

Sunday 3rd February, 2008

Last Sunday after Epiphany
Transfiguration

Sentence

Suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is My Beloved Son with Whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him.'
Matthew 17:5

Collect

Almighty God, You have given Your only Son to be for us both a sacrifice for sin and also an example of godly life; give us grace that we may always thankfully receive the benefits of His sacrifice, and also daily endeavour to follow the blessed steps of His most holy life; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, Who is alive and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. **Amen**

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Exodus 24: 12 – 18

PSALM

2

EPISTLE

2 Peter 1: 16 – 21

GOSPEL

Matthew 17: 1 – 9

NOTES ON THE READINGS.

*Make no mistake - this is a **very** significant series of readings with all manner of thought-provoking parallels and emphases. We miss them at our own risk, if not peril. The connection and contrast between the Mosaic receiving of the Law and the Transfiguration is clear and deliberate and Biblically important. So is the inclusion of Psalm 2 – if you can catch the significance of the fact that part of John's **Revelation** is a clear exposition of this Psalm as John compares human kingdoms with that of Jesus. I have an awful feeling that the notes this week are going to be vast.*

Old Testament Lesson

Someone reported, decades ago, that people cannot understand the Old Testament without the New. I suspect that the greater reality is the other way round. So much modern preaching and emphasis sees little or no connection between the two great parts of the Bible. This – dare I express the view – leads to a remarkably foreshortened understanding of the Faith, and an immature presentation of it, to a world that deserves far better.

Whenever you see reference to mountains and clouds (or smoke and/or fire) and voices please be far less literal and far more understanding. Here is 'Hebrewesque' presentation of **the presence and power of God**. Recall for just a moment the number of times there are similar expressions: with Abraham, with Moses a couple of times, with Isaiah's call to prophethood and to Jesus at His temptation, transfiguration, in the Temple at the Cross and at the Ascension. All connected, and all illustrative of the huge importance of the various occasions. The imagery is far more significant than the mere event, if you follow me.

Through Moses the Law was given; through Jesus came something far more significant and of far greater value. Mind you, never discount the Law either! Or have I lost you there? Remember Jesus' comment about the greatest commandment(s), the *Shema Israel*.

Psalm

I am astounded constantly at the vision and breadth of the faith of this ancient Psalmist. Being so early in the Psalter, it had to stem from Davidic times – or perhaps earlier, - and that alone puts it at 1,000BC. Here is the ponderings of a mere human being whose political and historical view of life leaves even most moderns for dead. He pondered the way in which leaders, political and religious, of his time, turned their collective backs on the value of Judaism, preferring to reject truth, justice and integrity for the sake of their own egocentric stances. "Give God the flick" would be a modern way of expressing it. How the hell does the Divinity know anything about leading people?

But in his own sweet way, the psalmist has God doing the mocking: follow that path, God is said to be saying, boyo, and you find yourself coming out backwards. Power and control is a hugely destructive path to travel, as some modern leaders are finding out to their cost and to their country's costs.

It is rather fascinating to see, referring to John's commentary on this psalm, that the more recent author turns the corner on this more ancient observer. For 'rod of iron' John comments, read 'the way of the Cross.' The answer to human need and progress is not overriding power but quiet, caring service. Even you may feel yourself on the side of the gungho kings of old (and new) but think it through better than you may have done so far. Control is never an answer; love and integrity is. The longer, harder path certainly, but the only effective one. **Even for the Church!**

Epistle

Now before you get hung up on all manner of side issues, stop and see what Peter (or whoever!) is conveying. The power of Jesus? Only the compulsion of love. *Caritas Iesus urgit me*. And majesty? Honour? Glory? With respect to Jesus, all this has only to do with the enormous and real value of that Lord of ours, and all that He did and does. No self aggrandizement here, but the profound and loving concern for others. *This is the Person Whom God loves, and anyone else who follows the pattern.*

So here is no theological statement about inspiration of Scripture, but rather an appeal to sit up and take notice of the outpourings and thoughts of the ancient prophets. They, like psalmists, could be remarkably insightful people, so don't write them off, but understand them.

