

Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 2007

First Sunday of Advent

**Sentence**

Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.

*Isaiah 2:3*

**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, that 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 2: 1 – 5**

**PSALM**

**122**

**EPISTLE**

**Romans 13: 9 – 14**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 24: 45 – 51**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

*But first some introductions.*

*Advent has sometimes been held up as a severe and mournful season, somewhat like Lent. I could never understand (or accept the reasons for) that. It has always been first a preparation for Christmas and the celebration of the Incarnation. Also it comes as a clear clarion call back to basics of faith and of living. Now this is serious enough, but – to my small mind – exciting rather than depressing. And in this particular day and age, the challenge seems very remarkably relevant – especially to Generation X and Y. Read on and catch sight of what I see .....*

**Old Testament Lesson**

As you might imagine, these notes are being written something like six months in advance, so you may have to look back a little to catch some of the nuances. However, also stop and realize that the reading takes us back to the ‘year the King Uzziah died,’ which wasn’t yesterday either. I find it exhilarating to see that this ancient passage, now over 2,700 years old, still speaks to us about issues important then and now.

(First) Isaiah was writing before the fall of the Northern Kingdom, at a period when Israel was threatened by foes all around. Mostly Assyria to the north, politically, but the prophet was aware that most of the threat came from within. It was a period of considerable wealth and luxury for (some of) Israel, and that always and ever means that there was also a lower class of poor being created. For real Israel, that process was utter blasphemy as the Torah was designed specifically to avoid that possibility. So much for Law; what price human greed?

The prophet’s response to the problems of his day was to try and bring Israel back to its spiritual and proper roots. It has to be said that Israel, even in its nadir, was head and shoulders above other religions, because it ever saw the need for strong emphasis and action on what we may call social justice. Lose that, and you lose the entire community. So the call was to get back to square one, to respond to the crisis truly and properly, which includes, of necessity, a recognition that violence is no answer to poverty, and that work and sharing is ever a means of restoration.

One often hears people wondering why God does not step in and produce the necessary changes, but even then the prophet realized the fact that if anything is going to change, **it has to begin with me.**

## Psalm

I have reported elsewhere my dismay at being called to the priesthood at the delicate age of 17 or thereabouts. It appeared to be little more than an exercise in sheer and utter boredom, and this business of being glad to go into the House of the Lord struck me as *appalling*. Fancy spending all day every day in church!!!!

This is not what the Psalmist was on about; he (or she!) was rejoicing in the utterly refreshing and valuable direction for life that the proper worship of JHWH offers *all humanity*. It is not boredom, but strong and valuable direction. When I respond to God ‘in spirit and in truth,’ it is not so much that God benefits, or even me possibly .... But you would find things go rather more smoothly and caringly if I do. Do you catch that?

## Epistle

It strikes me that quite some of the problem with some modern Christians is the somewhat blinkered way of reading Scripture. Almost in spite of their plans, there tends to be a somewhat legalistic view of Paul’s writing, and that narrows one’s vision and imagination. (How do I know this? That is where I came from!) A rather more imaginative response offers some rather more wide-visioned understanding of what the Apostle was trying to convey.

Commandments tend, by necessity, to be negative. Turn that positive – love – and a fresh approach becomes almost tangible. Now Paul was not calling on people to become self-focussed puritans, but to see more clearly that life can be far more positive, creative and valuable when people operate under the ‘law’ of love. There can be little fight with that, but one is left wondering why more people are not prepared to see it, try it.

## Gospel

So here is another way: as Jesus puts it, choose the side you intend to stay with. But as you choose, take a moment or two to realize the result of that choice. On the one hand, there is an outward looking, self-forgetting way of operating, which offers great benefit to other people. The antithesis of this approach is also obvious, with the complete disregard of other people. Those words of Jesus may sound severe, but a poor choice will always have a very hurtful, unproductive outcome. It is as simple as that.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

If you wonder why I commented, half a page or so back, that Advent for me simply cannot be dour or morbid, it is because of the clarity of the issue this Season presents. One may put it like this: the Lord is coming, so get your act into gear and become the person you were designed to be. That – for anyone surely, - offers a future and a hope.

