

Sentence

Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and was buried, and was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and appeared to many
1 Cor. 15:3-4

Collect

Most holy God, Whose glory fills all in heaven and earth; cleanse our unclean lips and transform us by Your grace, so that Your word spoken through us may bring many to Your salvation, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Isaiah 6: 1 – 13

PSALM

138

EPISTLE

1 Corinthians 15: 1 - 11

GOSPEL

Luke 5: 1 – 11

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

This has to be one of the most moving passages in the Old Testament; this call to Isaiah to be prophet. One needs to read it imaginatively, as often one must in Scripture, as we try and catch hold of Isaiah' attempt to tell us how his whole life changed utterly when he was at work in the Temple. It was a matter of the familiar suddenly becoming a window to a perception of life and a calling that far surpassed any expectation this man had up till then.

The imagery is very Jewish. The seraphim were not angels but those old stone images likes the sphinx that decorated the Temple. The clouds had even then long been the icon or image that represented the power of God and His majesty. Remember Sinai. Perhaps the most telling factor in this account is the Ter Sanctus, the Trishagion. You a so familiar with it in the Eucharist: *Holy holy holy is the Lord of Hosts*. The point of the story is that life-changing experience for Isaiah, whose epiphany there was not only the facing of the reality of God, but also of the point of the Faith He presented of the need for hearing and responding to the truth.

The closing part of this passage is most telling. One might have dared to think that people searched for truth and longed for it, but as the prophet knew right at the start of his call, that potential was and remains a rarity. People do not want know, and they will bend and twist in all manner of directions to try and avoid the possibility of hearing what ought to be.

Psalms

If one takes time to ponder what is being said in these old Psalms, there is quite a lot to be remarked about. The second half of the first verse would indicate (to me at least) that this is a fairly early Psalm, where Israel still had not let go the idea that other gods were real, at least to some extent. On the other hand, this same author has a remarkable and clear perception of the nature of God. I wonder how early or late it was that the phrase 'loving-kindness' first hit airspace in Hebrew thought ---- *and why!*

You may not be aware of the extent of difference between the Hebrew perceptions of God (and gods) and that of people around about. Ba'al was a god who could be manipulated with the correct rituals, but JHWH was never seen in such a poor light.

It is perhaps not a bad exercise to ponder your own perceptions and God and attempt to reach back to the sources you use. Scripture is not the only source: Israel simply observed (life and history) and drew many insights from sheer and ordinary life. And then went on to test those observations by continuing to watch and observe.

Epistle

Only people of mature age might remember back to when this passage was the selected reading for funeral services, and whilst people then had a better awareness of Scripture, the passage was of real and strong impact. There are a couple of interesting observations that I would offer. One observation is that whilst it is not difficult to discover where 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures' with all the Servant Songs of Isaiah there, it is not quite so easy to see the justification for the resurrection in the Old Testament. In fact, the very concept of resurrection was only beginning to emerge as Old Testament merged into New Testament.

For Paul, the Resurrection of Jesus was basic and critical to the Gospel. Hence he was at great pains to refer to a number of people and a number of situations where there were, even then, people alive who had witnessed the Risen Christ themselves. This is an interesting declaration. His own experience of the Risen Christ may well have been on the Damascus Road.

GOSPEL

There are a couple of fascinating insights into the nature of Jesus in this passage, both of which have to do with sheer practicality. The first is His request to use a boat as a pulpit, for the human voice carries far better over water than over land. The second is that business of the haul of fish. I am rude enough to see no reason for what some call 'miracle' in this little cameo. I have long suspected that Jesus was an acute observer, not only of human nature but also of ordinary nature. Lots of people walk around with their eyes (and minds) so closed that they do not observe anything much. Others are far more interested in their surroundings – and learn so much more.

Is there not a strong possibility that Jesus had spotted a shoal of fish, during the day, and so made His suggestion. The fishermen may well have been so inured to the process of fishing at night that they were somewhat blind to any other possibility. And so what appealed so greatly to Peter, Andrew, James and John, was that this Guy talked so much sense about the faith and exhibited so much nous about life that it made one hell of a lot of sense to stick with Him awhile and see where it took them.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

We are getting to the tail end of the Season of Epiphany and again have a series of readings that point us, if we think about it, to sources of epiphanies for ourselves and those around us. Strangely enough, the possibility of 'epiphany' is there all the time, and what is required is no great burst of spiritual energy, but rather the opening of one's eyes to what is there already, all around you.