GOSPEL

And the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus. Here is no event for Jesus' reassurance, but rather a necessary kick in the pants for the thick disciples, who were still quite happy to go on with the rather pleasant ride. A week previous, Peter was jolted into seeing in Jesus someone rather more significant than had crossed his mind prior. Messiah, whatever that meant to the somewhat unsophisticated backwoods Hebrew mind. And this event was an even more powerful thing, though notice that Jesus took only what may be called His leadership team into the experience. Messiah eh? Then handle this, you guys. Moses and Elijah. Law and Prophets. These were somewhat lesser than the Man Who stood before them. It took Peter's breath away, though he managed the traditional foot-in-mouth disease of which he was most capable.

What is the role of religion anyhow? A lifelong Jew may well have seen past the regular forms of worship and prayer and sacrifice when they got the chance. Awareness of sin and evil was a large factor. And one more than suspects a huge sense of injustice not only through the crushing presence of Roman legions, but also the even more crushing power of their own religious leaders. One of the sad outcomes of many religions is their capacity to keep a beaten people down. But that was the opposite emphasis of the faith that Jesus came to offer. He did not only heal the sick but also in Isaianic terms, 'set the prisoner free.' It must have been a huge learning curve for those rather unsophisticated disciples. Even more learning was to occur down the mountain afterwards.

Who is this, Whom wind and sea obey? Who is that Law and Prophets submit to? This is the commencement of a remarkable journey into which we do not enter at our own peril. Here is the *raison d'etre, the meaning of life, and the means of great progress in human relations, if you dare to follow Him*

Notes for a Sermon

Is there not sufficient there already? The mind really boggles.

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’ keeps me from heaven **rather than seeing the damage it causes to you and to others.**

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 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 Temptations¹ 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

¹ *Testing* I would prefer to describe it!

process, *reconcile people to each other. And who would dare to dispute that even the slightest move in such a direction will have repercussions 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.

Sentence

We do not live on bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God

Matthew 4:4

Collect

Almighty God, Whose Son fasted forty days in the wilderness, and was tempted as we are yet without sin; give us grace to direct our lives in accordance with Your will, that as You know our weakness, so we may know Your power to save; through Jesus Christ our Redeemer, **Amen**

Old Testament Lesson

Genesis 2: 15 –17 & 3: 1 – 7

Psalm

32

Epistle

Romans 5: 12 – 21

GOSPEL

Matthew 4: 1 – 11

Notes on the readings

Old Testament Lesson

I am still stunned to find that so many devout Christians try and hang on to a very literal and myopic understanding of this most important of Hebrew sagas. It is not history (insofar as it is not a tale of something that happened in some far distant past,) but is very much the Hebrew response to what is wrong with humanity and the world. ‘Adam’ is not a name but a generic word for ‘humanity’ which as the tale indicates is from ‘adamah,’ the earth. Incidentally, ‘adam’ is made up of ish and ishshah, make and female, and this ancient Jewish legend seems to have been the expression of revolt against the male superiority of the time. There is no *adam* without male and female. An insight way in advance of its time.

So in this tale, the perception presented is that the ‘human dilemma’ stems from **all** humanity’s refusal to accept the real God, and to substitute self. ‘You shall be like gods’ is that ultimate temptation, a promise accepted by so many of the human race, with –as the story indicates – its outcome in the breakdown of relationships. That business of nakedness has far less to do with nudity, and far more to do with the barriers which we create between ourselves and others.

This then is the real nature of sin: not its capacity to dirty our souls, but in the extensive damage it causes in a world that God designed to be ‘good.’ The outcome was not divine punishment, for as one of my more senior parishioners once said, *‘I find great comfort in this tale: even after the disaster, the Lord was still looking for Adam in the cool of the evening!’*

I really do long for far more people to get beyond the attempts to defend this series of tales, so that they understand that what they really need is defence against what the story is saying. It is powerful, even if very ancient stuff.

Psalm

How is it that we Christians have tended never to get past the narrow business of seeing the sin/forgiveness part of the story as being our ‘escape’ from punishment and restoration to ‘purity’ – which never seems to work anyhow! Here the Psalmist is taking us into the real direction for the process.