And it is not actually all that terribly religious: it is in fact really quite humane and real and beneficial. Get back to basics.

I am always put off by those who can offer only snide and sarcastic remarks about religion. I have to say that I do not like the term myself, but the usual criticism about people who believe tends to be fired at those on the edges perhaps or others who are religious rather than real. It is always rather silly to attack the caricature or the stereotype in anything, simply because if anyone does happen to reflect that caricature, then they tend to be rather silly and shallow anyhow. *And rather rare.*

So this is a Season of getting back to basics.

One of the basics is that realization that ‘what the world needs now is love, sweet love,’ but that has always been the case. (Mind you, this love is not saccharine or syrupy – that is useless stuff.) And love is the capacity to learn how to enjoy other people’s differences rather than see them as some sort of barrier. The colour of skin is, after all, only skin deep, and whilst cultural differences run rather deeper, we can still find ways of accepting each other just as we are.

Another of those basics is to realize that this following of Jesus lays some rather weighty demands on us. Made more impactful now that we live in what amounts to a global village. And however Christian I am, my task is not to change you, but simply to live out what I have found to be true in Jesus and in life. Let's make it quite clear: I have been involved in parish life long enough to know that it is far from easy to love your neighbour. There are times when they drive me absolutely nuts. *But then I may well do somewhat the same to them even without knowing or realizing it.*

Inasmuch. It used to be the sermon topic often enough, whenever this Gospel reading surfaced. It is a simple yet potent illustration of the fact that if I follow Christ, (not 'if I am religious!') I need to be aware of the situation that you are in, and to be an unobtrusive help to you if I can, and allow you to be the same to me:

Brother, sister, let me serve you  
Let me be as Christ to you.  
Pray that I may have the grace to  
Let you be my servant, too.

**Sentence**

The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near: repent and believe in the Good News.

*Mark 1: 15*

**Collect**

O Lord Jesus Christ, at Your first coming You sent Your messenger to prepare the way before You; grant that the ministers and stewards of Your mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready Your way by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, that, at Your second coming to judge the world, we may be found an acceptable people in Your sight, for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Isaiah 11: 1 – 10**

**PSALM**

**72: 1 – 7 & 18 – 21**

**EPISTLE**

**Romans 15: 4 – 13**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 3: 1 – 12**

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

**Old Testament**

What is it that you expect from such a reading as this? Seems that most people simply read and say ‘Ah! This has been fulfilled in Jesus, ‘and thus miss the greater part of the issues involved. Certainly, this passage points to and was fulfilled (to some extent) in the Incarnation. But there is rather more to the matter than that.

So much expectation of people is that someone should do all the hard miles for them and they simply bask in the result. That is a poor reading of prophets and Scripture indeed. It is always through such people as the branch from the stock of Jesse that God gets things done. Little people. Obedient people. Non-egotistical people. And Jesus is certainly the pattern and the leader, but this is the process than needs to continue, generation after generation, for each generation needs to see Gospel in action.

It is one of the huge tragedies of Christian history that failure to see the pattern and follow it has required singular upheavals from time to time, as the Church gets back to its proper roots.

*Now where does all this leave you, and me?*

**Psalm**

Taking some of what is said above, please see how, at this stage in Hebrew history, people looked to their king to be the one who epitomized the characteristics of God. It did not take long for people to see that even kings are human too, and ego was likely to get in the way. However, look and see what those expectations were – for justice and righteousness, equity and peace. When this operates from the top down or from the bottom up, life has some chance of becoming far more settled and creative.