Have I related the story before about surprising small event that occurred many years ago quite some way south of here, In a lovely rural parish to the north of Adelaide, I had been given the job of bus driver to pick up senior citizens from small towns all around for activities at the local Hospital. It was something like a fifty kilometre drive each Tuesday morning, stopping and starting and picking up the oldies. Another person came too in case of emergency with the oldies, usually a lady most of whom had lived in the area all their lives. On the journey between two of the small towns there was the drive into rising country to the crossing of a small range. It was a tree-covered area, and as usual on main roads, fruit trees of various sorts sprang from discarded seeds. Apples, almonds, peach trees. All sorts.

Driving up that rising road, with bends and twists, and this particular day being towards the end of winter, I called to my offsider and commented on the beauty of the drive. She looked at me oddly (well, parsons are a weird mob!) ... and then really did have a look out of the windows. 'Ron,' she said, 'I have lived here all my life, and travel this road constantly. And I have never even bothered to see the beauty around me! But I will now.'

So many people seem to go through life with their eyes shut. It reminds me of young people who complain about being bored, when they cannot or will not see past their own noses. And sad to say, there are rather too many Christians who are about as myopic as those youngsters. They have attained a sort of faith that seems to meet their needs (as long as life provides no challenges) but cannot or will not see that there is anything outside their purview. That has to change. Sadly, when crises do come to such folk, it is often a case of discarding what minute faith they have, for God has not stayed within their own miniscule limitations. We all need to be more mature than that!

Sentence

Blessed are you when people hate you on account of the Son of man. Rejoice and leap for joy, for your reward is great in heaven

Luke 6:23

Collect

Righteous God, You challenge the powers that rule this world and You show favour to the oppressed: instil in us a true sense of justice that we may discern the signs of Your Kingdom, and strive for right to prevail; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Jeremiah 17: 5 – 10

PSALM

1

EPISTLE

1 Corinthians 15: 12 – 20

GOSPEL

Luke 6: 17 – 26

NOTES ON THE READINGS

It is not surprising that in a land largely dry and arid, that one of the constant illustrations of the difference between certain moisture and contrasting aridity has long been an illustration for life. Oddly enough, in our own country, the same imagery does not seem to make the same hit. Recent comment and recognition about the widespread drought may well change things for a while – in city-dwellers' eyes at least. In today's Readings, both OT Lesson and Psalm make the point in terms of imagery; the other readings are rather more specific and point to where the aridity and moisture really have effect in human relationships

Old Testament Lesson

It is far too easy, and remarkably trite to imagine that Jeremiah is requiring his listeners to be religious. He is making it quite clear that, whether in personal and political terms, one needs always to have eyes fixed on the real issues and not on possible advantages. Israel was ever a pawn in the hands of greater powers around the country, and tended to play politics instead of reacting and responding to the real issues. It may not be the best process to respond to true issues; however it must be said that there are multitude of harsh illustrations of countries and cultures that have descended into most awful decisions. And we never seem to learn the lessons of history, even up to the present day. Whether you are Prime Minister or mere individual, relationships are always enhanced when the old verities of truth, justice and compassion are at the forefront of decision making.

Psalm

As mentioned above, the Psalmist simply has another way of expressing the same convictions.

Epistle

It may take something of an exercise of imagination, but I often ask people to catch sight of what resurrection is really saying. We put blinkers on ourselves if we simply look for the eternal – heavenly – outcome. The reality is far more immediate and needs to be responded to.

What is the resurrection of Christ saying, besides the defeat of death, is **the defeat of evil**. That Jesus rose from the dead put paid to the perception that to execute Jesus was to smash His life and teaching and outlook. Love, truth, justice can be overcome for a time, but there will always be the rising, the resurrection. Evil is defeated, not by the execution of the perpetrators, but by showing it up for what it is. SO, if you can think outside the box, so to speak, Paul is conveying a not dissimilar message to the other readings today.

Gospel

If you are able to read with eyes wide open, you will notice that Luke has amended Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, to make it rather a sermon on the plain, level ground. And Luke made the great connection between healing of body and healing of responses to life and other people.

There was a time even in my short memory, that both these sermons were regarded by commentators as applying only to heaven. Those commentators were certain that there was no possibility of mere humans even beginning to approach such elevated expression of life and relationships. Jesus had no such illusions. As a wiser head than mine has said, 'if you aim for nothing, you will hit it.' And while it may be a vastly elevated view of what living could be like, and while I may not reach the pinnacle, I will get further than if I just surrender.

