

Sentence

Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles.

Isaiah 40:31

Collect

Saving God, Whose Son Jesus Christ healed the sick and brought wholeness of body and mind, inspire us constantly to proclaim His Gospel by our words and by the dedication and integrity of our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Isaiah 40: 21-31

PSALM

147:1-11

EPISTLE

1 Corinthians 9:16 – 23

GOSPEL

Mark 1:29 – 39

NOTES ON THE READINGS

A short prior comment

Always look for connection between Readings and Collect. If there is one thing that should show up as a fundamental characteristic of Christians, it is dedication and integrity. There is not a lot of it around these days, so delight in it wherever you find it.

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

I have long been struck with the similarity between the time (second) Isaiah was writing and our own time. Then it was a very critical time, not just for the survival of Israel but more for the Faith it professed. All could easily have been lost, had it not been for someone like Isaiah whose vision stretched far beyond the issues of the day. Isaiah is perhaps best known for his wide-ranging view of God, in creation and in human affairs. Sadly, even these days, many so-called believers tend to limit their view of God to some sort of *santa claus* figure who is there to deal with their problems. (Reference to the old man of Christmas is deliberately lower case!)

If you have not read much of Isaiah before, I challenge you to read – at one sitting, preferably – the rest of Isaiah from chapter 40 to 66, or at least up to the end of chapter 53. And read it imaginatively.

In the midst of a life-and-death crisis, in exile in Babylon and with most people fearing that JHWH was dead,¹ Isaiah emerged with a totally different and far more positive message from God. In order to underline the magnitude of the Lord, the prophet pointed to that which surrounded everyone, the cosmos, and the political situation. Isaiah's comments about rulers was most powerful: most rulers attempt to portray themselves as invincible, *yet none of them are*. On top of that, he pointed to the cosmos, not just in terms of 'who made all this?' but also in terms of the obvious care and precision that has gone into creation. The obvious outcome was that a Creator who did all that is not likely to be careless or unaware of the people He created.

Psalm

It would seem a little likely that the Psalm for today comes from a time a little later than the Isaiah reading. Notice, then the emphasis on the greatness of God, and His activity in nature and history.

That business of the 'Lord Who is rebuilding Jerusalem' is indicative of the breadth of the Lord's activity. It is His business, you might say, in reconstruction of that which has been destroyed – and surely that is the direction present-day people need to be looking and thinking. As with alcoholics, there needs to be a 'rock-bottom' before there is a rising again.

Epistle

Along with a number of Old Testament prophets, St. Paul felt himself mightily constrained to fulfil the calling that was his as apostle. There is passion in what he writes here, not only in the sensed necessity of 'doing his job,' but in that remarkable confession about being 'all things to all people.' Mind you, it strikes me as an absolute necessity to be as

¹ With Jerusalem sacked and the Temple destroyed, the contemporary view was that once a god's temple was destroyed, it marked the death of that god. Remember the story of Samson?

committed and as thoughtful in ministry, and there is great dis-appointment in finding little of that commitment these days. This surely is part of the 'integrity' mentioned and called for in the Collect for today.

It is worth noticing that Paul's approach was not new to him: He was simply following the pattern of His Lord.

Gospel

There is a sense of urgency even at the start of Mark's Gospel that is not obvious unless the book is read as a whole. I have long had pity for Peter's mother-in-law, who seems to have been healed simply so the rest of the mob could have a feed! Mind you, I know mothers and mothers-in-law who operate in exactly that same self-committed way.

The thing that emerges most clearly in this passage is the total commitment on the part of Jesus, for that throng of people around Him. It must have been exhausting, so there is small wonder that our Lord got up early and headed for some peace and quiet. I recall, after a handful of years in one parish, understanding why Jesus' ministry was of somewhere in the nature of three years' duration. I doubt if a body could take much more than that, at the frenetic pace at which He worked.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It may be a matter of my becoming older – and perchance a little wiser, - to be more aware of the growing difference between the society in which we live, and the Gospel which has always been ours to live and preach. I had grown up in a situation where everyone, almost without exception, was trustworthy and trusting, and all would be shocked at any action that was different to that. Young people may like to look back in scorn on those so-called unsophisticated days, but most of their assessment is remarkably out of touch with that reality.