**Epistle**

In our day and age, when so many people are of the opinion that Christianity (or any other faith) is a private and personal matter, disallowed from impacting on life generally, it is fascinating to see that the Apostle had become singularly aware of the fact that the Faith was not something for Jews only. While Paul mentioned ‘Gentiles,’ please do see that he was saying ‘everyone, all the rest of the world.’ In other words, Paul saw the Faith as an answer to all human needs and aspirations. *Do you?*

**Gospel**

And as if to underline all that has been written in Scripture and responded to above, the Gospel has us in the real world where a real (non-egotistical) human has the job of getting the message across to people of his own day and age, and of his own culture. It is a single and unremarkable John the Baptist who – with all his faults and failings – made people aware of Someone coming into their midst, and the value of it.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

It is quite a number of decades since yours truly had the call to the ministry, (over five in fact.) And the expectations of that call back in those days of yore was to a special role, a somewhat elevated view of ministry, and the expectation of some success and importance. What came as the biggest surprise to me within a year or two of work in a parish, that none of those expectations were real ones. I was not some special envoy in spite of that vocation; I was just another of the people of God called to ministry. However, the reality was, and remains, that this is the call of everyone who follows Christ. *Everyone*. We are not incapable, we are all gifted, and each different one of us are able to connect with people that others again are not. We are all in this together, without threat to each other.

To take this matter further, I relate a story from almost as many years ago. I had moved from one Parish to the next, and there was quite a gap between our departure and the appointment of the next priest. January to August to be precise. And while I was a little concerned about how the parish would cope, I had the answer in a remarkable and somewhat dramatic way.

A couple of months after my 'successor' was appointed, he came to me almost in tears. 'Whatever is wrong?' I asked, more than a little aware of the fact that that 'high churchman' might have some difficulties. His answer thrilled me! 'The Parish is perfectly capable of running itself,' he said to me. 'I am superfluous.' And he was appalled at my delight! 'For heaven's sake, is that not the very way it should be?' I quizzed, 'with services being taken and sermons preached, with people caring and visiting those around them. Does this not make it possible for you to do all sorts of priest things that otherwise you could not?' *Forty years later, that same parish is just as capable, in spite of the passage of years and that business of getting old. And thank God for that, and for them.*

Perhaps it is because we have the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, so often that we miss the point. Certainly, I confess to having difficulty with the Roman Church and its elevation of Mary to something superhuman, because that is precisely the means of missing the point. All the above, and John, and even Jesus if you dare, were ordinary, down-to-earth, no great shakes sort of people who saw the task and remained faithful to it, regardless of contrary pressure. Little people. Not Kings; not Prelates; just someone quite like you. And me.

I don't quite know why it is, but perhaps it is that persistent view of Christians that nothing we can do is of any use to God, we are 'worms and not man.' And that persistent business of 'justification by faith' underlines, apparently, our incapacity and worthlessness. And that, pardon me, is so much pious bunkum, an escape from reality and responsibility and a reason for seeing it as all too much. Why do we get so caught up with the dogma and tenet that we are blinded to the real life of the Gospel. It is there to fill out and broaden our capacity as humans, not to reduce us to some sort of false and stupid modesty.

**Sentence**

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong. Do not fear. Here is your God.'

*Isaiah 35:3*

**Collect**

Sustain us, O God, with the power of Your love, on our journey to meet the One Who is coming: strengthen our weak hands and make firm our feeble knees, and open the blind eyes to the dawning of Your Kingdom. We ask this through Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Isaiah 35: 1 – 10**

**FOR THE PSALM**

**Song of Mary**

**EPISTLE**

**James 5: 7 – 10**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 11: 2 – 11**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

**Old Testament Lesson**

If that passage from Isaiah seems totally unrealistic, then stop for a moment and put your imagination into gear. Isaiah was not 'off with the fairies,' but rejoicing in the enormous possibilities that ensue from obedience to JHWH. Living as he did in a world that had departed very considerably from Law and spirit, he could see the enormous benefits for all concerned if people were true to their Faith and their God. This had nothing to do with good seasons and lots of rain, but overloaded with other benefits that would make life so much the better. You may call it the language of hope, and you may well be right, but the only thing that gets in the way of a far richer and healthier life and lifestyle is to sit up and take notice of the Faith. Huge pity that Israel, even in this day and age, does not travel that path.

**Psalm**

I have reported elsewhere the enormous surprise when – having been asked to comment on this *Magnificat*, - I pointed to the almost political implications of Mary's song. It also needs mention that this canticle reflects the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel. In other words, obedience to God brings all manner of down-to-earth benefits; although perhaps it is easier to see the downside of the opposites. Never allow your vision to be limited to what we Christians sometimes love to call the 'spiritual' aspects. Life – as far as the Hebrews were and are concerned – is all of a piece.