Luke is not proposing a view of life as epitomised by the old Negro songs – that life is a vale of tears and the only hope is the life to come. Luke is making quite clear that the person who (really) follows Christ will operate on a vastly different wave-length, and be prepared to follow Jesus in the hard areas, not to be a martyr to the cause but to be a pointer for others as to the value of this greater caring of others.

It could be expressed, as Luke does, in the contrast between those who reject what they know to be true, and those who will follow truth wherever it leads. And there are not enough people on this planet prepared to do that.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

May I begin with a reminder that we are still in the Season of the Epiphany, with its strong emphasis on the business of bearing witness to and attesting in life and word, to the great Gospel values. I am not talking about getting people to heaven, but the more immediate business of redemption of the world here and now. One of the tragedies – seems to me – is the great Christian capacity of pointing people to something outside their ken, rather than giving people the real benefits of the faith.

I recall when young, having an older sister, now deceased, who always carried her Bible, which while the King James Bible, the Authorised Version we called it then, with comments by a person whose name and qualifications I regret having forgotten. However, one of the clear and stated comments that man made as he commented on the Sermon on the Mount is one that has stuck in my memory. He was certain that Jesus' teaching was a foretaste of life in heaven, as he saw it totally impossible for mere humans of the present time. (Mind you, the further we go these days, the more we depart from the slightest possibility of many people living in that mode.)

It is precisely that point of view that has led to the discarding of the Faith by increasing numbers of people these days. They see no point of contact, no purpose or connection with real life, and so the Faith is regarded as quite irrelevant to the modern world, having nothing to say and very little to contribute.

One of the surprising side-issues of that rejection came as a huge surprise when I first recognized it. A wider head than mine made the comment some years ago, that when people give up believing in God, they do not believe in *nothing*. **They will believe in ANYTHING.** So we finish up with a plethora of strange and outlandish beliefs, with even less connection with real life, and – if the reports are true – even royalty manages to get caught up in pronouncements of gurus and all sort of other charlatans. Neither Jesus nor Luke were charlatans either, so it is up to us to consider the directions to which they pointed and the values which they upheld. This is no easy process in a world obsessed by attaining wealth and position and status.

In another reminiscence from long ago, I recall being somewhat bemused by stories of American businessmen jumping from skyscrapers to their death because of the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and on. Certainly their respective wealth may well have reduced from vast amounts to small ones, even none. But neither you nor I are summed up and value-estimated by what we have or do not have in the bank. Human value is quite disconnected from that. Sadly, there are many people these days who would disagree with such an assessment.

So what makes a person – as it were – living beside a stream; and what makes them desert-dwellers. In Biblical terms it has to do with what we have just been thinking about. Desert-dwellers would be concerned with what they **have**; stream-dwellers are rather more concerned about who they are. What sort of person, with great emphasis on care and concern for others, about expressing love and justice and integrity.

I guess it must be said that it is not always easy, especially in this self-obsessive world, not to be affected by the general and selfish trends of our society. Even adults seem to have peer-pressure pushing down on them, demanding a conformity to the rather ridiculous norm. Maybe I am a little odd myself, or maybe the Gospel got to me a long time ago, but I have never really had difficulty with avoiding the sort of stupidity that passes for 'social mores.' If something is stupid, then nothing makes it any better. Likewise if something is selfish. And I have **NEVER** seen the point purpose or necessity of wearing 'big label' shoes or clothes, simply because you are 'out' if you do not. A pair of shoes is a pair of shoes, not a status symbol.

So as we think about the tail-end of Epiphany, it strikes me as just another aspect of sharing the goodness of faith and life to quietly and simply stand up for well, common sense, is it not? And if there is one thing sadly lacking and far from common these days, it is *SENSE*.

Sunday 18th February, 2007

Last Sunday after Epiphany
Transfiguration

Sentence

The word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.

John 1.14

Collect

O God, You reveal Your glory to those who seek You with a sincere heart; strengthen us in faith to embrace the mystery of the Cross, and open our hearts to its transforming power, so that clinging to Your will for us, we may live as followers of Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Exodus 34:29 – 35

PSALM

99

EPISTLE

2 Corinthians 3:12 – 4:2

GOSPEL

Luke 9: 28 – 36

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

It is somewhat strange to the modern mind, to have this old business of Moses and a veil brought back to our attention. What is required, of course, is to try to get to the bottom of what is being expressed. It was ever a very Hebrew thing to consider that if a person actually saw God, the experience would be fatal. And here is a matter of someone who did get close to seeing God, having to shield others from the experience.

