **convince!** They only entertain. For people to be convinced, they need to stop and listen and think a lot deeper than that!

**Gospel**

So we take this approach further. One of the things that really does give me the willies is the way we love to emphasise the unimportant, and so do not catch sight of the significant. The real business about

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<sup>3</sup> Notice almost every other call to some ministry and notice that it is low key and little people!

the call to Mary is NOT, repeat **NOT** the story of the Virgin Birth, but the fact that, like David, dear young 15- or 16-year old Mary was a nonentity as far as status and importance was concerned, and so was far more likely to be genuine, faithful, and respond with her whole heart. Can you imagine the Premier of your State, the Prime Minister of your country or the President of any other being called to such a task as was Mary? Then go on to see that this same Lord may well be calling insignificant you to a ministry, too.

Scary, isn't it!!!!!!!

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

Christmas is now but a step away, and we have been given a chance to stop and think of the people involved in the saga. It is always rather easy to miss the wood because we can see only trees.

When it comes to pondering the characters of the Biblical stories, it is always very easy to place a huge gap between them and ourselves. Partly that is because of the distance in time and culture twixt them and us, and partly it may be because we have swallowed the propaganda that those holy people must have been head and shoulders over us. They knew it all; we struggle to understand very much at all of the religious bits. In both cases, it may seem that propaganda has won.

I remember the first time that I raised the issue of the likely age of Mary at the time of the annunciation. Let's explore that a moment. It is common knowledge now that Mary might have been 15 or so when she felt the call to be the mother of our Lord. Part of the clue comes from the Greek word that is translated 'virgin' in your Bible. That Greek word is 'parthenos,' παρθενος – and the word does not mean so much what it has become, but rather means 'a young woman of marriageable age *in that culture*. My point is simple: Scripture is not telling us of some highly sophisticated, religiously learned young person, but someone quite simple – in the real sense of the word! – and honest and faithful. Mary was highly unlikely to develop into some sort of prodigy or ego-tripper. She was most likely to remain one of the 'little people,' unnoticed by those in positions of high power.

She was little different from you and me. Ordinary, genuine, likeable and just as likely to be with faults just as you are. And that is the sort of person God is forever calling to particular and important ministries, then and now.

The moment we elevate people like Mary to even the beginnings of sainthood, we are missing the point and isolating that poor woman from her reality, from God's reality and also from ours. IF Mary was some sort of plaster saint, then she is so far distant from me that there are no connections whatever. She is up there, and I am down here, and never the twain shall meet. It is that sort of perceived distance between 'senior' and 'junior' Christians that does a lot of damage.

Mind you there can be damage the other way, too. I recall the time a young member of a Youth Group in which I was involved telling me that he felt called to ministry. And in the enthusiasm but ignorance of youth, he decided that any sort of Biblical or theological training was completely unnecessary. When we look at Mary and her task, it is seen that theological training was not called for, but I would be rude enough to suggest that naivety would have been a very distinct **disadvantage**.

So, in terms of the Collect today, Mary was ready for the coming of the Kingdom, and history makes clear that she was up to the task, and was constant and true. The question for us, in our day and age, is to wonder quite how the kingdom comes here, and whether our eyes are open to such advents.

I doubt if there was anyone who could have attested to Mary's call, for such things take place, in my experience, in the quietness of the depths of one's life and mind. Such annunciations, such transfigurations, are not noisy or advertised events. They are low key, as spirit meets spirit in the deepest part of a person. One of the reasons, perhaps, that such things are not so noticeable these days is because there are not a lot of human beings who are even aware of such depths, or are scared witless of them. It is not fashionable to let it drop that one thinks or feels deeply, especially about important issues.

However, it is my experience that whenever you might encounter anyone who does want to talk about deep issues, that you can be fairly sure that the kingdom is not all that far away. There will be no

whistles blowing or bells ringing, and you may well feel that you did not get very far. But that is how the kingdom comes, in quiet but remarkable moments. Notice how often in Jesus' own ministry, that He simply met people in whatever situation or crisis they were at the time, and that He did little more than offer them the next step forward. He did not press for 'decisions,' He did not demand huge steps, but He met them where they were, offered them the next step, and then left them the responsibility of taking it all further.

It all may sound so different and contrary to our present culture which is all push and shove, demanding immediate response, and brooking no dispute. If you think you should operate in the modern way, then imagine how you, as evangelist, if you operated like those persistent and pushy telemarketers who will not take no for an answer. They get me quite angry, and my response is, almost automatically, negative. I see no sight of that in Jesus' approach to people.

**Sentence**

I bring you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, Christ the Lord.

*Luke 2:-10-11*

**Collect**

Almighty God, Who gave Your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon Him and as at this time to be born of the Virgin Mary; grant that we being born again and made Your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by Your Holy Spirit, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the same Spirit, ever one God, now and for ever.

