Sunday 6th December, 2009 **Second Sunday in Advent**

Sentence
By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. ***Luke 1:78-9***

Collect
O Lord Jesus Christ, Who at Your first coming, sent Your messenger to prepare the way before You; grant that the ministers and stewards of Your mysteries may likewise 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 **Malachi 3: 1 – 14**

I am about to send my messenger to clear a path before me. Suddenly the Lord whom you seek will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight is here, here already, says the Lord of Hosts. Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand firm when he appears? He is like a refiner's fire, like a fuller's soap; he will take his seat, testing and purifying; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver, and so they will be fit to bring offerings to the Lord. Thus the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as they were in former days, in years long past.

I shall appear before you in court, quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers, and perjurers, against those who cheat the hired labourer of his wages, who wrong the widow and the fatherless, who thrust the alien aside and do not fear me, says the Lord of Hosts. I, the Lord, do not change, and you have not ceased to be children of Jacob. Ever since the days of your forefathers you have been wayward and have not kept my laws. If you return to me, I shall turn back to you, says the Lord of Hosts. You ask, "How can we return?' Can a human defraud God? Yet you defraud me. You ask, "How have we defrauded you?" "Why, over tithes and contributions. There is a curse on you all, your entire nation, because you defraud me. Bring the whole tithe into the treasury; let there be food in my house. Put me to the proof, says the Lord of Hosts, and see if I do not open windows in the sky and pour a blessing on you as long as there is need. I shall forbid pests to destroy the produce of your soil, and your vines will not shed their fruit, says the Lord of Hosts. All nations will count you happy, for yours will be a favoured land," says the Lord of Hosts.

You have used hard words about me, says the Lord. Yet you ask, "How have we spoken against you?" "You have said, 'To serve God is futile. What do we gain from the Lord of Hosts by observing his rules and behaving with humble submission?' "

FOR THE PSALM **The Song of Zechariah**

Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel: Who has come to His people and set them free
The Lord raised up for us a mighty Saviour: born of the house of His servant, David
Through the holy prophets, God promised of old: to save us from our enemies, from the hands of all who hate us
To show mercy to our forebears: and to remember His holy covenant
This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham: to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
Free to worship Him without fear: holy and righteous before Him all the days of our lives
And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High: for you will go before the Lord to prepare His way
To give people knowledge of salvation: by the forgiveness of their sins
In the tender compassion of our God: the dawn from on high shall break upon us
To shine on those who well in darkness and in the shadow of death
And to guide our feet into the way of peace.

EPISTLE **Philippians 1: 1 – 11**

From Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all God's people at Philippi, who are incorporate in Christ Jesus, with the bishops and deacons. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God every time I think of you; whenever I pray for you all, my prayers are always

joyful, because of the part you have taken in the work of the gospel from the first day until now. Of this I am confident, that he who started the good work in you will bring it to completion by the day of Christ Jesus. It is only natural that I should feel like this about you all, because I have great affection for you, knowing that, both while I am kept in prison and when I am called on to defend the truth of the gospel, you all share in this privilege of mine. God knows how I long for you all with the deep yearning of Christ Jesus himself. And this is my prayer that your love may grow ever richer in knowledge and insight of every kind, enabling you to learn by experience what things really matter. Then on the day of Christ you will be flawless and without blame, yielding the full harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

GOSPEL **Luke 3: 1 – 6**

In the fifteenth year of the emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea, when Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip prince of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias prince of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went all over the Jordan valley proclaiming a baptism in token of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the prophecies of Isaiah: A voice cries in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord; clear a straight path for him. Every ravine shall be filled in, and every mountain and hill levelled; winding paths shall be straightened, and rough ways made smooth; and all mankind shall see God's deliverance."

NOTES ON THE READINGS .....

Old Testament

For those who still seem to feel that the Old Testament prophets ranted and raved against human sin, without relenting or offering any options, it is as well to read these ancient authors properly. Stop and ponder, read slowly and think, **and see what is really being preached.**

Look closely and see that the old prophet is speaking against the fundamental dishonesty of the 'faithful' of the time. They seem to have turned the faith into some sort of rote practice: thoughtless, mechanical going through the motions and taking little or no notice of the realities of the Faith. Of course the whole thing became sterile, as it always will in any human activity. This sort of death comes to any human activity that gives no thought to the realities. Notice how Malachi points to the old verities of honesty and real response. That is what the Hebrew faith always focussed on, and it all crumbles when the focus is turned elsewhere.

It seems like we need Malachis often, even in our own day and age.

Psalm

This old canticle that appeared in Evensong, if I remember correctly, was one very familiar to me as a choir boy in days of yore. Those days the words came without impact on me, until I began to see why such things were included in worship – in the Anglican style.

God is always a God Who offers to rescue people from their own stupidity, if they dare but look to Him for help. Exodus, Exile and Christ event are the situations *par excellence* where this activity of God is seen most clearly. And the rescue is not to some remote and untouchable paradise, but to the very situation in which humans find themselves: when I am free to respond to God in all honesty, then there is not a lot that is likely to touch and damage me, in the real sense of the term.