In a way, the problem tends to me more in reverse of all that. The real problem is that we look at all manner of situations and visions, and fail to catch sight of the reality behind it all. In Moses' situation, while he understood something of the enormity of JHWH, other people either were not ready or not able to cope with such enormous reality.

PSALM

I have to confess that, as a young choir boy singing or reciting the Psalms as set, Sunday by Sunday, I was left wondering why such florid language was used about God. Was it to bolster people's failing faith, or simply what we moderns call 'spin?' It really is a matter of looking closely at what is being said. Notice the constant reference, not only in this Psalm, to matters of justice, integrity and truth. In a world, then and now, that discounts such values as passé, it becomes increasingly easy to see why those ancient (and modern) verities are seen as so valuable. It is not hard to imagine how much better life would be for all, when such values are part of all human relationships.

EPISTLE

It is almost unnecessary to unpack this passage from Corinthians. Paul made the clear connection between lack of faith and veiled blindness, and who has not had to do with someone who has determined NOT to see which way the truth lies? These days we seem to like the idea that our genetics are the cause of our failures and errors (and sins.) This is one of the aspects of 'the god of this passing age' blinding people. Do not lose sight of the fact that this 'god of the passing age' is us ourselves. We humans blind ourselves to the realities, and so continue to fall into the traps of our own making. We are human: we are responsible – and we are stupid to begin to think otherwise. Once the truth is acknowledged, all sorts of other important issues become remarkably visible!

GOSPEL

As the Gospel story unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that Jesus found it necessary to put some pressure on the Twelve, who seemed quite content to drift along in the shadow of our Lord. In the incident just a week before the Transfiguration, it took pressure from Jesus to get even Simon Peter thinking. Here He took three of them another large step along the way.

The comfort zone in which the disciples were stuck was a remarkably 'normal' one even for modern day Christians. It would seem to me that when people 'believe,' then they tend to stop thinking. The ask of the Twelve was not to 'believe,' but to become the spearhead for the new movement, about which they had a great deal to learn.

So this remarkable tale of Jesus' transfiguration¹ is not a matter of Jesus being reassured, but of Peter, James and John having their blinkers taken off, and their horizons widened enormously. *They* were the one who needed to understand that Jesus had far more to do than simply be a rather remarkable and even lovely religious teacher or guru. Here is the Son of God, superior to Moses (Law) and Elijah (Prophets) and Whose role it to expand the effectiveness of the Faith. The Cross, the means of reconciliation, lay in front of Jesus, and of amount of religious nicety would take Judaism – or the Twelve – anywhere near that goal.

So the outcome of this experience for the Three was that the ground almost opened up in front of them, as they began to realize that this Jesus was a far more significant Person than they had even begun to realize. Please stop and realize that, then or now, such a mind-blowing experience will always take mere humans some time to understand and to come to terms with the implications.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

There are a couple of things that, for me, stick out like organ stops, when this story of Jesus' transfiguration comes up for examination each time. Perhaps there are three.

The first is the necessity for each of us to look again at the familiar in order to see beyond the banal to the very interesting. The second is to remind ourselves of our own need to grow and expand in our faith as much as in our personalities, and to turn away from comfort zones and refusal to move. The one that encapsulates the other two is the great need to realize that the Faith is a pilgrimage and not something static.

For far too long, this story and others like it in Scripture, have been seen as just part of a story that has never really made a lot of sense to us. It had been simply something to believe in, rather than something to ponder, absorb and move on with and from. It used to annoy me when people talked about 'believing' and saw that as their sole task and responsibility, when it was just as much a screen to allow them to avoid any greater moves or growth.

It is only after some years of constant contact and reading of the Gospels that I began to see how the authors presented the story of Jesus, and of the Twelve. The men themselves seemed quite content to roll with the waves and simply enjoy spending time with Jesus, listening to all He had to say, and to bask in the reflected glory of being little more than Jesus' groupies. However, Jesus was made of sterner stuff, and was painfully aware of the task before Him, and the need for the Twelve (and others) to come to terms with life's harsh realities. So, you will notice too, if you dare to read the Gospels with eyes wide open, than Jesus needed to stand on the toes of the Twelve, so to speak, to get them to move from some sort of dreamland into reality.