It was not until I was actually working in a parish, ten or fifteen years after that youthful growing up, that I had the rather great difference between a Christian community and a different one, to see why my sense of value of the 'old ways' remains strong. It is not a matter of looking back at the good old days. It is a matter of the almost total loss of trust in the community and culture in which we live. It is fifty years since I first encountered children in locked cars outside drinking holes, screaming for their parents who did not want to know.

There is fairly constant propaganda these days about the scientific and other invalidity for any sort of faith, let alone Christian, and that state of affairs is illustrated by such other factors as people demanding unjust rights and salaries, and kids being brought up to demand *their* rights over and above those of their parents or peers. It has become a screamingly selfish and self-obsessed society. Small wonder that Muslims find Western society effete.

Today's readings offer quite something of a picture of that from which we have all fallen. Perhaps I am somewhat passé, but while I have small difficulty in people claiming disbelief, I do have problems with dishonesty and lack of integrity. My greater problem lies in the certainty that, the further we move from those ancient and tried values, the further we move into chaos, And sooner or later, that chaos is irremediable.

One of the attitudes commonly expressed that annoys me is that patronising reaction of those who profess atheism in their condemnation of Christians (or people of any faith.) I suspect that their complaint stems from lack of knowledge, and while it has to be said that neither Christians nor Church are anywhere near perfect, the Faith once delivered has far more substance to it than those folk would acknowledge. Mind you, I suspect a lot of people of my generation and older had a sort of folkloric approach to the faith, and many were quite unable to express in word or logic their reasons for faith. Largely because of that, I suspect, their children and grand-children had nothing at all substantial to consider – and so the whole business was written off as far too vague for the real world, and totally out of touch with 'community standards.'

If anyone had consulted Isaiah back then, (40 Or 50 years ago, I mean,) they would have been faced with something remarkably substantial, viable, and in fact, necessary to life as lived by almost anyone. (In fact, I suspect we are now living through circumstances similar to those that obtained in Isaiah's time, when all seemed totally lost. God was dead, The demolition of Israel, Jerusalem and the Temple were all evidence of that reality. But Isaiah was one of those - and there was a number of them – who looked and searched rather further than the immediate parameters. There is nothing in any religion or culture that comes anywhere near the remarkable line of Old Testament prophets. Yet, what they preached was not the fire and brimstone stuff traditionally attributed to them. What those worthy ancients were on about was the failure of Israel's sense and reality of justice, truth and integrity in public and private life. Said prophets were very aware of the fact that failure in justice and integrity brought, not so much Divine punishment, but internal collapse, Left long enough, that collapse would be final, total – and result in utter and complete chaos. One needs only to look at history over millennia and see that those observations are true in any culture, any country, even any religion. In other words, Judaism was designed not so much to be a religion as to be a Way of Life. SO was its successor, Christianity.

There is nothing vague or ephemeral about the Faith. It is remarkably tangible, and while there remain those heirs and successors of the Pharisees, the faith once delivered was designed as much for this world as for any that is to come.

It is probably remarkably naughty of me, but I have been conducting a one-man band against the practice we Christians seem to love, and that is to express the faith in what I call 'holy talk.' It is the jargon of believers which usually means nothing, or worse, is utterly confusing to what I might call unbelievers. It may express all sorts of stuff to us, but sounds like absolute rubbish to those not on the 'inside.' That practice is about as useful as well, whatever epithet springs to your mind. There is none of it in Scripture, and certainly there is nothing of it in the Old Testament prophets. They were remarkably clear in the issues they embraced, and the remedies to which they pointed. It is high time for modern Christians to emulate their clarity of thought and expression.

If you have reached this far in my tirade, you may wonder what connection this all has with Epiphany. The answer is simple. If we are attempting to convey the faith to others, it **MUST** be done in both words and expressions that ring bells for our contemporaries. Otherwise, that epiphany becomes so minimized and darkened, that it fails to be epiphany at all.

Sentence

A great prophet has arisen among us! God has visited His people

Luke 7:16

Collect

Almighty God, You gave the law to guide our lives: grant that we may never shrink from Your commandments, and, as we are taught by Your Spirit, may fulfil Your law in perfect love, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

1 Kings 5:1 – 14

Psalm

30

Epistle

1 Corinthians 9: 24 – 27

GOSPEL

Mark 1: 40 – 45

NOTES ON THE READINGS

But before we get there, herewith a thought or two.... With Epiphany coming to an end, one might wonder quite how these readings even begin to fit the issue of being lights to the world. I find the answer to that rather interesting.