Epistle

One of the delightful things about Paul's letter to the Philippians is the great pleasure Paul had in that group of people. It echoes through the pages of this short epistle, and its emphasis is on growth and development of the congregation. Do not imagine for one moment that Paul's reference to being flawless meant that the Philippians were perfect. No one ever is. Perhaps 'complete' is a better translation. And please, please, please, when you read the word 'righteousness' do be ready to understand that better as 'justice.' Δικιοσυνη - dikaiosune – is the word, and it translates justice, but be careful to realize that this is justice as God offers and operates. There is nothing retributive, punitive in this; corrective perhaps but not punitive. And His justice takes into account **all, repeat all** of the factors of the situation. There is no revenge or retaliation in His justice whatever. Never forget that!

GOSPEL

One of the traits that Luke exhibited, as underlined to us theological students, was his great attention to historical detail. Luke often made perfectly clear that what he had to write about was rooted in ordinary human, tangible history. (In fact, for some years before that education of mine, the assumption was that Luke made things up – until archaeological and other evidence proved Luke correct.)

So here in this run-up to Christmas, Luke offers two lines of thought: first the groundedness of the event in the ordinary run-of-the-mill experience of ordinary people. Linked with that is the connection between Exodus and Exile, back to the Lord of all Whose pattern of working is ever to bring things back from the threat of extinction and offer new life and hope. Never be afraid to see how most Biblical authors saw life both from the narrower as well as broader perspective.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

As I write this, I am in the middle of reading the story of William Wilberforce, best known for his long-drawn-out work towards abolishing the slave trade 200 years ago. While you may be surprised to find that comment as an intro to today's sermon notes, I offer a reason for the move.

One of the lessons we learn from history is that we do not learn (or certainly do not remember!) the lessons of history. One of the almost constant complaints or comments from Christians or non-believers these days concerns to apparent downturn in commitment to the Faith, as if it were something new. One of the repetitive comments in the book 'Amazing Grace,' has to do with the appalling state of England at the time, when even the Church was failing to take much notice at all of the faith once delivered. Amongst Wilberforce's goals for his country was the restoration of manners, the return to real values and to truth.

Thus, if you go back over history, here is a recurring need. The Evangelical Revival of that time illustrates the periodic need to urge people of whatever community to get back to basic values and to basic faith. *There is nothing new about it, as all history illustrates. We are going through yet another of those cycles – and the Christian needs to be aware of the responsibility that this requires.*

Advent comes annually as its own recurrent reminder of the importance of those issues in life to which the Faith has pointed, long and constantly and consistently. Human culture tends to go through contrary cycles of reduction to the lowest common denominator, as it did in England and the Continent in the Enlightenment period. Actually, to some extent it is oxymoronic to title that period as Enlightenment, for though there was real progress in many particulars, the reverse was the case in other issues. Anyone needs but a moment's thought to recognize that there are similar parallels in today's world of technological progress with contrasting regress in a wide range of other areas of life.

Now it may become clear how a very similar situation was raging in the time of Malachi's ministry. Here was no narrow-minded 'rager' against sinful people, but a significant and serious call to return to the long-time tested and tried values without which societies and cultures collapse under their own weight. You may notice reference to adulterers and perhaps get away with regarding such people as quite normal in this day and age. However if you turn your eyes away from the 'naughtiness' of such activity, to focus on the damage caused to people by them, then perhaps a clearer vision of the outcomes become apparent.

Notice further that Malachi – in line with almost all of the OT prophets – focussed on other damaging issues: wage-cheating, widow-damaging and other forms of injustice. It is no surprise to learn then that Wilberforce, in his day and age, found the same inequities and injustices, and was horrified to encounter enormous resistance from the upper classes as he tried to redress the imbalance. Even today, those who rail against 'religion' need to stop and see the extent to which the Faith once delivered is writ large in its emphasis on justice and truth, equity and compassion.

So this Season of Advent, designed as it is to prepare the way for the coming Christ, is – life Lent earlier in the year – a challenge to return to the important and communal issues of life and faith. How can I say I love God, whom I have not seen, when I do not love my brother, whom I have seen?

I suspect that this is all the needs to be said – for the issue is now over to you.

Sunday 13th December, 2009 **Third Sunday of Advent**

Sentence
Do not fear: the Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will renew you in His love. ***Zephaniah 3: 16 – 17***

Collect
Almighty God, You sent Your Son into a world where the wheat must be winnowed from the chaff, and evil clings even to that which is good; let the fire of Your Spirit purge us of all corruption, so that we may wait eagerly for Him Whose Day draws near, Your Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ. **AMEN**

Old Testament Lesson **Zephaniah 3: 14 – 20**

Zion, cry out for joy; raise the shout of triumph, Israel; be glad, rejoice with all your heart, daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has averted your punishment; he has swept away your foes. Israel, the Lord is among you as king; never again need you fear disaster. On that day this must be the message to Jerusalem: Fear not, Zion, let not your hands hang limp. The Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who will keep you safe. He will rejoice over you and be glad; he will show you his love once more; he will exult over you with a shout of joy as on a festal day. I shall take away your cries of woe and you will no longer endure reproach.

When that time comes; I shall deal with all who oppress you; I shall rescue the lost and gather the dispersed. I shall win for my people praise and renown throughout the whole world. When that time comes I shall gather you and bring you home. I shall win you renown and praise among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes. It is the Lord who speaks.