It is no mistake to note how the Evangelists describe Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah. Our Lord needed to put something of a time-bomb under the Twelve, when He asked 'who do people say that I am?' Jesus needed no answer to that question: the Twelve needed to ask it themselves. Peter's answer was explosive, for Peter not Jesus, for it had to begin a huge process of 'rethink.' Here was no religious Nice Guy; here was Someone Who had a huge agenda in front of Him, *and where does that take us?*

And it was only a week afterwards that another, more powerful blast was to take place, although this time the Twelve were not involved, just the 'leadership group.' Peter, James, John. Obviously the pressure was increasing as the focus was narrowing. And do NOT lose sight of the fact that this Transfiguration did not leave the trio on some sort of high; the next morning they were dropped right into the reality of the incident of the young man and his illness. A mountain-top experience is not something to hang on to; it can only be of use if and when it becomes a means of helping others.

¹ The Greek word in the NT text is 'metamorphosis'

You will have had the experience, surely, of suddenly being confronted with the fact that something or someone you had taken for granted is invested with a value and importance that takes your breath away. This sort of experience is quite common in ordinary life to anyone who lives with eyes wide open. (Conversely, the sort of person who never has seen past their own nose is highly unlikely to have their myopia healed – and so they will miss all sorts of chances to grow, develop, mature.)

It was Jesus' proactive effort that took the blinkers off Peter, James and John. In this experience, however it actually happened, those three men were enabled (or was it 'pushed'?) to see past their own noses. This Bloke Who had been with them (or they with Him) for quite a long time, was now seen with fresh eyes, and widened perspective. Here was no lovely religious guru, but Someone Who lifted 'religion' out of the banal and into the world-changing business of dealing with issues that most other people avoided. Make no mistake about it, Jesus was a radical of the first order, and the Faith He came to bring was designed to deal with issues that most people consider to be totally insoluble or quite untouchable. Religion has to do with escape from life; Jesus was doing nothing of the sort.

That is a huge – sometimes impossible – step for anyone, really. It was an explosive issue for the trio. Dear old Peter had no idea what to say or do. He had been taken by surprise completely! Also, I suspect, he wanted to remain there for quite some time in order to try and absorb the impact of what he had begun to understand. And he had the choice of hiding himself away from what confronted him, or going with the flow and discovering where it all took him. Not a lot of people like being disturbed in this way – but there is no other way for anyone, in any matter, to grow beyond where they are now, than to go with that flow.

So it was for the disciples' benefit, not Jesus', that this incident occurred. So the real lesson to be learned, for any person anywhere, is to be open to all of life's realities, to embrace life's truths and discoveries, and to have our horizons widened and our personalities broadened.

Are you game for such pilgrimages?

Sentence

Return to the Lord your God, Who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Joel 2:13

Collect

Almighty God, You hate nothing that You have made, and You forgive the sins of all who are penitent: create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of You, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Joel 2:1-2 & 12-17

PSALM

51:1-17

EPISTLE

2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10

GOSPEL

Matthew 6:1-6

Notes on the Readings

Old Testament

The Old Testament prophet used to be hounded with bad press. Old-time preachers would thunder and rant and rave as they assumed the prophets did, but they never seemed to have the content or the impact of those ancient worthies, for they never seemed to have thought much about what they preached.

Israel, at the time under review, suffered from what remains a common problem for Churches and Christians. They went through the motions, trying to appear genuine and ‘spiritual,’ but being nothing of the sort. Joel was attempting to bring Israel, or at least part of it, back to genuineness in both faith practice and life practice. Inconsistency between these factors was not acceptable. So it was genuineness that the prophet called for, and that is precisely the challenge that is presented to us, year by year, in the Season of Lent.

In what may be a surprise for some modern readers, the prophets were constantly calling for the exercise of justice and integrity in dealings with each other, considering that failure in those directions would bring the nemesis of collapse of nationhood.

Psalms

I am left wondering about the extent to which the Biblical emphasis on sin gets lost in the modern context – it is seen these days as a personal and internal failing. While that is certainly the case, the real issue for the Psalmist and his ilk is the damage that human sinfulness causes in the community and nation. We have turned something significant into something so internalised that it misses so much of the point. These days, ‘my sin’ is seen as keeping me from heaven **rather than seeing the damage it causes to you and to others. That latter process is the real issue.**

Once I see the point of all that, I am more likely to be **significantly** repentant, and less concerned on its impact on me. In fact that very self-centred emphasis is as much sinful as is the other.