**Epistle**

And there is Paul's word on the subject. Be patient, especially in this time of the apparent supremacy of the cult of the ego: life has its own way of restoring some balance when this orgy of selfishness is on top. It causes far too much damage to last for long. Although one needs to remember that whilst the mills of God grind exceedingly small, they also grind exceedingly slow – to give us all a chance to balance ourselves out.

**Gospel**

It must come as surprise to find that John the Baptist was not all that certain about the credibility of his Cousin. We may feel that strange, but please note that, even in this day and age, different Christians have different expectations of God and faith. John expected a somewhat violent and retributive activity from God, for he saw that as the only effective way to sort out the world. Jesus' views were so remarkably different that He managed to wrong-foot the Baptist. We humans tend to operate on the basis that violence has to be met and overcome with greater violence, but our Lord was on another wavelength altogether. **It is hugely important to see and respond to the difference.**

On the other hand, our Lord had nothing but support for the Baptist, - and in what He offered, showed up how John was closer to his Lord than may have first appeared. Here was no explosive personality seeking a crowd, but a humble and almost primitive disciple whose whole life and effort was directed to the calling He received from God.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

It has long struck me that we live in a strange and convoluted period in history! On the one hand we have people educated far, far beyond that experienced at any other time in history, as far as I can see, and yet the other side of the coin shows humans in a remarkably different light, many of them chasing dreams and following shadows, in the hope that some easy solution to their problems might turn up. On the other hand, there are those who give up totally, and surrender to the profound sense of pointlessness and end it all in so many ways of suiciding. Other take the longer path of drugs and substance abuse, often for the very same sorts of reasons.

The message of Advent, and that of these readings in particular, point in the diametrically opposite direction. There is life; there is hope; there is purpose, and there is responsibility – but it is not going to drop in your lap with little or no involvement from you. If ever and whenever that happens – and it does with quite some of the welfare state syndrome, people are destroyed simply on the basis of getting something for nothing. It is a hugely detrimental path. *And I will hazard a guess that some of you will scream at me.*

The Faith is nothing if it is not totally down-to-earth. It has nothing to do with starry-eyed ‘hope’ which is a crossed-fingers, crossed-toes and everything else, without basis and almost no chance of success. It is far more virile and realistic than that. But it is also painfully aware that, for this pattern of life to work, it calls for the commitment of fir the person, and then the community around them.

Isaiah lived through a time, however surprising it may seem to you, of rather rapid and incredible wealth among some of the elite of the northern kingdom of Israel. That nation had long sat astride the important land trade routes that linked the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian and the Hittite Empires. Whoever controls the trade handles huge sums of money. And wherever that happens, cupidity and greed bounce to the surface. There may not be many people who find their bank accounts explode, and that adds to the stresses. You have; I do not, and the pressures between us tear us apart. You consider yourself quite the superior, and me the inferior. People are the first casualties, and communities follow very soon after. It happened then, and it still occurs across all sorts of cultural divides. Selfishness. Terribly destructive. And the prophets, from Amos on, had become so painfully aware of the fact that sin is very destructive stuff, right here and now.

As such folk pondered that somewhat novel approach to social issues, they also began to see Torah and Faith in a rather new light. Evolution of the Faith, if you dare, was gaining pace. If sin is destructive, then following the Torah had to be quite the opposite. And the more they pondered that, the more they could see the extraordinary possibilities that could stem from taking the Faith rather more seriously. That did not involve becoming all insular and religious: it involved acting with integrity and justice ‘in public and private life.’ It was the beginnings of what Jesus was on about when He talked about ‘eternal life,’ not some future hope but the quality of life that stems from following Him rather more significantly.

So that is one of the lessons of Advent – an emphasis that deserves attention all the year round, but, with the coming of Christ, the Incarnation, the Word become flesh, it points to the need for faithfulness to be rooted in the ordinary and normal intercourse of life.

**Sentence**

A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel, God with us.