Like Adam, when I become aware of my faults, I tend to hide them from you as well as from me. That sort of falsity damages everyone around. I present a false front, and so do you, so we are reduced to dealing with veneers of each other and not the real person. This explains much of the pain expressed in the early part of this psalm. However, if and when I face up to my failings, especially knowing that forgiveness is a possibility, then I can get my feet back onto the firm ground of reality. Yes, I fail; and if you are in any way able to accept reality too, you can accept my failure because you are caught in the same issue. (I have never been able to understand how anyone could blackmail a Christian. If you have some true dirt on me, then talk about it! I am not perfect, Charlie Brown. If it is not true, then you are barking up a wrong tree.)

As I mention to folk constantly, the fact that confession and absolution are prominent factors in any Anglican form of worship, it is not because we are particular sinners, but it is to underline that we are not perfect, but knowing that forgiveness is a Divine possibility, we can acknowledge those faults and not hide

from them. That then gives us the chance to look back on those failures, accept them, and learn from them. Is this not a rather remarkably productive way to go?

Epistle

One of the sad facts of modern Christian understanding of Scripture is our western way of treating these old documents. We need to think Jewishly to catch sight of much of Paul's (or other Biblical authors) insights and the expression of them. Perhaps comments above on Genesis may help to reduce the work-load on this passage. Basically, human sin is ever met by the loving and longing of the Father Who has provided an alternative way to operate. Divine grace lies in the wonderful fact that, through Christ, there is this alternative, of loving and caring and forgiving, though – as the psalmist makes clear – there has to be a serious recognition of the failing and the repentance from it. Grace is no easy way out! In fact, that 'easy way out' syndrome' is one way of missing the whole point and purpose of the Gospel.

GOSPEL

I would hope that we have reached the stage of using imagination better when it comes to taking hold of this story. How can one convey things of such vast importance without going off into the imaginative, even mythical if you dare. Myth is not something untrue or unreal. It is a powerful means of conveying truth imaginatively. Not literal, OK, for that means we would miss most of the point.

This was no test to see if Jesus would remain sinless, keep being true to God, as if that was the task before Him. No, it was – if you dare to follow me – far more significant than that!

The huge question for Jesus at this point of commencement of His public ministry was to ask Himself the question as to what strategy, what direction, what underlying process He needed to take. There are all manners of *modus operandi* when it comes to leadership, from the powerful, oppressive 'father knows best' image, through to the weak and pathetic gentle pointing to a proposed direction. It is not just a matter of what works; it is a matter of how best to win a following from people, being aware of the fact that rather too many people are only into things if there is something in it for them. We humans are not, generally speaking, a pretty lot.

Leadership. So the 'temptations' are really a facing of a series of possible courses of action – and one suspects that there would have been other patterns Jesus examined ... and discarded. About the best indication He would have had from Biblical sources, would have been from the Old Testament prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and that stunning passage from Genesis at which we have looked already.

Stones into bread. The Empire of which Jesus was part, however unwillingly, tended to operate on the basis of 'bread and circuses. Pander to the gut, so to speak. A matter of some sort of blackmail to 'give 'em what they want' so you can do with them what you want. Watch your politicians who still operate under remarkably similar modes, and we let them get away with it. It is a case of buying people by means of their own assets. Small wonder that Jesus rejected this most false of processes, and seeing the importance not of what may be wanted, but of what is needed. 'Every word that comes from the mouth of God' is not some minor Biblical matter, but very much the old prophetic word about justice, and truth, integrity and compassion. You don't ever see much of that coming from the mouths of politicians or other leaders, now do you. Honest now!

Pinnacles of temples. I remain appalled constantly at the extent to which entertainment constitutes so much of the consumption of people today, Sometimes they even call it an 'industry!' What rot. Yes, you may get a crowd at a rock concert, or a cricket match (depending where in the world you come from) but once the kerfuffle is over, is it back to the deadpan. Entertainment becomes a drug somewhat, requiring increasing doses and even more ridiculous activity. No sensible Lord would even contemplate heading in such a direction, though some of His more recent servants try to operate at such a level.