Psalm **A Song of Isaiah**

Behold, God is my salvation: I will trust and not be afraid
For the Lord is my strength and my song: and has become my salvation
With joy will you draw water: from the wells of salvation
On that day you will say: “Give thanks to the Lord, call upon His name
Make known His deeds among the nations: proclaim that His name is exalted”
Sing God’s praises, Who has triumphed gloriously: let this song be known in all the world
Shout and sing for joy, you that dwell in Zion: for great in Your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

EPISTLE **Philippians 4: 4 – 7**

I wish you joy in the Lord always. Again I say: all joy be yours. Be known to everyone for your consideration of others. The Lord is near; do not be anxious, but in everything make your requests known to God in prayer and petition with thanksgiving. Then the peace of God, which is beyond all understanding, will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus.

And now, my friends, all that is true, all that is noble, all that is just and pure, all that is lovable and attractive, whatever is excellent and admirable--fill your thoughts with these things. Put into practice the lessons I taught you, the tradition I have passed on, all that you heard me say or saw me do; and the God of peace will be with you.

GOSPEL **Luke 3: 7 – 18**

Crowds of people came out to be baptized by John the Baptist, and he said to them: "Vipers' brood! Who warned you to escape from the wrath that is to come? Prove your repentance by the fruit you bear; and do not begin saying to yourselves, "We have Abraham for our father." I tell you that God can make children for Abraham out of these stones. Already the axe is laid to the roots of the trees; and every tree that fails to produce good fruit is cut down and thrown on the fire.” The people asked him, "Then what are we to do?” He replied, "Whoever has two shirts must share with him who has none, and whoever has food must do the same.” Among those who came to be baptized were tax-collectors, and they said to him, "Teacher, what are

we to do?” He told them, "Exact no more than the assessment.” Some soldiers also asked him, "And what of us?” To them he said, "No bullying; no blackmail; make do with your pay!”

The people were all agog, wondering about John, whether perhaps he was the Messiah, but he spoke out and said to them all: "I baptize you with water; but there is one coming who is mightier than I am. I am not worthy to unfasten the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing-shovel is ready in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn on a fire that can never be put out.”

In this and many other ways he made his appeal to the people and announced the good news.

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Before we go anywhere, hands up those who have heard of the prophet Zephaniah before? The fact that this is one of the twelve Minor Prophets gives you an excuse, of course, and it also raises a problem for the Biblicist. More of that anon. There is also the issue that we Anglicans are often not as Biblically aware as we ought to be, in a world where the faith is under some stress and attack. Christianity has some sharp edges and is far from being some sort of chloroformed response to life.

OT Lesson

It must have been very easy for many of the readers of this almost unknown prophet, Zephaniah, to assume that God would do everything necessary for Israel’s rescue, escape and survival; all they had to do was wait. Life’s reality of course is quite different, and one needs to attend to this prophet (as with most of them) with rather more care and forethought.

Psalm

As we follow the comment from the OT Lesson, I wonder if you have ever questioned the basis for the confidence expressed so often in the Psalms, as epitomised here. A look at the history of Israel might leave one wondering if there were any grounds for confidence, but please think a little more.

One of the things that occur to me constantly as such expressions of faith are laid out, that the reality behind these verses lies rather deeper than initially evident. Please notice how, with all the emphasis on God’s ‘righteousness’[1] there is the clear and constant picture that, as the People of God reflect the nature of God, while there may well be conflict against the spirit of the then current age, the ancient verities of life, guaranteed as it were by God Himself, will emerge even against attempts to destroy them. The Cross is the example *par excellence.* In that entire attempt to submerge and destroy Jesus and the truth that He represents, all was overturned by the Resurrection. Not only in this situation but in all life, truth might be suppressed for a time, **but can never be destroyed. Truth, life love, will rise again.**

Epistle

Whilst it may be said, and is constantly, that Christians are often far too conservative and old-fashioned, it remains true that we do underline and emphasise those aspects of life and relationships that produce benefits for all. That second paragraph of today’s reading was an absolute favourite of a lovely elderly parishioner of mine in years past, and each year as this reading was repeated, Mary would almost jump up out of her pew with delight. These verses had been part of her early education and were embedded in her memory, her heart and her very living. Like truth and justice, these ancient verities are also so valuable as to be indestructible.

GOSPEL

It is small wonder that dear old John the Baptist raised the ire of many who heard him. Totally uncompromising was this man from the Essenes, for he left little room to manoeuvre to those who lived life differently. Even today his uncompromising position remains rather hard to follow to the letter.

However, the point needs to be underlined: to be a Christian disciple is NOT some form of escapism, and certainly not superstition. It is and always has been the serious and solemn determination to follow the

[1] Righteousness = justice, remember!

