

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, in contemporary thought, all that meant final defeat of 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. There seemed to be neither future nor hope. However, the prophet Isaiah¹ had managed to explore further than the popular perception, and pointed people to something they hardly could have imagined. That is, that 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.

Psalms

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.

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. It would be the Flood visited for the final time. Or those 12 legions of angels would have had a field day just before the crucifixion. So why did He not?

¹ Second Isaiah if you can cope with that appellation. And the role of the prophet was always and ever to understand what God was saying to people of his own time.

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 will come, 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. (These notes were updated when George W is trying to get the multi-billion back-up through Congress. Both the cause of this extraordinary action and the possibly irresponsible reaction of George W is indicative of what both Peter and John were on about, do you see? *Dare you see?* Here is populist policy at its most revealing: removing responsibility from the perpetrators – a process almost universal in our present culture. And oh! So damaging.

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. Only when we take note of that, and explore the directions in which that leads, we miss so much of the Biblical implications.

On the other hand, I think you – personally - may have had difficulty coping with someone as one-eyed as the Baptist had you been there to listen to and watch him. 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 – yet it was far more God-like!!!. On top of that, the Baptist would not have been nice to be near: his dress, his eating habits and his living patterns would have been somewhat odouriferous.

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 10th and 11th 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 Robinson 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 where 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 me, 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. The same thing has done likewise with other rather likeable atheists I have encountered over the years..

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* 2,000 years ago, or the Lord Who will *come again*, at the Parousia. When we are as myopic as that, we 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 and destructive to the Gospel. It is a defensive approach, and defensiveness tends to be a singularly unappealing thing anyhow, very damaging and self-defeating..

SO the question is when 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 in 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 many of its adherents. Those days (late 1960s) 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, One God, for ever and ever.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Isaiah 61:1-4 & 8 – 11

The Spirit of the LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity. In my faithfulness I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed.

I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.

FOR THE PSALM

The Song of Mary

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord: my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour
Who has looked with favour on His lowly servant: from this day all generations will call me blessed
The Almighty has done great things for me: and holy is His name
God has mercy on those who fear Him: from generation to generation
The Lord has shown strength with His arm: and scattered the proud in their conceit
Casting down the mighty from their thrones: and lifting up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things: and sent the rich away empty
He has come to the aid of His servant Israel: to remember His promise of mercy
The promise made to our forebears: to Abraham and his children for ever.

EPISTLE

1 Thessalonians 5:12 – 28

Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, and be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

GOSPEL

John 1: 6 – 8 and 19 – 28

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" Now some Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

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. Not very many people seem to be 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 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. The Church has much to answer for in its refusal to follow its own truths.

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 parts 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. In the OT reading, and this Magnificat, 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, creative and God-like way to go in a world that refuses that path on the grounds of 'weakness.' Small wonder that neither wars nor revolutions resolve not a thing..

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. 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 defence 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.²)

When the time for the talk arrived, the ladies expected a lovely, heart-warming chat about dear old Mary and her spiritual (and therefore other-worldly or 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, now could it! ???

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 positions 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 those 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 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 our 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, nor did any of the men of the parish..

² read 1 Samuel 2 if you would like more detail

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!

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

After the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, he said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am, living in a palace of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent." Nathan replied to the king, "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you." That night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying:

"Go and tell my servant David, 'this is what the LORD says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" Now then, tell my servant David, 'this is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture and from following the flock to be ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men of the earth. And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.

.....
Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me ; your throne will be established forever.

Psalm

89:1-4 & 19 – 27

Lord, I will sing forever of your loving-kindnesses: my mouth shall proclaim Your faithfulness throughout all generations I have said of Your loving-kindness that it is built for ever: You have established Your faithfulness in the heavens.

The Lord said, 'I have made a covenant with my chosen: I have sworn an oath to my servant David 'I will establish your line for ever: and build up your throne for all generations.

You spoke once in a vision: and said to Your faithful one: I have set a youth above a warrior: I have exalted a young man out of the people

I have found My servant David: and anointed him with My holy oil

My hand shall uphold him: and My arm shall strengthen him

No enemy shall deceive him: nor shall the wicked hurt him

I will crush his adversaries before him: and strike down those that hate him

My faithfulness and My loving-kindness shall be with him: and through My name his head shall be lifted

High

I will set the hand of his dominion upon the Western Sea: and his right hand shall stretch to the streams of Mesopotamia

He will call to Me "You are my Father: my God and the rock of my salvation

Epistle

Romans 16: 25-27

Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the

prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him - to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

GOSPEL

Luke 1:26 – 38

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

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, pilgrimaging. 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, and 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. And ego trips run contrary to the will and plan of God.