Epistle

This may also be a sign of my advanced age, but today’s Epistle comes as a strong challenge to much of today’s mores. Please notice two things:

The emphasis on **reconciliation**; and

The extent to which the Apostle submerged selfish cares and concerns in order all the better to meet his responsibilities as Apostle and Christian.

In today’s view of life, self-assertion is regarded as one of the goals of existence, and that brings with it a growing divide between individuals and communities. I am right; you are wrong; and if you disagree with me I will find ways of ensuring that you follow my pattern. I may even kill you to make sure that others submit *to me*.

Contrast that with the longing Paul has for the divides between humans being overcome by love and forgiveness. It is a costly path, but it is the only way to healthy community.

Gospel

When I was young, this tirade against spiritual hypocrisy was so self-evident that we young people could not begin to understand why Pharisees could possibly be so stupid and self-centred. How could anyone possibly think that other (lesser?) mortals would consider them superior when they acted in that way?

Not only has much of Western society – non-religious at that! – followed such a foolish pattern, but quite some of modern Christianity indulges in similar posing. In the world, you are nothing unless you wear the correct brand names or live in unnecessary luxury; and in parts of the Church, you are nothing unless you wave your religious flag and even pray in an almost required and rigid style. Pharisaism is not confined to the times of Jesus, nor even religious practice. It is all part of that human and selfish streak which is expressed in that most ancient of telic tales, the Story of the Fall. Genesis 3.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It would seem to be *de rigueur* in many religions for there to be times set aside for the faithful to endure and go through strict and self-searching experiences. The era of hair shirts and self-flagellation may be long past, but there are still those who like to show their commitment by means of rather odd practices.

I remember quite some years ago poking gentle fun at a Lutheran pastor who made it a severe practice in the season of Lent to give up smoking. Twenty or more years ago, that seemed like a severe and significant resolve. On the surface. But with all due respect, the said Pastor was not a noted smoker, going through perhaps three or four cigarettes **a week**. Not only was their small difficulty in his self-set challenge, my real difficulty was the fact that the whole exercise was remarkably self-focussed. ‘Look what I have done!’ And that took him in precisely the wrong direction for the Season.

When I see that the story of Jesus Temptations² is the focus for next Sunday, Lent I, the real issue about Lent falls in place as far as I am concerned. That period in Jesus’ life and ministry had our Lord pondering and deciding quite what should be the nature of His ministry and leadership. If that is a fair assessment, it has long struck me that the real point of celebrating Lent is to spend time looking for and responding to the really important issues in life and faith. Even the old business of deep penitence and contrition would seem to me to focus on ‘me and my standing before God’ when the real issues are how can we best make God known to people around about us?

Today’s Readings seem to me to offer a springboard in that direction. Perhaps you can see that factor already.

First the OT Reading points out and underlines the necessity of being quite serious in terms of our own discipleship. For OT readers, the ‘Day of the Lord’ was looked forward to as a time when Israel would be proved right, and would take its place as a leader among nations. It was the expectation of importance. And that is why Joel pricked that particular bubble. ‘It is a day of darkness and gloom’ he said, for whenever it occurred, Israel would find itself at the wrong end of the stick.

The Psalm is a reminder to me, every time that I read it, that I, too, have contributed to the sum total of human evil, and that I need – for everyone’s sake – to change direction, rethink my actions and attitudes, and regain some real balance in life and values.

Then the Epistle points me to that most significant parts of both Faith and Gospel: that God has always been concerned, not only to reconcile people to Himself, but in the same way and through the same process, ***reconcile people to each other. And who would dare to dispute that even the slightest move in such a direction will have repercussions so enormous and life-changing.***

The Gospel then comes as no surprise whatever. If the People of God find themselves unwilling or unable to be fair dinkum and to see beyond their own selfish goals, what hope is there for the rest of the world.

With that sort of challenge before us, it seems to me that we simply need a little time to be quiet, take it all in, and respond seriously.

² *Testing* I would prefer to describe it!

Sentence

Worship the Lord your God and serve only Him.