'Fall down and worship Satan' - here lies the most insidious test: I kid you not, and the most used and abused form of leadership that is so common it is almost unseen. Satan, the Great Deceiver, in Biblical terms. The great liar. No, not someone out there leading you astray, but your own capacity to fool yourself. This temptation to Jesus was to water down the realities to make them acceptable to people, to spin, to prevaricate, to lead up the garden path. This temptation is ever to turn the truth into a lie, and a lie into the truth. Spin. The sort of stuff, once again, that seems to be one of the preserves of pollies, of advertisers, of salesmen of all manner of sorts. And I lay London to a brick that you have either experienced this trickery or engaged in it yourself. Small wonder that Jesus turned His back on such subterfuge, and thank the Lord that

He did. Thank heavens that He saw the necessity of having something sacred, even if it was at the cost of His own life.

Never, *never* lose sight of the vast importance of this encounter in the desert – this ‘dropping off the world’ in order to get His focus and priorities right. And what is more, stop and realize that this is a constant need for anyone who dares to follow in Jesus’ footsteps. When we mere humans act outside the parameters of this Lord of ours, turning leadership into bullying, we commit the most serious of blasphemies, and do enormous damage.

Servant, not master.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

You may well have heard me on this before, but it strikes me as sufficiently significant to reiterate it, year after year. If that worries you, then I tell the story of a young mother some years ago, who had sat through similar sermons for seven years, and at the end of that time, after hearing again what follows, asked why was it that in all her years she had never heard the story told that way. She was shocked when I told her that she had, but that this was the first time it had struck her. For each of us there seems to be ‘times and seasons’ when things break over us and we see life in a fresh light.

Even as a Sunday School kid, I was in trouble. Those temptations seemed rather – well, pathetic – if it was to put Jesus to the test. Turning stones into bread seemed such a petty thing, and only a very short-term solution to hunger. And jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple struck me as the height of stupidity. I was addressed in severe terms and expelled from the class. And all because no one else dared think outside the square. If you dare to think about it, it does sound ridiculous, until you ponder the matter more deeply. What was really going on in the head of Jesus for those six long and hungry weeks in the bush? And why?

Jesus had just undergone baptism at the hands of John (the Baptist) and had a reassuring experience with those echoes from the Psalms *you are My Son, my beloved*. But what did that entail and how does a person respond to that calling?

One of the great disappointments of my life occurred at the time of my Ordination. I do not know quite what I expected, but felt sure it would include a clear indication of how to ‘priest,’ and what it entailed. Nothing of the sort happened, and the ‘charge’ that I somehow expected came only in dribbles as the years rolled by. Jesus did not have the luxury of either ‘charge’ or long-term discovery, and that is why He did what we ought to have done then, and that is to go on retreat. How does one operate as Son of God, as Messiah, as Servant of the Lord? The usual and normal modes for leadership, we humans assume, is to be Boss of the Yard. Order people around. Delegate and then sit back.

The three different sorts of questions or tests that faced Jesus revolved around the nature of His ministry and leadership. How should *He priest?* How to gain a following, how to get the message across, how to win disciples? **What sort of leadership is required?**

That turning of stones into bread was a figurative way of operating. The Romans ruled, as it is said, by means of bread and circuses. Devise ways of getting people’s attentions by diverting them from the real issues. Spin is what we call it these days, though I have a fondness for the two-syllable Aussie expression that really expresses it vividly. Jesus knew that if He filled people’s bellies, some would follow Him. But He also knew that as soon as the freebies ran out, so did the loyalty – or whatever passed for it. Obviously, this was not a valid direction to head.

Jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple is just as daft. Mind you, in our day and age, those who amuse and entertain us are lionised, grossly overpaid, and followed by a rather mindless multitude. Shoot me down if you like, but what has any singer, or dancer or ever sportsman **really** done for you and others? Jesus was not stupid, and knew that if He started out that way, it may begin with the pinnacle, but would have to expand into ever more stupid and risky procedures. And in what way does that process ever get anyone to think or love their neighbour.