Shema – *love God with heart, soul mind and strength, and one's neighbour as oneself.* That approach to life allows no possibility of war and conflict. *Ever.*

NOTES FOR A SERMON

One of the views of God that recurs constantly, seems to me, is that old hoary thing that insists that if God is God then He will always come to the aid of His people and right all the wrongs that occur to them and stop them when they undertake foolish or dangerous actions. For instance, there is the oft-repeated plea of those involved in wars of various periods, complaining that God did not intervene to stop the conflict. 'If God is Almighty, why did He not step in and remove the problems?' Ask anyone with children as to what happens when that sort of protective cotton-wool approach to life gets one, and the answer is that it is totally destructive to the protected person. It removes all responsibility, and leaves the person expecting all life's problems to be solved, and that is a very destructive process indeed. In fact it seems to me that rather too many young people today expect to have all their issues dealt with at the press of a button and with no commitment from them, *and one need look no further at the damage that causes.*

If there is one thing that is a constant challenge, in Old Testament and New, it is that call and demand that the People of God reflect the character of God in their relationships, lives and activities. This is no Divine cop-out, but rather the more profound recognition of the fact that my response to life and people is a measure of my maturity or lack of it. And it is only through passing through the various vicissitudes of life and responding to them affirmatively, that I grow and develop as a mature human being.

This may look like a twee illustration, but it gets the point. Many, many years ago I was trying to provide shade on the northern side of our Rectory at the time. One of our friends had a cedar tree or two, and so I gathered quite a number of seeds from them. Well inside the fence-line was where I planted a series of seeds, designed to provide a line of shelter when the trees developed. It was a fairly slow business waiting for things to develop, although one of the seeds must have fallen in a flute of the corrugated iron fence. That seed germinated and grew very rapidly indeed, surprisingly so! In fact I was getting impatient at the other plants. It was not until the rapid growth of the slender trunk of that protected plant reached to the top of the fence that the reality of life hit it. No longer protected from both sun and wind, its rocket-like development came to a sudden and dramatic stop. It shrivelled and very soon died! Those unprotected plants grew rather more slowly, but their development was consolidated at each step of the way, and there were no death throes – even for years afterwards.

Whether as God or as parent, protective smothering is no substitute for real love. And those parents who act responsibly with their children are well aware that part of the pain of parenthood is that it hurts them more than their kids. And kid complaints are constant, repetitive and undermining. But who is right in the long run?

I suspect that enough as been said here.

Sunday 20th December, 2009 **Fourth Sunday of Advent**

Sentence
Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken of by the Lord.
Luke 1:45

Collect
Gracious God, You have visited Your people and redeemed us in Your Son; may our hearts leap for joy at the sound of your word, and move us by Your Spirit to bless Your wonderful works. We ask this through Him Whose coming is certain, Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON **Micah 5: 2 – 5a**

But from you, Bethlehem in Ephrathah, small as you are among Judah's clans, from you will come a king for me over Israel, one whose origins are far back in the past, in ancient times. Therefore only until she who is pregnant has given birth will he give up Israel; and then those of the people that survive will rejoin their brethren. He will rise up to lead them in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. They will enjoy security, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. Then there will be peace.

FOR THE PSALM **The Song of Mary**

My soul tells out the greatness of the Lord, my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour;
for he has looked with favour on his servant, lowly as she is.
From this day forward all generations will count me blessed,
for the Mighty God has done great things for me. His name is holy,
His mercy sure from generation to generation toward those who fear him.
He has shown the might of his arm, he has routed the proud and all their schemes;
He has brought down monarchs from their thrones, and raised on high the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.
He has come to the help of Israel his servant, as he promised to our forefathers;
He has not forgotten to show mercy to Abraham and his children's children for ever."

EPISTLE **Hebrews 10:5-10**

At Christ's coming into the world, he says: Sacrifice and offering you did no desire, but you have prepared a body for me. Whole-offerings and sin-offerings you did not delight in. Then I said, "Here I am: as it is written of me in the scroll, I have come, O God, to do your will." First he says, "Sacrifices and offerings, whole-offerings and sin-offerings, you did not desire or delight in," although the law prescribes them. Then he adds, "Here I am: I have come to do your will." He thus abolishes the former to establish the latter. And it is by the will of God that we have been consecrated, through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

GOSPEL **Luke 1: 39-45**

Soon afterwards Mary set out and hurried away to a town in the uplands of Judah. She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby stirred in her womb. Then Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed in a loud voice, "God's blessing is on you above all women, and his blessing is on the fruit of your womb. Who am I, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? I tell you, when your greeting sounded in my ears, the baby in my womb leapt for joy. Happy is she who has had faith that the Lord's promise to her would be fulfilled!"

NOTES ON THE READINGS

If there are major issues that arise from this rather difficult set of readings, they seem to be ones too easily overlooked. That is strange because the overall message of Scripture is there for all to see. Micah, that minor OT prophet, expresses what must have been an unexpected message even to people of his own day – that God works through little people, not through the great ones of this world. History is all too ready to list the heavies and important ones, but if the truth be known, most of what makes this world go around stems from ordinary little people getting on with what they see as important to be done.

Bethlehem, it may surprise some, is but one hop, step and jump from Jerusalem. A handful of kilometres, and no more. Living in the shadow of great places is as debilitating as living in the shadow of some great human being.

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Have I mentioned before how I discovered almost by accident how differently some Jewish folk look at their Scriptures and understand them? Seems it is an issue for Christians as well, for the sort of thing many Christian people look for with the prophets is 'fulfillment.' I would ask you to look otherwise, for the real issues lie otherwise.