First you have the story of an utter outsider looking for answers, and finding them because of a slip of a girl. A slave in fact. In spite of the lass's quiet witness, Naaman is far too proud to follow up the offer- until one of his own blokes talks to him.

Then in the Psalm, there is the story of an insider, if you like, looked for answers and found them. The Epistle relates the conviction of one of the great insiders (who began on the outside anyhow, did he not?) and then there is the tale of the leper. He should have been an insider but Judaism of the time decided to turn its back on him – but Jesus did not! (That speaks volumes does it not?) And the leper too, found his answers. All of the answers are found in God – and they still are.

Old Testament Lesson

The story of Naaman was always good Sunday School stuff, as it relates the effect on a far 'superior' person that the quiet witness of a little nobody can often have. As the story unfolds, the picture of Naaman with his nose in the air reminds me of the sort of person who considers any sort of faith let alone Christian, is beneath their dignity. Remember, everyone is perfectly free to choose sense or nonsense – and the Lord will not get in their way. The real issue here is of the quiet offering of something better by a young lass or lady who knew which way was up. No fuss, no bother, no tirade.

Psalm

A lot of people write Psalms off as some sort of internalised groanings. While there may be one or two in that category, it is not so here. This is the delight of a person – a good Jew obviously! – who had made a mess and looked for something far better. No mention is made of the nature of the mess, but there is great joy in the answers that came from none other than God Himself.

Epistle

Brevity, they say, is the soul of wit. And here you have it. Paul makes it quite clear that the business of being Christian, being light to the world, involves discipline and training. I have always found it goes against my grain to watch budding Olympians expend enormous time and energy for years, in the hope of a medal. Life is rather too short for stuff like that. But their commitment is stunning, even if somewhat one-eyed. Commitment is where Paul is pointing here.

Gospel

Only a few days ago our Bible Study Group looked at this passage, and one of the questions raised was wondering why Jesus was angry here. Was it at the leper? Was it at his begging? Why was Jesus angry? And whist there is nothing specific said in the text, one can take a fairly respectable guess that His anger was addressed to Judaism which had decided that someone in this man's position was totally ineligible for the slightest attention or interest. He was outcast.

It is a strange but all too regular fact that the very organisation or instrument of support and assistance to people becomes the barrier to that assistance being effective. That would have been sufficient to arouse the anger of our Lord. As if to underline the fact, Jesus required the now-healed man to report to the clergy – not to shove it up their nose, so to speak, but to ensure that the altered status of this man would be recognized by all, wherever he went.

The Faith, Jewish or Christian, is designed to offer people new life and new hope, and if either faith relegates people to the margins, then it is acting in total disregard of its *raison d'être*.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I have found it a strange and often difficult thing to be a priest of the Church of God. On the one hand people seem to expect you to be perfect (which I am not!) and consider me responsible for the failure of the Church, from hierarchy to ordinary parishioner, - matters over which I have remarkably small control. Part of the reason people seem to lay that weight on such as I (and I would not be surprised if you have similar experiences!) tends, almost invariably, to be a mechanism to avoid them having to face the real issues.

Naaman was one-such. It must have been a very difficult position to be in. As a field-officer in his king's employ, he had an elevated position and status. If people knew of his ailment, he would have been reduced to an outcast in moments. So he had a huge problem that required vast attention. Mind you, like most people who rise to such heights, Naaman may well have had a somewhat exaggerated view of himself also. Although many people look adoringly at those in positions of great elevation, even the highest of the high remain human, in spite of any of their attempts to prove otherwise.

At the other extreme, there is the leper² in the Gospel story. This man had none of the proud traits of Naaman, - one suspects that any period of time in isolation from humanity would be enough to remove such attitudes from him. Mind you, after being healed, the man could not contain himself and told the world. There is no great evidence of Naaman making a show of his recovery, except to recognize the Source of his health.