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Isaiah 9:2 – 7**

**PSALM**

**96**

**EPISTLE**

**Titus 2:11- 14**

**GOSPEL**

**Luke 2:1 – 14**

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

One can well imagine people being more than a little bemused by this passage from Isaiah and it may well take a little imagination to catch sight of what the old prophet is saying. This is well and truly pre-exilic, and comes from a time when conquest was a real and terrible threat. On top of that, Israel itself did not have the best of kings and rulers, and the possibility of life being marked by justice and integrity was more than a little limited.

In such a time of oppression and hopelessness, the prophet anticipated a time when all that was ugly and damaging would be a thing of the past. *Even that rather ugly reference to boots and garments blood-soaked was seeing them as passé and invalid.* In other words, you know and I know that warfare and violence produces nothing at all beneficial, so here is a tirade for the peaceful approach. In world weary even then of warfare and plunder, people were looking for a sensible, tangible, worthwhile way to operate that would bring something rather more settled and worthwhile.

So the longing and hope and expectation is there expressed in the second paragraph: it is all about peace, ‘with justice and righteousness.’ What sort of a world would we have if those ancient values held sway? The answer is obvious. But how to get there .....

**Psalm**

You may well find that many of the Psalms are rather more in the way of daydreaming than of down-to-earth reality, but you need to look and think a little deeper if you want to catch sight of what is really being conveyed. Day-dreaming this is NOT.

One of the things about faith that even the most naïve Hebrew knew was that God is there to be followed, obeyed, taken notice of. Certainly God is always there, as guarantor of all that is true and just and equitable, but He does not do it all for people. He offers the different way to operate, pointing people to where real life is to be found. In other words, God is not going to lean on or punish those who ignore His ways, but leave them in the world of their own creating to see that there has to be a better way. When people ‘own’ the truth and follow, only then will life have its changes.

**Epistle**

In spite of some appalling and shallow teaching about grace, the Gospel is not something that costs nothing either from Christ or to us. There is always the challenge to accept, to follow, to bend one’s life to the truth and the values of God. Salvation needs to be seen in terms, not of life after this, but of a completely different view of life, of relationships and responsibilities. It is not an emotional experience. It is a deliberate choice.

## GOSPEL

The story must be so well known as to need no repetition whatever. In fact, I usually choose to select the Prologue of St. John's Gospel, so that we are talking about the implications of the Christmas event, not the details. However, the thing never to lose sight of is the sheer ordinariness of it all. That sign of the child wrapped in 'swaddling clothes' is not something outstanding and different. Every infant at that time and in almost any other would have been wrapped similarly. The point of the Christmas story is such that it underlines the way God works and the sort of people through whom He works. There is nothing outstanding or notable about any of the characters involved, but they were all as ordinary as you. *So what does that say to you?*

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

It may be a case of giving myself away, but I have long had problems with the celebration of Christmas, not for me but for others. Over the years of my life, I have seen a huge decline in the numbers of people attending Midnight Mass or any other Christmas service, and I suspect I have some idea why this is so. From my youth upwards, there has been so much brouhaha about the Season, and most of it had no 'legs,' if you follow, nothing of substance behind all the fuss.

I guess it is possible to carry on with the fizz long after it has lost its effect on me, for the sake of the kids. It is a little like the Father Christmas business, which while it has its roots in distant history, there is remarkably little connection between the old man in red and St. Nicholas, Bishop of Myra.

So where does that leave us? From where I sit, I think we need something of a reality check.

There are often some rather ridiculous claims made in Christmas sermons, and I am not talking about Virgin Births and all that sort of thing. I am talking about the extraordinary claims about Christmas, epitomized perhaps by the 'peace on earth and goodwill to all men.' For most people, and especially those with children, the peace business doesn't last any longer than the opening of presents. And on the wider scene, there is not a lot of peace amongst Christians sometimes, in the Holy Land it is abysmal from where we sit, and it all sounds like a lovely idea that has not the slightest hope of fulfilling its expectation.

You may feel that I am overloading the picture, and you may be correct. But I do have a problem with some Christians and their credibility. In fact I have a problem for those not of the Faith, with their perception of *incredibility* of the Faith. It is not as if there is no truth in the story; it is a matter of knowing what the truth is.

One of the problems that people have (and not only Christians) is of rather wider concern. It may be a case of living in the electronic age, where answers are expected at the push of a button. Or it may be that we are being pressed into expecting a sort of 'messiah' response to all problems. You know what I mean, do you not? It is like expecting our political leaders to have all the answers to all the problems, which they are expected to do without any input or cost from us. A good messiah will do it all for you. SO with the combination of both the above, we are left with the very false expectation that the world owes us a living, and a damn good one at that, and it that means someone else goes with out, *stiff cheddar*.

Now, if that is the sort of expectation you have from the Christmas celebration, then, FORGET IT. You do NOT have a Lord Who is going to do it all for you, You do not have anyone who is going to remove responsibility from you, or remove decision making from you. You DO have a Lord Who is pointing you in a direction that is going to offer you the sort of peace that he story is all about.