*Matthew 1:23*

**Collect**

O Lord, raise up Your power and come among us, and with great power succour us, that, whereas through our sin and wickedness we are sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us, Your bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us, through Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Isaiah 7: 10 – 16**

**PSALM**

**80: 1 – 7 & 17 – 19**

**EPISTLE**

**Romans 1: 1 – 7**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 1: 18 – 25**

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

**Old Testament Lesson**

*It has long struck me that the writers of the New Testament had a strong penchant for quoting the Old Testament in a way we can only consider as rather illegitimate - or else we have misunderstood the usage in our traditional understanding of the Faith*

*If you take the trouble to examine the whole of Isaiah 7 as it leads up to today's Reading, you will discover something that should give you food for considerable thought. Here is no promise of a redeemer but a promise rather that a serious and potentially fatal threat to Israel will fade into oblivion.*

*Ahaz was having a severe case of the willies. Enemies to the north were threatening the very existence of his kingdom, and he felt utterly powerless in the face of that threat. One traditional path was to encourage to assistance of Egypt to fight on Israel's side, but – as these days – that was a singularly dangerous path to travel. Here the solution was offered by the prophet. And the solution was this:*

***In the time it takes for a young woman to conceive and bear a child, for that child to grow to the point it was aware of the difference between good and evil - perhaps a period of five years or so, - the threat from the north would disappear for the kingdom behind the threat would virtually cease to exist. The use of that fascinating name for the child would be none other than the clear indication that JHWH was as behind all that. Nothing miraculous. In fact, remarkably mundane and just as remarkably redemptive.***

Would you now give consideration to seeing both OT Lesson and Gospel in that light. In apparently normal and ordinary factors of life, God is at work through really quite unremarkable people. We have tended to blot out that clear statement by elevating Mary out of this world, and surrounding the whole business with miracle. I am rather certain that that was not the intention of either Evangelist who reports on the birth of Jesus. I am not denying miracle. I am asking you to think.

**Psalm**

One is left with the sneaky suspicion that ancient Israel was ever painfully aware of the weak and powerless nature of its imprint in the world of its day. It isn't easy being green, we used to hear; and it is not easy being powerless. But the more one thinks about it, the more one sees that God is a God Who works through little people, not via big battalions. Out of that emerges the perception that we are left to rely on God – which is easier to say than to ! – and though we may well start off with the proposition that God is a BIG so-and-so, we will then have to learn the lesson that He does not go around belting the living daylights out of people, even to save them. Neither power nor belting resolves many problems, as a certain US President is finding out to his dismay. He needs to reconsider his understanding of God as well, does he not!

## Epistle

I wondered why, at this point in the Lectionary, we have the opening verses of Romans. Stop a moment and see that this passage was chosen because of its focus on the Incarnation, first of all, and then on the universal<sup>1</sup> nature of the Gospel. Here is no 'hole in the wall' event; here is something to affect and change the entire world. Right now, most of our part of the world does not want to know; sooner or later they will need this Gospel, even if it is to get their feet back on some sort of solid rock'

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<sup>1</sup> Dare I use the wd 'catholic?'

Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> December, 2007

Christmas

### Sentence

In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.

*John 1:1,14*

### Collect

God Most High, Whose eternal Word chose a dwelling among us that we might live in Your presence; grant us a spirit of wisdom to know how rich is the glory You have given us, and how great is the hope to which we are called in the Word made flesh; Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

**Amen**

### OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

**Isaiah 52: 7 – 10**

### PSALM

**98**

### EPISTLE

**Hebrews 1: 1 – 4**

### GOSPEL

**John 1: 1 – 14**

### Notes on the Readings .....

#### Old Testament Lesson

A concern crossed my mind as I set up the Old Testament Reading for today. I wondered then and still do about just how much impact this reading will have on anybody today. There seems such a huge gap between the expressions of hope in Isaiah's day, and the lack of it these days. So where do we start? I suspect that part of the answer lies in reminding ourselves of what we celebrate at Christmas. It has nothing to do with families and all that jazz; it has everything to do with the priorities in life of finding a way back to sanity. And, heaven knows, we need that do we not! (Statement, not question.)