Now look again at the story of Samuel choosing David³ - 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!

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

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 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 stop and realize why NOT.

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 what it has become, (virgin in the clinical sense,) 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 **dis**advantage to that young man 50 years ago.

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 unremarkable 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

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

This is the Word of the Lord **Thanks be to God**

PSALM

96

O sing to the Lord a new song: sing to the Lord, all the earth
Sing to the Lord and bless His holy name: proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day
Declare His glory among the nations: and His wonders among all peoples
For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised: He is more to be feared than all gods
As for the gods of the nations, they are mere idols: it is the Lord Who made the heavens
Majesty and glory are before Him: beauty and power and in His sanctuary
Render to the Lord, you families of the nations: render to God glory and might
Render to the Lord the honour due to His Name: bring offerings and come into His courts
O worship the Lord in the beauty of His holiness: let the whole earth stand in awe of Him
Say among the nations that the Lord is king: He has made the world so firm that it cannot be moved; and He shall judge the peoples with equity
Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad: let the sea roar and all that fills it
Let the fields rejoice and everything in them: then shall the trees of the wood shout with joy before the Lord
For He comes, He comes to judge the earth: He shall judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with His truth.

EPISTLE

Titus 2:11- 14

The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

This is the Word of the Lord **Thanks be to God**

GOSPEL

Luke 2:1 – 14

Glory to You, Lord Jesus Christ

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,

and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all on whom his favour rests."

This is the Gospel of the Lord
Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ

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 of Israel 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 And take others with us!

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, and 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

This 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 the story is all about.

Sentence

My eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory for Your people Israel. **Luke 2:30-2**

Collect

Saving God, Whose Son Jesus was presented in the temple and was acclaimed the glory of Israel, and the light of the nations, grant that in Him we may be presented to You, and in the world may reflect His glory, Who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever **Amen**

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3

PSALM

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EPISTLE

Galatians 4: 4 – 7

GOSPEL

Luke 2:22-40

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

It is rather terribly easy to read and misunderstand the writings of the old prophets, especially if you are not aware of the situation into which they were written, and to which they applied. There are those who still look for ‘fulfillment’ of prophecy, not realising that OT prophecy is not star-gazing stuff, but is rather pointing to God at work.

Isaiah was writing about the time of the end of the Exile experience of Israel at around 520BC, when the People of God were without country, capital or temple. That, in contemporary consideration, neutered both them and their God!

What Isaiah was expecting was the removal of the disgrace by the return of the people to their own land. When that happened, Israel’s enemies (and bad-moutherers) would see that Israel’s God was rather different to the rest of the world divinities, which, hopefully, would get them to sit up and take some notice. *It is as well to bear in mind, before we idealise Israel, that there were a great number of Jewish exiles who decided NOT to return to their own land, as life had proved rather too prosperous where they were. Hence the Diaspora was added to, after the dispersion of the Northern Kingdom some 200 years before.*

Psalm

Psalms may either interest you or perhaps bore you, but this one ought to make us sit up more than a little. There are a couple of rather interesting points that we modern sophisticates need to take on board, as we look at the way ancient Israel viewed the Almighty (they would never, never call Him God!)

Notice the strange (to us) way in which Israel could understand that their God was Lord even over things in nature and life that were beyond their own experience. ‘Monsters and all deeps’ may have been quite beyond the experience of the run-of-the-mill Jew, but even that Jew knew that God knew all about them and so they were not beyond Him. That may seem to be a somewhat naïve approach to us, but please do stop and see that said Jews tended to have a rather wider and broader picture of God than many present-day Christians have. In other words, we need to take a leaf out of their book.

Epistle

This is but a tiny snippet of an Epistle today, but as someone once said, ‘it dribbles a bibful!’ There is a lot to ponder here. First of all, catch sight that Paul is making it quite clear that when God is at work in and with His people, it is always through a person, and a little person at that. Nothing of what you know as Gospel

would have been possible without Mary. Nothing would have been possible with another human, Jesus. His identification with us had to be complete, so that we could and can relate to Him and His enormous work. But still see that Jesus' crucifixion would have been seen, by those who did it, as a nobody being got rid of. No big deal. And yet it *is!*

GOSPEL

The Song of Simeon as included in today's Gospel has been embedded in my mind since, as a choir boy, I joined in singing this at Evensong – and that from during the WWII years. That gets to be a while ago now. I have to confess that the impact of the words did not hit until teenage or later, for reasons I will record later.