Bethlehem is about 8 kms from Jerusalem, and in this day and age, the intervening distance would be completely built up. Not so then. And this small town would have been quite overshadowed by its far more important neighbour. And that is the focus of Micah's words. The real point of what Micah is saying lies in his emphasis on God's involvement of the little people. Perhaps we tend to miss the point, but the whole reason for Mary being mother of our Lord is not that she was upper stratum, or hugely important. She was neither, and nor was Joseph. That Mary seems to have been elevated to the pantheon, so to speak, misses the whole point, or perhaps allows us to evade the real issue. If God then worked through little people, He is not all that likely to change tack: so yes, He may be calling you to some charge or ministry. Don't wait for the high and holy ones to do the job. They are most unlikely to respond.

PSALM

In the light of what is written above, just stop, re-read and ponder this song of Mary. (Take time, too, to compare this song with that of Hannah (1 Sam 1) before the birth of Samuel.)

Then begin to realize that much of both songs have to do with matters of what we may describe as natural justice. People of those days (and increasingly, people of our own day) were confronted with leaders and rulers who considered themselves above the law, and above anyone and everyone else. Power and wealth mad, they made mockery of their leadership, and that mockery impinged on the little people. Small wonder that God rejected such people from taking a leading role in His calling.

EPISTLE

One would have to be Jewish to follow the convoluted argument expressed here. Do not be surprised if this passage seems to have little to say to you ..... until you take on board what he been written above. 'Prepared a body for me .... ?' It is only in the real world that God's work is ever done. No escape from reality here. 'I have come to do Your will' is the real and complete issue. Once again there is small room for any great *beau geste*, but in your case as in Jesus, it is in the cup of cold water, or the gentle and not necessarily visible caring that the Divine Will is obeyed. Little people again do you see!

GOSPEL

It should come as no surprise to you that none of the people who were focal in the unfolding of the Christmas story were top notch, leadership people. Almost all were utter non-entities as far as the 'heavies' were concerned. Even so, it is interesting to find that Elizabeth saw the real importance of Mary. The real issue for all concerned was their faithfulness in doing the will of the Lord.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

As I mentioned a week or so ago, I have been reading *Amazing Grace*, the story of Wilberforce's push to abolish the slave trade. One of the surprises for Wilberforce and his allies was the ugliness of the contrary pressure in spite of all the evidence of total and ghastly abuse of Negro slaves, including women and children, and the high loss of life in their transport to the West Indies.

There seem not to be too many modern Christians who are all that aware of the vast gulf between Christian discipleship and the general 'normal' perception of what is just and what is justifiable. And this series of readings, and the Song of Mary in particular, makes clear which direction Christians need to take.

Quite a number of years ago now, nearly 20 actually, the local Mothers' Union asked me to speak on this Song of Mary, and it was obvious that they expected some sort of bland, religious, 'spiritual'

meandering. I asked them if they were sure of their subject, as I expected it to explode in their faces. They were sure, but were startled at the outcome.

After we get past the opening verses which seem on the surface to be bland enough, we are confronted, completely unapologetically, with nothing less than a call to oppose the *status quo* and 'bring down the mighty from their seats!' It is a remarkable *volte face* from what might be expected. It is a call to equity, to eradicate thirst and famine, and to what Australians might regard as exercising the tall poppy syndrome. Mind you, there is a clear and present indication of the method this must follow, and the Cross of Christ is the *exemplar par excellence.* However, the direction is entirely culture-changing.

For those ladies who grew up in the atmosphere of religion being private, personal and covert, it came as a huge shock. When that is related to the fact that it was precisely this sort of direction that led Jesus to the Cross, it became even more unsettling. Jesus was crucified precisely because He was seen as a total threat to those in command, and to their patterns of leadership; a*nd to anyone else's leadership if at all similar to those enemies of Christ.* ***And this is something that rather too many modern Christians and their leaders seem yet to come to terms with.***

There are two particular issues in this pre-Christmas story that seem to stick out like organ stops, for me at least.

The first is that we Christians have tended so to idolise Mary, mother of our Lord, as to lift her out of exactly the position given her by God and by Scripture. Here was no demi-god or –goddess but one plain ordinary humble unremarkable human being whose main aim in life was to follow God's will. In other words, Mary was a 'one-of-us,' a run of the mill simple human being. And never forget that.

What has happened from the vast elevation of Mary has been the perception that God can only work through demi-gods and Saints with a capital S. And that is exactly what this tale demolishes. **You may well be the one God calls to accomplish what He puts in front of you, because, unlike the high and holy ones, you are unlikely to demand all manner of emoluments and blandishments. You will do it because you are called, full stop, Amen.**

The second matter is rather clear and powerful. As a follower of Christ you are called to redress the injustices and inequities that you encounter, as they are running counter to God's plans for human beings. But, like the prophets of old, you need to be aware that, like your Lord, you will be sticking out your neck and may well pay the supreme sacrifice for such actions. Do not think, for one moment, that I exaggerate, for the further our culture heads in the hedonistic and selfish direction, the greater will emerge the antipathy to the Gospel. Christmas is no lovely celebration reason to get the family together. It is there to ensure that there will be a future for not only your family, but for the entire civilization.

And that is hardly bland comfort, now is it!

Friday 25th December, 2009 **Christmas Eve /Day**

Sentence
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. …. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. ***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 have been 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 9:2 – 7**

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; on those who lived in a land as dark as death a light has dawned. You have increased their joy and given them great gladness; they rejoice in your presence as those who rejoice at harvest, as warriors exult when dividing spoil. For you have broken the yoke that burdened them, the rod laid on their shoulders, the driver's goad, as on the day of Midian's defeat. The boots of earth-shaking armies on the march, the soldiers' cloaks rolled in blood, all are destined to be burnt, food for the fire.