The point that I would like to make is to underline the differences between Naaman the pagan and the other man, of Jewish faith. In fact the difference I would underline is that there is **no difference**. Both men were as human as you and I. Both men had compassionate people in support of them, and both people reached health again. And whilst Judaism lay behind the scenes as the point of contact, in the latter story even one of their own was the outcast, **but he was not cast out by Jesus.**

Quite recently in a study I was asked quite why it was and at whom it was the Jesus was angry. Some felt it must be the sin that lay at the back of the leper's problems, but I have to comment that I would find that approach a little twee. I find no justification for considering that Jesus is angry at MY sins, and more than I am at my children's or others' sins. Sad perhaps. Angry? Not really.

I suspect that the answer to the question is that Jesus' anger stemmed from the fact that Judaism of His day had moved so far from any sense of compassion for people that it had legislated to isolate them from the mainstream of life, and put them into a little hidden ghetto. Out of sight; out of mind. Before anyone gets too uptight about that comment, notice how often and how easily people are marginalised these days! Too hard baskets about all over the place.

In other words, the very group or organisation that should have been a source of comfort, strength and rehabilitation – or even of solace for a person in a most difficult position – had become the very barrier itself from even seeing the unfortunate person in its midst. And the huge question is how in the name of all that is wonderful can anyone turn that situation around, and bring in monumental change?

I was talking only last night to a mate of mine from a previous parish, a man who has a profound concern for the future of the Church where he lives. He is not a priest, but I suspect ought to be! In his ministry where he lives, he almost despairs of that congregation ever moving from its complacent and comfort-zone position. He would not be alone in his concerns. One of the appalling outcomes of the very narrow and egocentric Gospel that tends to have been preached for decades has to do with 'my salvation' since Christ has died for me. It is an appalling narrowing down of the faith!

In this day and age, I am tired of people bemoaning the fact that the life of the Church seems limited. 'Whatever will happen when we are gone?' is the general cry, and the assumption tends to be that someone needs to do something. The answer is yes, someone does, and that someone will almost certainly be **you**. And that is where the process breaks down. I am not qualified, I am inarticulate, I am neither this nor that to be any use in this challenge.

² Most modern translations have footnotes that make it clear that any skin disease at the time was classified as leprosy. 'It may have been leprosy, or something less virulent – but the general population ran scared of anything likely to shove them to the edges of existence.'

Now there may be more to things than this, but I suspect that the answer is rather less complex than we allow. Notice that it was the little slave girl who pointed Naaman to his answers, though I bet she was overlooked totally when Naaman was healed. Small matter –the task had been done and that is what matters. Whether it was the failure of parents to share the Faith with their kids a generation or two or three ago, it is history now. But all that is needed, on the ground where you are, is to see that the responsibility for sharing the faith is *yours*.

A small story to help: you may have heard this one before.

It was around the time of the first Billy Graham Crusade of the mid-50s, and my father was most unwillingly dragooned into the business of calling on people in our street, to invite them. My father lived and died a man of faith, but he was somewhat incapable of putting it all into words. At one home where he called, and offered the invitation, he was met with a somewhat belligerent response: “What the hell is the use of all that to me?” replied the man of the house. Dad’s only answer (and I bet it was with tears in his eyes) was ‘I don’t know how I would cope without God.’ And fled, feeling totally incapable and useless. The outcome of that story is that that family started attending Church went to the Crusade, and to my knowledge as still ‘part of the show’ about 50 years later.

Little slave girls can do it. Even inarticulate men can do it.

Sentence

In the Son of God, every one of God's promises finds its 'Yes.'

2 Cor.1:19

Collect

Almighty God, You have taught us through Your Son that love is the fulfilling of the Law. Grant that we may love You with our whole heart and our neighbours as ourselves, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Isaiah 43:18 –25

PSALM

41

EPISTLE

2 Corinthians 1:16-22

GOSPEL

Mark 2:1-12

NOTES ON THE READINGS

But first a word

If you ever notice that I have a strong predilection for Isaiah, then you can lay the blame at the feet of my maternal grandfather. He may have been gone now for over 60 years, but I will never forget his habit (boring for a 10-year-old) to have a Bible reading after the midday meal. Almost invariably it was this most ancient and lovely of authors, and its old words ring in my head and heart still.

Old Testament Lesson.

Dear old Isaiah must have been a most remarkable person. I imagine that much of his insight and common sense came from what may well have been long observation of God at work and Israel at mischief. As I get older, I really do understand things much better, having the experience of looking back over so many years and discerning what was sensible and what was stupid.