The last temptation is the one that gets a lot of people. What really does it mean to fall down and worship Satan? It is not a matter of magic or mumbo jumbo. It is not even a case of the occult. It is far more simple and tempting than that. It is in fact something I suspect you do often. It is a matter of watering down the truth, of making it all palatable and lovey-dovey, it is spin. It is disguising the truth and reducing it to make it appear more palatable. **It is the temptation to turn the truth into a lie and the lie into the truth. Or at least, make it look that way.**

This is the way of humans, of politicians, and of all who would lead the gullible up the proverbial garden path. And it is remarkably easy to do, for whenever you **know** you should be clear and direct and honest with others, Need I say more. Fortunately, we have a Lord with rather more integrity than that.

It would have been terribly easy for Jesus to have made a mess of things, simply surrendering to the normal human patterns. Thank God He did not. And here comes a huge sting in the tail.

Not only was it necessary for Jesus to have made His solid and strong decision in terms of His ministry and leadership, ***it is also necessary for us. Not just clergy, but all the people of God. In fact all of the humans anyhow.*** *Only when I come to close terms with the real and powerful lessons of Jesus' testing and learn to operate that way too, that my ministry, even my humanity has a chance to reach its potential, not for me but for others.*

Sentence

God so loves the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life.

John 3:16

Collect

Remember, O Lord, what You have wrought in us and not what we deserve, and as You have called us to Your service, make us worthy of Your calling, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Old Testament Lesson

Genesis 12: 1 – 4a

Psalms

121

Epistle

Romans 4:1 – 5 & 13 - 17

GOSPEL

John 3: 1 – 17

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

This saga about Abraham is fascinating stuff, and I have to confess that much of the impact of the tale did not touch me until quite well into my own pilgrimage. But here, in seed form, is so much of the point, purpose and direction of God's call and purpose, which is something we ignore to our own peril I guess.

Right here at the historical beginning of the Biblical revelation, the real issues are faced. This is no personalised, internal experience either for Abram or even his immediate descendents. This is for the world, for all human beings of whatever time, place and culture. (Religion that is internalised tends to be of no use whatever, even to the participant sometimes.) This, as far as God was concerned, was to be of real value to all living people.

One interesting question remains at the forefront: have you ever wondered why this happened to Abram? Don't go all coy and religious on me; be real.

The scenario, surely, would have to be something like this: Abram grew up in 'Ur of the Chaldees' so his religious background would have been more in the line of a moon worshipper, or what you may well call a pagan. In spite of his apparent wealth and position, this was a questioning, searching, inquisitive man, who found all sorts of holes in his then current religion. Not a lot of people are happy to ask questions in that situation, as they tend to be afraid that the whole thing will crumble to dust in their hands.²

So here was a bloke who was prepared to go on a search, wherever it took him. Without any great certainty of progress, he took off, with loyal Sarai alongside. Whilst quite some of their answers arrived through this pilgrimage, not all be any means were attained. *Now do you begin to understand something more of what faith (and/or faithfulness) means?* Have you ever wondered how many other people God tapped on the shoulder before getting a response from this man?

Psalm

On the other hand, I wonder how many moderns find little or no connection between the psalmist's experience of God – and their own lack of it? This – on the surface – does sound a little twee does it not? However does God begin to get that close to anyone, being all protective and maternal?

I suspect that the answer is rather more visible when we are honest enough to know that, if and when we are about to do something selfish or destructive, there is that 'still small voice' that prompts otherwise. God is no stepper-in or demander, but there is that sense of knowing what ought to be right in the middle of what ought not to be! Or is that not your experience?

Epistle

² One colleague in Theological College reflected exactly this attitude: he refused to attend lectures on Genesis because what he was hearing threatened his (terribly narrow) view of the stories. As far as I know, he has never moved past that apparent barrier, and that is tragic in the extreme.