Isaiah was in Babylon, Jerusalem (and the Temple) were in ruins, and there appeared to be little future or hope for Israel. But the prophet saw otherwise, and knew that when Israel returned to basics, then the tide would change because God is God, and brings life out of death. **History showed Isaiah to be correct.** And Christmas is the celebration that God is still at work, at the Incarnation and now, and that return to basics of faith, justice, integrity and love will always be the path to renewal.

#### Psalm

So let's get excited about it. And in particular, about the last verse of the Psalm. We live in a day and age that seems to regard responsibility as the ultimate obscenity; which is why things are tottering. God sees things differently .... This remains a moral universe.

#### Epistle

This passage has long been set as the Epistle for Christmas – the Book of Common Prayer put it there 450 years ago. It is a brief tracing of the effort God put in, or if you like that Israel had to travel to espy what God was doing and how He was doing it. And it takes time for most of us to catch on. It is a process, an evolution, a development. And why? For that seems to be the only way we manage to catch on. Mind you, even in Jesus, that speaking was via the still small voice – few of us take too much notice of loud yells and screams, for when we do, they take us up all manner of dark and dingy garden paths.

#### Gospel

Increasingly it seems to me, people find it harder to get their heads around the Divinity of Jesus. Whilst prepared to see Him as a hugely important figure, they cannot accept the next step. SO what is John saying? It is possibly helpful to realise that John was opening his book with a prologue that expressed the end of the thesis as the beginning. In other words, John's Gospel is saying 'this is where I have come to *vis a vis* Jesus, and what follows is the evidence on which I base the case.' In other words, each and all of us need

to be free to explore at our own pace and in our own time, and that strikes me as hugely important. *Refer back to comment on the Epistle!*

I suspect that the tragedy of the Incarnation is that whilst here is the One Who has the most to offer to all humanity, much of that humanity spurns the offer and turns back into the mess of its own making. Here is light for everyone; and 'people prefer darkness rather than light.' And that is the human tragedy and dilemma.

#### **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

I become disenchanted increasingly as I watch this hugely significant Christian celebration become emasculated into something as twee and meaningless as a 'time for family.' All manner of expense is undertaken and for what? Seems it is to avoid the real issues that the Season represents.

**Sentence**

Because Jesus Himself was tested by what He suffered, He is able to help those who are being tested.

*Hebrews 2:18*

**Collect**

Almighty God, You have shed upon us the light of Your incarnate Word; may this light shine forth in our lives, through Jesus Christ Your Son our Lord.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Isaiah 63: 7 – 9**

I shall recount the Lord's unfailing love, the prowess of the Lord, according to all he has done for us, his great goodness to the house of Israel, what he has done for them in his tenderness and by his many acts of faithful love. He said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not play me false"; and he became their deliverer in all their troubles. No envoy, no angel, but he himself delivered them, redeemed them in his love and pity; he lifted them up and carried them through all the days of old.

**Psalm**

**148**

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord from heaven: O praise Him in the heights  
Praise Him, all His angels: O praise Him, all His host.  
Praise Him, sun and moon: praise Him all you stars and light  
Praise Him, you highest heaven: and you waters that are above the heavens.  
Let the praise the name of the Lord: for He commanded and they were made.  
He established them for ever and ever: He made an ordinance which shall not pass away

O praise the Lord from the earth: praise Him you monsters and all deeps  
Fire and hail, mist and snow: and storm wind, fulfilling His command  
Mountains and all hills: fruit trees and all cedars  
Beasts of the wild and all cattle: creeping things and winged birds  
Kings of the earth and all peoples: princes and rulers of the world  
Young men and maidens; old folk and children together  
Let them praise the name of the Lord: for His name alone is exalted.  
His glory is above earth and heaven: and He has lifted high the horn of His people.  
Therefore He is the praise of all His servants: of the children of Israel, a people that is near Him.  
Praise the Lord

**Epistle**

**Hebrews 2: 10 – 18**

In bringing many sons to glory it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings; for he who consecrates and those who are consecrated are all of one stock. That is why he does not shrink from calling men his brothers, when he says, "I will make your fame known to my brothers; in the midst of the assembly I will praise you"; and again, "I will keep my trust fixed on him"; and again, "Here am I, and the children whom God has given me."