Being in exile for a long time would have been a rather searing experience for the prophet. Painfully aware of the fact that Israel should have been 'getting on with it' rather than doing what amounted to a long stretch of prison almost, having the time and the tension to look at what went wrong and where. But as the prophet says here, stop looking back, living in the past. Expect new and great things from God but also expect to get your hands dirty doing whatever God has for them, and putting the shoulder to the wheel.

The close comparison between the time of the exile and the current drought for the Church remains a hugely significant one for me at least. Bishop Spong may have all sorts of radical comments and assessments to make about the faith and its need of reformation, but it strikes me that, just as Israel's sins had to be dealt with and put behind them, so too we need to take a long hard look at the Faith, its difference to 'community standards,' and to represent all that is just and true and compassionate. *Israel had to live through such a struggle and survived.*

Psalm

If you feel as I do that this Psalmist could do with a good shake, then feel free to administer one. It sounds like the 'poor me' cry of someone who had some rather lousy friends. He also had some rather lousy theology, Whilst what he is sure about remains true, that the Lord does care even about people like this guy, it is also true to say that such self-concern is not the most helpful way for a person to go.

Epistle

Poor old Paul! It must not have been easy for a person like him to be an apostle, with all the expectations that that seemed to bring. While he would not he been an easy person to work with, he did not suffer fools terribly gladly. Here he had been charged with forever changing his mind about getting to Corinth or not, but there were obviously a lot of other factors that tended to dictate his movements.

In his inimitable way, Paul raised the issue of God's lack of shillyshallying, pointing to the clear and unshaking positivity as expressed in Jesus. It is a strange way of conveying the thought, but then Paul was rather good at obscure statements. This is not the most edifying of all the passages in Paul's writings, now is it!

Gospel

This story is a well-known tale that must have been thrashed to death in Sunday School lessons – at least it was in my experience. In those days, the 'faith' of the paralytic was emphasised on the grounds that no miracle ever occurred unless the recipient had faith. There is more to this one than meets the eye, at least the eye looking in that direction.

Two things are worth noting: it was the commitment and persistence of the mates of the paralytic which Jesus acknowledged. And that is faith, do you understand. The other issue has to do with forgiveness of sins. Even this issue is not as straightforward as might appear.

One of the other requirements back in the old days, was that talk of forgiveness required a fairly obvious case of sinfulness. While all of us acknowledge that we are far from perfect, Charlie Brown, the real issue is perhaps more basic than that. What could it have been that rendered the patient as paralytic? While any answer to that is necessarily a guess, it certainly does not need to be a case of the man having been 'an open and notorious evil liver!' It may well have been something rather more psychosomatic, as is becoming far more prevalent these days.

The point of Jesus' action in this case was not to make some vivid connection between sin and illness, but to draw attention to the fact that we humans manage so often to damage ourselves by our failure to respond to the truth of situations. (I may well tell a story in the sermon notes.) In clearer words, Jesus met that poor limited man where he understood himself to be, dealt with the issue as the patient saw it, and offered what were really the same release from his disability. Certainly it was a miracle for the patient, but the real point is Jesus' recognition of the very sad way in which we humans make a mess of ourselves.

Notes for a Sermon

Whenever I come across stories such as those in today's Gospel, I am reminded of a very much more recent tale of healing from a very similar debilitating illness. The story concerns a lovely old priest, long since gone to his reward, who happened to be the Rector in my grandparents' parish. So it is a while ago, but well within my own memory.

Said priest, a man well ahead of his time in understanding and presenting the faith, was called to a neighbouring parish to try and help a single man of middle years who had been retreating more and more into himself. That farmer who had been part of the parish where he lived, had cut himself off increasingly from family, community and Church. Family and friends had taken him to doctors, psychiatrists and anyone who appeared to offer some solution, but no one managed to lift him out of his despair. So the call went out to said priest.

The Canon went to the farm to have a chat with the man that he certainly had known for some time. Gently he drew from the man details of whatever it was that had produced this sad withdrawal and sense of futility. Painfully aware of the fact that the farmer was devastated by what he had done, certain of no chance of forgiveness, the old Canon suggested that his certainty of lack of forgiveness was not the case. He suggested that they get into the car, drive into town to the Church, and he would hear the man's confession.