I think maybe that some of the comment on the Old Testament lesson may help to open up what Paul is saying here about the difference between law and grace. Abraham did not respond to demand or rule when he left Ur and Haran. It was in response to an urging to discover. So much of old religion, still evident in some faiths, that it is important to keep the rules. That surely leaves the adherent marking time and never moving forward. This faith of Abraham and Paul both pointed to and looked for a far less static and far more pilgrimming experience. Have you noticed that as long as Israel was in pilgrimage, even in the desert, there was more progress made than even when they were settled and comfortable! Perhaps there is a lesson here somewhere.

GOSPEL

More on this anon, but I fear I have great difficulty with those who jump up and down and say here is the real gospel. What is seen is that by such folk tends to be little more than a populist perception of it.

This encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus is far more serious a matter than someone 'making a decision' to follow Jesus. And the great problem Nicodemus seemed to have was of hugely greater import than usually seen.

Here was, like Abram, a searcher after truth, who was having some difficulty with the material that Jesus was presenting, because he recognized a great problem needing resolution. It is fascinating to watch Jesus as He dealt with this person who should have been far more aware of the faith and far more open to realities.

Born again! Here is no reference to some emotional experience as some sort of prelude to faith. Here is the expressed need for complete change in human nature – which is why poor old Nicodemus could only open his mouth in shock: how can anyone start all over again?

Jesus' difficulty with Nicodemus' short-sightedness lay in His surprise that the Pharisee had not come to terms with the prophetic words of Ezekiel *et al.* That remarkable vision of Ezekiel of the dry bones made clear even in those distant days, for the people of faith to be restored through the agency of the Spirit of God. *Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones, hear the word of the Lord*

The stunning thing about this Gospel of forgiveness and redemption lies in the expressed need of repentance – not just sorrow for sin but a **change of heart, mind and will.** Metanoia. Powerful stuff, and far more reaching than a mere emotional exercise.

SO when we talk about faith, we are not entering into some sort of low-key internalised thing but a life-changing exercise and not just for our benefit but also for the whole world. Back to that Abramic challenge.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It is something of a confession from my dim distant past, but it was a significant challenge to all that I had been taught in terms of 'preaching the gospel.' In the first year after ordination, I was asked by a young lad about becoming a Christian, and having just had four years of College training and considerable experience in the Billy Graham Crusades of the '50s, felt reasonably confident to lead this lad to Christ. As you might imagine, we went through the process of proving sinner status and the forgiveness offered in Jesus. We talked about the Nicodemus story and being born again. We prayed as the young man made his decision to accept Jesus. *And it lasted about three weeks.*

My main concern was my obvious inadequacy as an evangelist, although I had done and been through everything that had been set down as needing attention. Mind you, it was all somewhat affected by my experience at the Crusades, at what was classified as 'Follow Up' – calling in on converts some short time after decisions that they had made at the Sydney Showground. I must have had a list of 20 or 30 people to visit, and – I kid you not – there was not a single soul amongst them who would even admit to having signed the card in the first place. Huge embarrassment all around was the signal of the day.

Both those experiences began my Abrahamic quest to discover what this 'born again' business was really all about, and like that ancient worthy, it took me into all manner of interesting and sometimes scary directions. I say scary, because those whom I understood to be on the same side as me, became very much the antagonists. Seems that there are not too many people – Christians included – who are prepared to look outside what we call these 'our comfort zone.' I was seen as something less than Christian, and something

certainly not ‘evangelical.’ Mind you, that label has long since lost its appeal, not because of what it means, but because of what it has tended to be mis-shaped to mean.

What is the faith about, really. *Truly, ruly?*

In spite of some appearances to the contrary, the Hebrew-Christian Faith has its focus on the redemption of the world. This world and the people in it. In the light of the enormous and damaging effect of people turning their back on God, on the breakdown of relationships and growth of hatreds, the Faith began and continues as a search for a workable, feasible relevant way of working and relating that can bring people back together. It is not essentially religious at all; in fact every attempt to make it ‘religious’ has managed only to distort the damn thing out of existence and point. I kid you not.