Luke 4:8

Collect

O Lord, who for our sake fasted forty days and forty nights; give us grace to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued to the spirit, we may ever obey Your godly will in righteousness and true holiness; to Your honour and glory, Who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. **Amen**

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Deuteronomy 26: 1- 11

PSALM

91:1 – 2 & 9 – 16

EPISTLE

Romans 10: 4 – 13

GOSPEL

Luke 4: 1 – 15

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

There can be no doubt that Deuteronomy has some wonderful passages and insights, in spite of its quite early age in Hebrew history. This may well have been the book that Josiah found that led to his renewal of the faith and worship of his time. It is interesting to note that much of Jesus' own quotations from the Torah came from this book.

Notice the stunning combination of the perception of God from history as well as from nature. 'A wandering Aramaean was my father' is a quotation that stuck in my memory from the first moment that Don Robinson, a College lecturer and later Archbishop of Sydney, recited it to us. The point that Israel always found God revealed Himself to them in ordinary and real life first of all. And then all the rest followed: all aspects of life came to them from the hand of God, so alongside reference to Abraham is the recognition that everything in life is given. Only when we all see that does the need to share all the gifts become really quite obligatory. This is something that we forget far too easily in this competitive and acquisitive society.

Psalm

I would suggest a certain amount of care before taking this Psalm even slightly literally. There have been far too many Christians who have done so to their own great disadvantage. What is really being said, it seems to little old me, is that when a person sees life and God in terms referred to in the paragraph above, then while things may still go wrong for them, there is the certainty that following God leads to sense, not to disaster.

Epistle

Christ is the telos **τελος** – of the Law – which means not 'end' as such, but rather the goal. Whilst that may be of little help to you in trying to follow Paul's somewhat difficult manner of writing, it does make some difference. It is fascinating to note that, while Paul's view of the Law generally is somewhat jaundiced. He does see that Jesus is the goal, as is all His ministry and Gospel. What he is really saying here, seems to me, is to point us all to Jesus for the ultimate and final answers to life, justice and truth. And thank heaven that Someone is, especially these days of political correctness and relative truth and mistruth!

GOSPEL

I am not sure where to begin with this stunning episode at the start of Jesus' ministry. However, I am quite clear that we need to see how significant it was for Him, and for anyone who wishes to follow Him. **Anyone**. With the baptism behind Him, that commitment to the task, Jesus had then to ponder both the direction and emphases of His ministry. (No clergy person I know of has ever been given a job description, and that is a pity for here it all is, almost written in blood.)

If I am messiah, how am I to operate? How does Messiah go about things? It would have been mad more difficult for Jesus, for the common expectation by people of His day was that Messiah would be gung ho! He was

Boss, He would do it all. But some of the OT prophets, Isaiah in particular, was aware of the short-sightedness of such an approach. It would have been trying to affect Iraq now by means of military force. Isaiah was aware of the need of a Servant, Ezekiel and others of the need for a Shepherd. So the Temptations (rather the questioning of what sort of leadership was called for) was the real issue for Jesus. It was not a matter of stones for His empty tummy, but a matter of strategy to help people to move from where they were.

The question, basically, was how does one gain a following in order to teach people the truth?

Stones into bread.

It may sound a little simplistic, but Rome ruled the Empire by what has been described as 'bread and circuses.' These days, similar things happen, along with the twist of deflecting peoples thinking by offering handouts and other platitudes. Certainly, as one can see from society around about, there are always those people ready to sell their souls for a little bit of the good life, especially if that can happen without effort or contribution from them. Jesus was totally aware of the distorting effect of such an approach and rejected it out of hand. This quote was (also) from Deuteronomy, underlining that a person is more than their gut, and their real needs far more significant than a feed.

Worship Satan

This is a rather more devastating possibility that might appear on the surface. First of all, forget Satan in terms of something out there waiting to get you. Satan, in Biblical terms, is always 'the capacity of humans, individual and corporate, to deceive, lie and create evil.' The more corporate that evil, the more damaging it is likely to be. So what is this challenge? *To turn the truth into a lie, and a lie into the truth.*

Just run that past yourself again and see how often, in ordinary life, commerce and even politics, this ruse is used, somewhat effectively. Truth disappears in the guise of spin, propaganda, and you know the great Australian adjective for it. If I water down the truth, or turn it into lie, then I am worshipping Satan, being deceptive, unreliable, destructive. Small wonder that Jesus rejected this as a valid leadership style.