For a child has been born to us, a son is given to us; he will bear the symbol of dominion on his shoulder, and his title will be: Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty Hero, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. Wide will be the dominion and boundless the peace bestowed on David's throne and on his kingdom, to establish and support it with justice and righteousness from now on, for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will do this.

PSALM **97**

The Lord is King, let the earth rejoice: let the multitude of islands be glad
Clouds and darkness are round about Him: righteousness and justice are the foundations of His throne
Fire goes before Him: and burns up His enemies on every side.
His lightnings light the world: the earth sees it and quakes
The mountains melt like wax before His face: from before the face of the Lord of all the earth
The heavens have proclaimed His righteousness: and all the peoples have seen His glory
They are ashamed, all who serve idols and glory in mere nothings: all the gods bow down before Him
Zion heard and was glad, and the daughters of Judah rejoiced: because of Your judgements O God
For You, Lord, are most high over all the earth: You are exalted far above all gods
The Lord loves those who hate evil: the Lord guards the life of the faithful, and delivers them from the hand of the ungodly.
Light dawns for the righteous; and joy for the true of heart
Rejoice in the Lord, you righteous: and give thanks to His holy Name

EPISTLE **Hebrews 1:1 – 12**

When in times past God spoke to our forefathers, he spoke in many and varied ways through the prophets. But in this the final age he has spoken to us in his Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things; and through him he created the universe. He is the radiance of God's glory, the stamp of God's very being, and he sustains the universe by his word of power. When he had brought about purification from sins, he took his seat at the right hand of God's Majesty on high, raised as far above the angels as the title he has inherited is superior to theirs.

To which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my son; today I have become your father,' or again, "I shall be his father, and he will be my son"? Again, when he presents the firstborn to the world, he says, "Let all God's angels pay him homage." Of the angels he says: He makes his angels winds, and his ministers flames of fire; but of the Son: Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever, and the sceptre of his kingdom is the sceptre of justice. You have loved right and hated wrong; therefore, O God, your God has set

you above your fellows by anointing you with oil, the token of joy. And again: By you, Lord, were earth's foundations laid of old, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; like clothes they will all wear out. You will fold them up like a cloak, they will be changed like any garment. But you are the same, and your years will have no end.

GOSPEL **John 1 :1 – 14**

In the beginning the Word already was. The Word was in God's presence, and what God was, the Word was. He was with God at the beginning, and through him all things came to be; without him no created thing came into being. In him was life, and that life was the light of mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never mastered it.

There appeared a man named John. He was sent from God, and came as a witness to testify to the light, so that through him all might become believers. He was not himself the light; he came to bear witness to the light. The true light which gives light to everyone was even then coming into the world. He was in the world; but the world, though it owed its being to him, did not recognize him. He came to his own, and his own people would not accept him. But to all who did accept him, to those who put their trust in him, he gave the right to become children of God, born not of human stock, by the physical desire of a human father, but of God.

So the Word became flesh; he made his home among us, and we saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.

NOTES ON THE READINGS …….

Old Testament

This alternative reading, whilst well-known, may go over the head of the normal reader, especially when it talks about all those bloodthirsty issues. So ponder a moment and think about this: what is the contrast set out in the reading, without even wondering about the historical context? On the one hand, images of war – on the other, images of peace. Now is that enough to make you think a little?

Take this how you like, but is not one of the major issues of today that of finding paths to peace? And do not those who talk most about peace act most about war? Do not imagine that life was all that different in Isaiah's day (and it is **1st** Isaiah, around 700BC.) What the ancient prophet is looking for and expecting from God is a path to peace. And with the wisdom of hindsight, we can look back and see that this path to peace is materialised in Jesus. And it is not done with force of arms, but with exercise of that which leads to peace, *even if that path is longer than one may hope.* Notice two aspects that underline the direction of this path: **justice and righteousness.** To be a little pedantic, they are two aspects of the same thing, *justice.* And while too many humans understand justice in terms of their opponents getting their come-uppance, the reality, the Biblical and human reality, is rather quite different. If you and I are in conflict, and wish to find resolution, then ***all the factors of the dispute need to be taken into account and brought to resolution.*** Only then is justice served, and only then is peace at all possible. Where there is no justice there can never be peace.

If you like to go on a bit, the need for righteousness can be expressed in terms of both of us being open, honest and fair dinkum with each other, without baloney, without cant, without hidden agenda. Now tell me that there is no one on this planet that would not like to see such outcomes! Now stop and see that you have reached the heart of the Incarnation, the heart of Gospel, the hearts of Jesus from those very old and very searching words……..