Since the children share in flesh and blood, he too shared in them, so that by dying he might break the power of him who had death at his command, that is, the devil, and might liberate those who all their life had been in servitude through fear of death. Clearly they are not angels whom he helps, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every way, so that he might be merciful and faithful as their high priest before God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. Because he himself has passed through the test of suffering, he is able to help those who are in the midst of their test.

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 2: 13 – 23**

After they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and escape with them to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So Joseph got up, took mother and child by night, and sought refuge with

them in Egypt, where he stayed till Herod's death. This was to fulfil what the Lord had declared through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod realized that the astrologers had tricked him he flew into a rage, and gave orders for the massacre of all the boys aged two years or under, in Bethlehem and throughout the whole district, in accordance with the time he had ascertained from the astrologers. So the words spoken through Jeremiah the prophet were fulfilled: "*A voice was heard in Rama, sobbing in bitter grief; it was Rachel weeping for her children, and refusing to be comforted, because they were no more.*"

After Herod's death an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said to him, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who threatened the child's life are dead." So he got up, took mother and child with him, and came to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus had succeeded his father Herod as king of Judaea, he was afraid to go there. Directed by a dream, he withdrew to the region of Galilee, where he settled in a town called Nazareth. This was to fulfil the words spoken through the prophets: "He shall be called a Nazarene."

## NOTES ON THE READINGS .....

### Old Testament Lesson

These old prophets are notoriously difficult to understand sometimes, and maybe this late in the year we are all feeling a little frazzled. But just take a moment to think this through: Israel's understanding of God came about, not by people going off into quiet and secret places, removing themselves from reality, but rather pondering their ordinary, often difficult experiences in life, to see if and where God's hand was at work. It was a matter of stopping to see what God was saying to them in the ordinary exigencies of life. It all needed to fit in with reality as they experienced it, and whilst that may well have resulted in a certain amount of trial and error, it took into account that the whole picture was yet a long way off. On the other hand, as some things became clearer, they could become more certain.

*This may well be a shock for some, but please note that scientific endeavour follows very similar patterns. It may well start off with a theory that requires testing to establish its veracity. And there may well be some variations, permutations and combinations as time goes by. Eventually, some considerable truth will be established.*

The fascinating thing about Isaiah's discovery is that God does things Himself – no second-hand process occurs. Hence the Incarnation. Word made flesh --- **in the real world.**

### Psalm

A comment was made earlier that Israel learnt that God is to be found in the various experiences and exigencies of life. Such a process seems, to my small mind, to differ remarkably from most other religions and isms. (Most of us try to fit the god of our own making or even desires into the ups and downs of our own lives, and discard the possibility of God because He does not do what we think He ought. Please think about this: it is a circular argument that can head absolutely nowhere.)

Now this psalm is a celebration of the perceived fact that God is to be found anywhere and everywhere. Even the most routine things of life illustrate, for Israel, something of God's nature. In fact, you might connect the stilling of the storm by Jesus with the eighth verse of this psalm. This was certainly the perception of the Evangelist when recording the tale.

### Epistle

Now perhaps, the Epistle may even come with some greater impact. Not only is God to be seen in the ordinary things of life, but it was essential that Jesus' ministry was in the real and harsh world also. Had that not been the case, then His gospel would have been emasculated. Jesus was our progenitor to show the way not in some rarified world out of touch with reality, but right there in the guts and gore of life as we all experience it.

### Gospel

So now the Gospel takes us in exactly the same direction: it was an enormously risky path that God took with the Incarnation. All manner of things could have gone wrong and blown the Gospel out of the water. So Joseph and Mary needed to be alert, not just at the beginning of Jesus' life, but right through. There were no cotton wool protections for our Lord, not even when there were threats to His life -- even

from the beginning. When you stop and think about it, here is clear evidence that God deals with the real world, and does not go off into the wide blue yonder, with you or with any other of His people. This is a faith with feet very firmly on the ground. Please never forget that.