Reconciliation; that is the key issue: from Adam to Jesus and beyond. Division which is the Adamic hallmark; reconciliation which is Jesus’ – in all He said and did and lived and died and rose again. And He calls us down the same track. *And I am appalled at the extent to which even Christians refuse to travel the path to reconciliation, often because in their hidden agenda it may show them to be wrong!* Don’t know about you, boyo, but I learn more from my mistakes when I do not hide you or me from them.

So where does this get us with Nicodemus? Interesting, Schultz!

Old Nico knew exactly where the problem lay, partly because he was human and I bet partly because he was a Pharisee, and I bet that must have been one of the hardest things for a Pharisee to be – I mean to be a questioning, testing, exploring sort of bloke. He could see with one eye shut and both his hands tied behind his back, that his mob, the Hasidim, the Holy Ones, had managed to stuff up the whole show, and were being (quite often) some of the nastiest pieces of work you could imagine. You have come across them, haven’t you? Holy joes who make utter mockery of the very faith they profess and who exhibit absolutely NO characteristics of their Lord! (I am not all that crash-hot myself, so this is observation more than criticism.)

Nicodemus’ question about entering his mother’s womb again and being born again was not some stupid ingenuous riposte. He was deadly earnest. ‘How the hell does a person begin all over again? I am the sum total of all that has happened to me, all my choices, actions and reactions. I cannot go back to Square One and start again. (Mind you it would be most remarkably helpful if a person could, don’t you think?)

And Jesus’ answer to Nico was not to report something new, but rather to point him back to what his own and older prophets had realized. Ezekiel and that valley of dry bones, for one. You can’t do it on your own, Nic, but you don’t have to exactly. The Holy Spirit is there, encouraging, enabling, pointing you in the more productive direction. Putting flesh on your bones and breath into your body.

(Interesting thing for any who may not know: in Hebrew, ‘ruach’ translates as spirit, Spirit, breath, wind, and all that marks by its presence if a person is alive. In Greek, the word is ‘pneuma’ and can be translated in the same wide variations. You will certainly recognize the source of *pneumonia* which is a deadly dysfunction of what is meant to be productive.)

Where does that get us? To see that the objective of this faith is to offer to all the world of people an alternative way to operate to the Adamic syndrome. It also recognizes the enormous change of heart and direction that this calls for, but it also sees the stark need for this radical and effective way of operating. It is the Jesus syndrome if you dare call it that, one of love and service, of self-giving not getting, that requires nothing less than utter *metanoia*, change of mind and heart, and openness to the Holy Spirit, or, if you dare, you own inbuilt intuition. Still small voice stuff. This is not something available only to a select few or tiny elite. It is inbuilt into all humans, who have always been able to respond – and it is an indication of the nature of the person or people when they do.

But it is an enormous challenge. And that is where the real problems lie. In our own day and age in this part of the world, society in general and people in particular are becoming increasingly self-obsessed, self-interested, and self-absorbed. And the whole societal thing, from advertising up, is built to feed that opiate. Religion is no opiate – or if it is it is not religion. But this stuff is, or it feeds on itself to produce increasingly intuned and self-obsessed humans. The destructive outcome of all this is becoming obvious increasingly.

Except a person be born again! Yeah. But do not expect it to happen in five minutes, nor to be anything less than a life-long process and pilgrimage. But worth it? Heavens, yes. **YES.**

Sentence

God proves His love for us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us

Romans 5:8

Collect

Lord God our Redeemer, Who heard the cry of Your people and sent Your servant Moses, to lead them out of slavery; free us from the tyranny of sin and death and, by the leading of Your Spirit, bring us to our promised land, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Exodus 17: 1 – 17

Psalm

95

Epistle

Romans 5: 1 – 11

GOSPEL

John 4: 5 – 42

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Those with keen eyes and hearts will notice the change from last week's emphasis on breath and rebirth to this week's water theme. All sorts of interesting pointers can emerge.

Old Testament

Anyone who has had any experience with arid lands and desert will know the point, purpose and value of water. It is not just a matter of keeping clean, but of staying alive. One can last without food for several weeks; without water, especially in dry country, that period is reduced to days – even hours in critical situations. So before we get too critical of the travellers from Egypt, stop and realize that not only have they left behind their slavery that at least had them well fed, but alongside the Nile they were never short of water. In fact it may have been a matter of too much on occasion. So on one hand you can understand the kerfuffle. However the process was markedly unpleasant and bitter. And one suspects that, even when water was provided, there would have been underlying unpleasantness. Still, the point was made then: water is a most basic essential to life, and lack of it lead to death.