This is what they did. And with all due ceremony, with stole around his neck, the Canon heard the confession of the man. With the absolution came the certainty of his forgiveness, and the man arose afterwards, emerged from the Church and rejoined family, society and congregation. There may be no surprise for many about the story, until the details of what was confessed are revealed.

It appears that the man, when a child, had been told repeatedly by a very domination mother, that if he ate lollies while in the (long drop) toilet, he would go to hell. Constantly repeated threats by his old Mum had left the poor bloke no room to manoeuvre. He had done the dreaded deed, and knew himself to be condemned to an eternal punishment. It was because the old Canon took his fears and dreads seriously, confessed the man, (where someone less compassionate may well have laughed at the man's fears,) and in God's name freed him from the dreaded future. It was a moving tale when I first heard it, and it is indicative of quite unexpected outcomes of human sin, and what it means to receive forgiveness. I would have to add that my respect for the old Canon rose enormously. I knew him as a white-haired octogenarian, and wished I had known him when he was young.

All I am trying to offer in all this is to widen our appreciation and perception of the ministry of Jesus with people. It is far too easy, and awfully naïve, when the business of sin simply covers our vision in a most judgemental way. Life and human evil is far more subtle and devastating than that, and the outcomes and effects can be really quite damaging in all manner of ways. It is the damage of sin that I suspect we need to concentrate on, for when the damage factor is avoided, the damage itself is so readily multiplied. Almost any experience of that will provide evidence of that.

Sentence

It is the God Who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' Who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

2 Cor. 4:6

Collect

Almighty God, Whose Son was revealed in majesty before He suffered death upon the Cross; give us faith to perceive His glory, that being strengthened by His grace, we may be changed into His likeness, from glory to glory, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

2 Kings 2: 1-12

PSALM

50: 1 – 6

EPISTLE

2 Corinthians 4:3 – 12

GOSPEL

Mark 9: 2 – 9

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

It is a remarkable little cameo, this passage of tension arising as the time for Elijah's departure came closer. It may all sound like a riddle (even slightly ridiculous to moderns) but the point of the story is the determination of Elijah's successor to be right there at the death-knock! The main reason for this persistence was the realisation by Elisha of his need for that 'double share of Elijah's spirit.'

It is one thing to be able to sit at the feet of a master; it is a very different thing to find yourself having to fill his (or her) shoes. That is when the real eye-opener comes to a person – and that is what is meant by 'transfiguration.' It is not so much something that happens to the important one. It is a burst of light that falls on the lesser figures. It is learning curve. It can be shattering.

Psalm

There are places that somehow manage to gain an aura way and above the reality: the Big Apple for instance, or even our own Sydney. Familiarity with such places (or people) may easily remove the aura, but for others it remains unscathed. For Israel, Zion [Jerusalem] was one such. It was the visible and tangible evidence of something far more powerful than the reality. In some way it epitomized even God. Hopefully, the city would have epitomized God's character – a character well known to Jews to value and uphold justice and righteousness. The imagery is similar to that applied to the Church, although hard-headed moderns may well hold to what the imagery represents rather than consider that the Church expresses it very well.

Epistle

It would seem that each of today's Readings point to and emphasize ways of looking at things and learning from them (or not as the case may be.) Here Paul discourses on the subject of how people react to their vision of life and other important issues. And one of the stunning things about God is that He does not demand positive response to His existence but allows people the freedom to choose to follow, or to refrain from following.

This is a fascinating passage, as far as I am concerned. Although John expresses things differently in his Gospel, here is the rather powerful statement that people really do almost define themselves by the choice they make in either looking for the truth and following it, or turning their back on it. There are all sorts of permutations and combinations in the middle of all those choices too.

In other words, transfigurations (the slow or sudden discovery that there is more to life and existence than meets the eye) come as a rule only to those who are open and honest enough to have reality burst on them and to respond to it as honestly as they are able.

GOSPEL

The Transfiguration of Jesus followed about a week after Peter – after some nudging, - realized that Jesus was the Messiah. If you look long and hard at the synoptic Gospels, you will notice that after that point, Jesus applied

considerable pressure on the disciples to get their acts into gear and ponder what they were involved with. The trio of James, Peter and John tended to be at the centre of things, but all the twelve seemed content to just go with the flow rather than impute any great significance to the Jesus thing.