Psalm

It is something of an imperative, in understanding Scripture, to have some idea of the period in Jewish history from which any particular item comes. Psalms come from a widespread period, tho' the earlier ones can be assumed to emerge from earlier times. King David is said to have written many, and he lived around 1,000BC. Then, as you might imagine, most people operated on the principle that power was right. So here you have an amalgam of those sorts of thoughts mixed in with the recognition of the need for

justice and peace. Today, we need to emphasise the latter and then go on to see that the former comes only by holding out on offer the possibility of peace when righteousness and justice are firmly on the agenda.[2]

EPISTLE

From my childhood, this passage has stuck out for me like the proverbial organ stops. Apart from anything else, it showed me how well God understands humans, by giving them a bit of the puzzle at a time. You may tell me something wise and useful, but if I am not 'there,' there is little point. One piece of the jigsaw at a time, and I can ponder, absorb, and take on board. Only then can I grow. Be patient with me

So God, with Israel. Two steps forward, one step back, but simply. Slowly. Patiently. Even with the Incarnation, God has come among us, not with all the whizzbang and oomph, but as a human. And it is only *post-eventum* that we have the chance to absorb the implications. And when it does finally hit us between the eyes, those implications are enormous.

I assume that you follow what I am saying: that it took something like 3,000 years for Israel to begin to grasp the significance of where God was heading, so to speak. While you may find this comment rather useless, please stop and see that you are also expected to grow little by little and not on one fell swoop.

GOSPEL

And this Gospel passage has always been Christmas to me. Εν αρχη ην ο λογος – In the beginning was the Word. John's obvious reflection back to Genesis 1 leaves the other Evangelists' openings for dead. It is a hugely significant statement that the reader is not expected to <u>believe</u> initially, but to recognize that the author will provide all the necessary evidence in the rest of his book.

John's statement is extraordinarily potent. He is actually saying that the point and purpose of life is to be found only in the Word-made-flesh. He is saying that the Word always was the answer, always will be the answer, and don't bother looking for any other answer. John was also painfully aware that there would be multitudes of people who did not and will not give a stuff about such things, and will turn their backs on the only reason (logos) for existence that there is. People, as my old father used to say, are funny cattle!

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I wonder if you are one of those for whom the whole business of Christmas has become 'ho-hum?' Been there done that, and once the kids are grown up, there seems to be little point. One of my complaints, if you will pardon me, is that the fairly recent emphasis on 'family celebration' has managed to remove the real emphasis and replace it will a lesser one.

Logos. Reason for existence.

You will know that I am neither medical nor psychological expert, but it does strike me as significant that in this day and age when everything is reduced to the lowest common denominator and God removed to the dustbin of history, that depression becomes the great horror and disability. When I ponder the possibility of there being neither point nor purpose in life, then I would have either to make up one for myself, or go slightly bonkers, or both.

Logos. *Raison d'etre.* For anyone used to denigrating 'religion,' it may sound preposterous, but the reality is quite surprising. For most of us who tend to have grown up under the misapprehension that Jesus is some sort of 'optional extra' to life, the Biblical realities come as something of a culture shock. Jesus is λογος - reason for existence, not just for us but for everyone. But what does that mean?

It is certainly not grounds for anyone going around demanding everyone respond positively and be baptised and all that. It is a rather wider-ranging sort of statement than that. If you will come with me a while I will try and fill this out more than a little.

[2] Keep your eyes open for the number of times in Scripture when those words, righteousness and justice, hit airspace. You just may be amazed, and may need to do a solid rethink of the faith and your response to it.

From very early times, Biblically speaking, the Hebrew Faith has tended to revolve around the *Shema Israel*, where the emphasis is on loving God – which later grew to loving one's neighbour. Compare that with the life realities of today or any other period of time, and you will realize that such an approach to life is a rarity indeed. But Hebrew Faith was nothing if it was not an attempt to understand what it means to be human and alive in this universe. Hebrew Faith was always a rather wide-ranging lifestyle 'thing' rather than 'religion.' When it was turned into the latter, it lost all of its sting and point and purpose. (The same thing happens to Christianity, I might add!!!)

Small wonder then that as the centuries rolled on the prophets were very vocal indeed, not so much against 'sin,' as being **for** those life practices and attitudes that led to very much more peaceful resolutions to issues. Justice, integrity, what Australians call 'fair dinkumness' were pointed to, and its opposites spoken against. Jesus was just as scone hot on such issues, as you will see if you read the Gospels with your eyes and ears open.

One could take the widest view, and remark that what John is saying in this most remarkable of Gospel passages, is that if you want to know where best to find life at its most significant, satisfying and real, then see in Jesus that most excellent of patterns, and reflect the characteristics in your own life and relationships.

If I were to hate you, then I would be on the path to destroy both you and me; if I take offence and revenge at each opportunity, then that same isolation and destruction is almost inevitable. If I should go all defensive and isolationist, the outcome would be similar if not so damaging and quick. One hardly needs much in the way of illustrations from real life to establish the truth of those positions. Even where I now live, I find the great tragedy is of people around living in isolation, and virtually rejecting any sort of connection or conversation. Is it fear of us, or for themselves? This city-bred self-protection may seem a safe way to go, but there is little or no room for love of neighbour. There is no community at all. We are reduced to isolated individuals, and that leads to tragedy.

The whole point in spending time in this joyous season on such a focus is to underline both the fact of and the reality of the potential outcome from the Incarnation. Here in the Christ event, from His birth to Ascension, is the illustration of how things could be, are designed to be and are not out of the range of human possibility. There is no tinge of superstition or cant; there **is** a huge challenge to each and every person to be committed and real.