Jumping from the Temple

Just as our Lord turned His back on 'bread and circuses' and lies and spin to gain a following, so – and few people seem to realize this – He turned His back on using miracle to gain people. If that sounds odd to you, please stop and see that this did not stop Him from using miracle for what we may call a teaching medium. It was never a case of 'look what I can do!' but very much more a matter of 'think about what this is saying.' For an example *par excellence*, ponder John 6 and the feeding sign³ - and please allow yourself to head in the direction that all this takes us.

Now, to reiterate, please see this 'temptation' episode as a hugely significant test for Jesus as He pondered the nature of the leadership pattern that He needed to take to be true to His Father. It is also the path necessary for all Christians, especially those in leadership positions.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I remember back to my youth asking questions of my Sunday School teachers and even the old Rector, why this business of turning stones into bread could ever be the slightest temptation to Jesus. Certainly He must have been hungry after those weeks in the scrub, but the experience would not have been all that strange to Him. And as for jumping from the pinnacle of the Temple, it struck me, even then, as a remarkably odd thing even to contemplate. Back in those utterly conservative days of my youth, my questioning was regarded as more than slightly sinful, when real Christian's task was simply to shut up and believe. Then I came across Dostoevsky's parable set in the time of the Spanish Inquisition - a retelling of this story with Jesus being excommunicated by the Inquisitors because He did not follow the path that the Tempter laid out in front of Him. The Inquisitors had found that suggested series of paths to be powerful means of controlling and directing the multitude, whereas Jesus wanted people to 'follow Him out of love and devotion, or not at all.' On reading that old fable, the story of the temptation blew up in my face.

That period of six weeks was for our Lord a time when He had the difficult and hugely significant task of checking out and choosing the nature of the leadership that He was to offer. There is a great range of such patterns – as humans know well. And more often than not, individual human ego tends to be expressed in terms thought to be strong, but in reality to be destructive. For instance, Germany of the late 20s and early '30s looked for and got

³ I repeat endlessly that John does not call them 'miracles' – in spite of the NIV – but **signs**, σημεια – semeia. A sign is a pointer, something to ponder and think about. And notice how John expands the sign from 'greater than Moses' to 'eucharist' – if you dare to follow Jesus' drift!

very strong leadership, and look where it got that country – and the world at large! Other less obvious but more sophisticated leadership patterns are almost as destructive these days.

Back to Jesus. Stones into bread; worshipping Satan; jumping from the Temple.

That first Temptation is one so very often used by politicians and others. In the Roman Empire, people were controlled by ‘bread and circuses,’ a means so often used still centuries later. Give them cheap substitutes and divert their attention from the realities. ‘Dumb them down’ if you like to put it that way. It is a cheap way to buy people’s loyalty, and in the end it is an insulting and destructive way. If a person has an empty stomach, it might help fill that for a while, but as Jesus responded, there is more to you than your gut.

Worshipping Satan. I often wonder how many people these days are aware of the extent to which the lie replaces the truth in almost everything. One might expect it in advertising, but it is a pattern used in almost every aspect of life. There are lies, the saying goes, there are damn lies, and then there are statistics. We call it spin, we call it propaganda, but we need to call it by its proper name. It is lies, lies, lies. It may be what a lot of people want to hear, but it is not what is needed for life to be more solid. Can you even begin to imagine what the Faith and Gospel might have been like, if Jesus succumbed to this quite evil alternative to what we have?

Jumping from the Temple. Now pardon me one minute. If I were to do that, and somehow survived even without any broken limbs, what would be your first thought? That I was ‘Son of God?’ I bet you London to a brick that you would ask ‘how did he do that?’ Next you would ask me to do something bigger. And your attention would be focussed on something bigger and better, because it would be nothing more than entertainment. Your nerve endings might be tickled, but your mind would be in limbo. Jesus was never going to be into titillating people, but laying down a far more significant challenge.

So the only real and significant alternative form of leadership in front of Jesus was not one of control, was not one of strength, but was – and remains for us His followers, - one of being servant. Of bearing witness to the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and of bearing witness with love and compassion (and not some set of strict rules!)

I mentioned in notes for this Sunday a year or two ago, having been asked to preach at the Commissioning of a minister of another Church, rather glad that it fell on the First Sunday in Lent. It was a large but not very sophisticated congregation, but once the reality of the Temptations of Jesus were unpacked to them, it struck them, and the minister being commissioned, as meeting them right where they all lived. And that, of course, is the point the Evangelists were making when they relate the story in their respective Gospels.