There are quite some issues that these passages require us to ponder, not least of which was the obedience of Joseph and Mary in fulfilling their obligations to the Old Covenant as Jesus moved in infancy. The requirement at 8 days old was for Jesus' circumcision, (reflected in the BCP's requirement for baptism of children, and for the same reason.) Circumcision was not showing Jesus' acceptance of God, but rather vice versa. It was the sign or sacrament of initiation into the Covenant.

Those two ancient worthies present at the time must have been fascinating old folk. Simeon has long held a firm place in my heart, as I picture the man, growing from youth to great age, awaiting the promise of which he was certain, but of which he was given no sign until not all that long before his death. Likewise Anna, who may well have been seen by some of her contemporaries as 'off with the fairies.'

What hit me with greatest impact about Simeon, was that he saw Jesus' purpose as going way beyond any introverted Israel, to the entire world. That underlines an enormous breadth of vision, especially for someone who may well have travelled not further in his lifetime than perhaps to Galilee, which, in this State, would equate perhaps from Adelaide to Port Wakefield. Hardly a jet-setter, eh!

It takes enormous vision to realise that God's vision, too, encompassed not just a tiny minority (and rather despised) like the Jews. Simeon was aware too that the Gospel Jesus came to live and bring would NOT find widespread acceptance, and that would have severe repercussions on Jesus' Mum.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I was not permitted to join the Choir in my Church in Sydney until I was at least ten years old. That prohibition was in place because, I understand, I was a noisy kid, and noisy kids had no place in the solemnity of a Choir. That was in 1944, but even 10 years later, I was refused permission to become a Lay Preacher because I was likely to whistle or make other comment if I made a mistake in the service!!!!) But back to the Choir,

In the old Morning and Evening Prayer services⁴ Canticles were the order of the day, sung of course. Some canticles were Psalms, like the Venite⁵ and others were Scripture passages like the Magnificat (the Song of Mary) and the Nunc Dimittis – this Song of Simeon. SO, as mentioned above, the words were hammered into my thick skull long, long before they made much in the way of sense to me. But, when they did
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I had been brought up in the era when being a Christian was one's very private preserve, and none of anyone else's business. That was a nice and safe way to go, all very Anglican I suspect, which led me at least to the perception that the business was so private that one needed only to hold all this close to the chest. It also removed me from the necessity, so it ran, of having to find any real reason to hold the faith. If it was private, then I did not need to explain it to others. I did not even need to explain it to myself. It was different to every other part of my life, and that is what made it 'spiritual.' It was a lovely and very useful escape clause. It has also explained why, for a couple of generations or so, the Faith has had no point of contact for very many people indeed, even of our own culture and country. Two or more generations have been lost.

But Simeon mucked all that up for me. Simeon had the *hide* to sing about Jesus –and Israel, and the Church - being 'a light to lighten the Gentiles ' and that did not mean to make them less, but rather to provide

⁴ Of the Book of Common Prayer, 1662 with some updates!

⁵ So named from the old Latin Psalm 95 O come....

them with the sort of light they needed to find their way in life. If that is the case, then it was incumbent on me to do a right royal re-think of what I understood the Faith to be.

What is it, then, that Gentiles needed then and now, which they did not have? The answer to that was not all that easy to find in that period of history after the War when, in my experience, almost everybody was caring and trustworthy, and life and livelihoods were valued, and one could always feel safe wherever they were. It was safe to travel on Sydney trains at night, even when passengers were few. I remember walking home after taking out a girl, and that walk home was about three miles in the outer suburbs.

You may find this odd, but it was not until the very early '60s that I made a shattering discovery. By that time I was in orders, and assistant in my first Parish. And I found out how many of the other half lived. And it was not a pretty sight. Whilst I might still walk the streets at night, I found families dysfunctional, and kids left in cars outside pubs until quite late. From that time on, it became increasingly clear that even Christians themselves hid behind a Gospel that promised life after this, and who hid themselves from the harsh reality of present life. That was all too hard. It had become escapism at its most selfish.

Reconciliation is what people need, and that not just with God if I may dare express it that way, but also reconciliation with each other. The further one looks, the further this same dis-reconciliation becomes increasingly obvious, in communities, in countries, between countries and internationally.