This event, as mentioned above, was not so much something that happened to Jesus as it was something that burst upon the central trio of the disciples. It has to be said that when they were chosen, the twelve probably saw Jesus as just another peripatetic preacher, although one of singular interest in both His personality and approach to life and faith. What He said made more sense, I suspect, than any preacher or teacher these men had encountered. However, Jesus needed them to see further, understand deeper, in order to be the people through whom the movement continued. It was not just a matter of 'faith.' It was a matter of understanding what Jesus was on about.

It would be impossible to put down in words the rather subjective experience that the Transfiguration must have been for the Three. The imagery that is offered in the report of the experience is meant to convey the fact that Jesus was fast losing His 'just another preacher' tab for Someone Who was greater than Moses and the Prophets. They were subservient to Him; not vice versa. Not only was Jesus now seen as 'great David's greater Son' but also greater than Moses, greater than the Prophets. That new perception required a huge new learning curve, and a lot of thought. Here was Someone hugely important.

It was expressed most clearly in that quote from the Psalms. Here was none other than God's Son Himself.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It may be the case that quite some of what follows is not as apposite as once it would have been. However, if the situation fits, it could be that what follows may encourage some folk to move ahead.

It was nearly 50 years ago that my turn had come, in my theological training, for me to offer what was euphemistically called my trial sermon. Over the previous year or two I had endured the productions of those senior to me, and observed the constant pattern of men preaching what they perceived to be the sort of thing that the Principal and staff expected. It was always the classical Gospel, often ending with an altar call, which stuck me as rather foolish given the audience and situation.

When my turn came, a family crisis had forced a huge exploration of Faith. An uncle of mine, brother to my Dad, had been diagnosed with a virulent and soon to be fatal form of cancer. Being a Church Warden at his parish Church in the country, Uncle suggested that his budding parson nephew should be able to provide some answers as to why. It was an impassioned plea, so we spent a lot of time questioning the platitudes of the day, and the strange capacity of people to try and solve such problems by ignoring them. Suffice to say that Uncle and I spent a lot of time exploring the Scriptures, and looking for written material on those subjects.

It would be of small interest to describe the search here, but the point of mentioning it at all was the way in which the understanding of life and God grew in both Uncle and me. It was a transfiguration, and I wanted to convey that, way back that day in College. However, my contribution was met with exasperation and spite, even by the staff. It was not Gospel, it had nothing to do with spiritual matters I was told. It was consigned to the dustbin of sermons.³

That was the time in Christian orthodoxy when a person was taught the Faith, and told what to believe and even how to do it. Any one who questioned the clergy were regarded as malcontents or intransigent, I can recall, as a young teenager, being named as a troublemaker for raising questions or offering different approaches or opinions, and silenced with great and holy firmness. Other people I have spoken to over the years make mention of the emotional pressure applied to ensure their silence. I suspect that part of the pressure stemmed from the fear that clergy had of questions they were unable to answer. I hope that such days are long gone.

If ever there was a process that imposed orthodoxy and that ensured conservatism, it was that old pressure. Control was the order of the day; and any growth or development went out of the window. I wonder how the Church and Faith even survived those idiotic times. And I wonder how and if it will should that attitude return.

There was none of that imposed orthodoxy where Jesus was involved. In fact, this incident known as the Transfiguration was not something to encourage Jesus, but rather a means of demanding that the disciples thought about, pondered, and realized the significance of the times they were living through. In Aussie terms, this event is somewhat of a matter of Jesus sticking the boot in and requiring Peter, James and John to think outside the square and come to terms

³ Mind you, one staff member, later to become an assistant Bishop in Sydney, took me aside after and congratulated me on dealing with issues that others would not. He very nearly wore a bunch of fives!

with the real reasons Jesus was ministering in the way He was. There was no room at all for conservative orthodoxy: here was time for exploration, for growth, for rather significant movement.

That is the point of transfiguration. It is the finding of answers to questions; it is the stepping outside old boundaries. It is moving forward - not for the benefit of disciples, but for those who have yet to become such. And that is the challenge before the entire Church right here and now. And if the challenge is not taken up, then the future bodes remarkably ill.