Sunday 27th December, 2009 **First Sunday after Christmas**

Sentence
Clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony, and let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts and be thankful ***Colossians 3:14-5***

Collect
God of community, Whose call is more insistent than ties of family or blood; may we so respect and love those whose lives are linked with ours that we fail not in loyalty to You, but make choices according to Your will, through Jesus Christ our Lord **Amen**

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON **1 Samuel 2: 18 – 20 & 26**

Samuel was ministering before the LORD, a boy wearing a linen ephod. His mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year, when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, "May the LORD repay you with children by this woman for the gift that she made to the LORD"; and then they would return to their home.

Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the LORD and with the people.

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 hosts
Praise Him, sun and moon: praise Him all you stars of light
Praise Him, you highest heaven: and you waters that are above the heavens
Let them 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.

EPISTLE **Colossians 3: 12 – 17**

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

GOSPEL **Luke 2: 41-52**

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him.

After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them.

Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

Notes on the readings

Old Testament

If you find it odd that, this Sunday after Christmas, we have the story of the very young Samuel, please do stop and see (and read 1 Samuel yourself, I suggest) to catch sight of the close parallel between the two youngsters, Samuel and Jesus. In fact, the parallels between Hannah and Mary have been remarked upon already in this set of note for Year C.

It may well have more impact on those who are mothers, but it should extend to the male of the species as well. Here is the profoundly moving story of a Mum and her boy who were totally committed to the God of Israel, whatever that cost. While some may well feel that approach impaired the relationship of the people involved, I would suggest that the opposite was the case: Samuel evolved into a singular and wise prophet, and a remarkably brave one as well.

Psalm

You may feel, also, that sometimes the Psalms can become little more than an exercise in boredom, and wonder why the ancient worthies bothered to preserve them. But please stop a moment to realize that part of the genius of Hebrew faith and its evolution was that the remarkable 'religion' of the Jews emerged as those fascinating people observed and responded to all that occurred in the ordinary business of living. Here was no response to dogma and creed: here they listened and watched, observed and thought, and produced a response to life that is without parallel in the world. Modern humanity is far too removed from nature, and in fact is determined to remove it. The further that process moved the greater becomes the distance from reality. And it takes little thought to work out where that gets anyone.

Epistle

Now does this all sound a little trite and twee, or not? Naive perhaps. But re-read the passage and consider the alternative, that of following today's trends and explode with huge anger at hurts, real and imagined. Today's news media are so pathologically full of that sort of behaviour, and the denigration of other human beings.

To follow Christ is to reflect His characteristics, not least of which is the counting to ten before acting or reacting. I find this rather easier to type than I do to live it, but I know with certainty which is the more productive and creative path to follow.

GOSPEL

I wonder how many or how few people know of this fascinating little cameo of Jesus at the time of His Bar Mitzvah? It used to be good Sunday School stuff, which may be why people of my age knew it well. But there are some interesting insights both into Jesus and into parenthood that show up here.

It must have been hard work being Mary and Joseph, not because of Jesus' capacity for being precocious (in the proper sense) but also being aware of the future of their Child. There is no need to see anything miraculous in Jesus' development for lots of kids are aware, deep inside, of an inner guide to something which, at that stage, they are unsure.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

"Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?' was the AV translation of the answer the young Jesus offered his worried parents. It is an olde worlde way of expressing what now looks quite banal. However, it was far from trite. I discover that there are few who realize that this cameo in Jesus' life was a significant step in His transition from childhood to adulthood, the rite of passage that marked every Jewish male's development. In a way, then, this is not as precocious an event as may otherwise be thought.

But it does illustrate something that is not unique in the development of youngsters. That comment does not render it pointless by any means. I simply ask people to see that there are quite a lot of developing young people who make great strides quite early, and it is incumbent on their parents to be aware of the situation. Here was a remarkable young person who was increasingly aware of God's call on His life, and of the consequent choices that needed attention if He was to follow.

One of the difficulties of this particular Sunday in this hemisphere is the proximity of the day to Christmas, and the strong possibility that attendances and attention at Church will not be all that high. Sadly, like Epiphany, the emphasis may well be lost a little, and that is sad. For if there is one fairly common experience for Christian people that tends to be downgraded, it is the matter of hearing and responding to the call of God – and that almost totally, is in the form of that still small voice.

I remember, in my own youth, being asked to explain my own call to the priesthood. There was simply nothing to show for it, nothing to prove it, but simply that inner conviction that would not be shaken, in spite of all sorts of interesting pressures and offers to turn my back on it. On top of that, there was the memory, of a number of years before, when at the delicate age of nine or ten I felt sure that God was calling me to something. My own reason for mentioning this experience was that, as time went by, it led me to understand Abraham and his call rather more really. He has nothing to show for it, and Sarah must have been someone outstanding to have gone along with the obvious conviction of her husband. And thank God that they both responded. Who knows how many other 'Abrahams' God tapped on the shoulder, so to speak, before this person responded.

And there lies the emphasis, surely, on this quiet reflective Sunday after Christmas. Instead of expending enormous effort to nominate saints as if they were to be elevated to some far greater level, please stop and see that, even in the Incarnation, God worked as ever He does, with ordinary little people **like you.** I am sufficiently cynical to wonder whether the more traditional move is an attempt to avoid responsibility – on the grounds that the Lord could not possibly be able to work through the likes of us.

Remember Abraham, and be glad. Remember Moses, Samuel, Mary, and you.