Psalm

And that theme is taken up in this psalm, titled the *Venite* when I was a choir boy, and it was sung as a canticle in every service of Morning Prayer. You could say that I know this psalm rather intimately even though I have not sung Matins for more than 50 years.

Some points of interest: did you realize that it took Israel quite some centuries to understand that JHWH was not just one of a mob of gods? The process took time, and longer yet before He was seen as the Only One there Is. Faith is a pilgrimage, remember!

And then there is that reference to the conflict over water, and the bitter taste that conflict left, if not in the mind of God, then certainly in the hearts of the Hebrew leaders. It is an underlining of the totally self-interested nature of people in the raw. They do not really want 'salvation.' They want their bellies filled, and you cannot do a great deal with people like that, now can you?

Epistle

In this most wonderful of Pauline passages, I still have a concern that moderns have moved the emphasis to such a personal and intimate plane that it has tended to bend the focus in an almost totally false direction. This is not so much a matter of offering you eternal safety as it is of reminding you of the eternal verities.

You have a God Who does not determine punishment on those who turn their back on Him, but persists in offering this remarkable alternative for life long before anyone deserves it. And notice the presence of the word *reconciliation* at the end of the passage. For this is the whole point and purpose of Gospel. Your reconciliation with God, yes, but also your reconciliation with others as well, operates on the same practical and theological basis as the other. Self-giving not self-getting. Please think all this through.

GOSPEL

Well, what a large Gospel, and what huge import in what is happening here. Last week, Jesus had firm words with someone who ought to have known, and here Jesus is rather more gentle with someone who could have but did not, and yet showed an underlying honesty. Marvellous stuff.

Mind you, Jesus managed to put the Twelve into a tizzy, for He stepped right out of the cultural bounds even in daring to talk to this female waste of space. (If you are offended, please read on) To the Jewish (male) mind. Samaritan women were far lower than Samaritan men, and regarded as permanently unclean. And while mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun, the only reason a woman would go to the well then was because no one else did. She, almost certainly, was the local prostitute. Could not face the ignominy of other women, and went when she could be sure of privacy. And when that Jewish bloke talked to her ... **decently** it would have taken her breath away.

What followed next was even more breath-taking. In asking for a drink, Jesus put Himself under an obligation to her, made Himself quite vulnerable really. It stunned that woman, and was an interesting prelude to a conversation that became community-changing.

The simple item of water became a focus of attention. 'Living' water is running water as opposed to still. Wells of course have the latter; streams have the former. And streams have that constant flow of clear pure water, or used to when I was a kid. No lack; no traps for the unworthy. No pollution either, as I recall, even after rain.

The woman was not silly when she asked for more of that water: both she knew and Jesus knew that the real conversation was about the things in life that really matter – and in her case one of those was to be loved. And that is why, one suspects, that Jesus moved the conversation from safer 'religious' subjects, to that which really bothered the woman. 'Go call your husband.' It could have been seen as a safety valve for Jesus, but I doubt it. Risks with people never seemed to bother Him. More likely it was a matter of attempting to hit nails on the head so to speak. Let's get to the bottom of it. (I am still amazed constantly at the way Jesus always managed to meet whoever He encountered in an entirely fit-the-scenario manner. No 'one size fits all' for it never does. But each encounter was individual, personal, sole.) So deeply moved was that woman by all this, that she went totally outside her own comfort zone that she got onto everyone! And the rest, as they say, is history.

The really stunning outcome of this apparently innocuous event was that the community of that town had to come to terms with the place of that woman in their midst, and doubtless the way some or more of the men may well have maltreated her and the women more so. 'Salvation has come to this place' and all from a most unsurprising conversation. The Twelve had one heck of a steep learning curve also, didn't they!

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I am beginning to think that there is enough put down already for you to bounce off.