

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, in Whose presence angels serve in awe, 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, Who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. **Amen**

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 6:1 – 13

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" And he said, "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed."

Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; until the LORD sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled." The holy seed is its stump.

Psalm

138

I will give thanks O Lord, with my whole heart: even before the gods will I sing Your praises
I will bow down before Your holy temple and give thanks to Your name: because of Your faithfulness and Your loving-kindness, for You have made Your name and Your word supreme over all things
At a time when I called to You, You gave me answer: and put new strength within my soul
All the kings of the earth shall praise You, O Lord: for they have heard the words of Your mouth
And they shall sing of the ways of the Lord: that the glory of the Lord is great
For though the Lord is exalted, He looks upon the lowly: and comprehends the proud from afar.
Though I walk in the midst of danger you will You preserve my life: You will stretch out Your hand against the fury of my enemies and Your right hand shall save me
The Lord will complete His purpose for me: Your loving-kindness O Lord endures for ever, do not forsake the work of Your own hands.

Epistle

1 Corinthians 15: 1- 11

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you--unless you have come to believe in vain.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them--though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

GOSPEL

Luke 5: 1- 11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signalled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

Last Sunday it was the turn of Jeremiah and his call; this week it is Isaiah. In fact, I find this report rather more moving than Jeremiah's, but that is a personal preference. However, the factors are strikingly similar. Perhaps this one has a little more detail. The main reason for my preference is that Isaiah was part of the royal/priestly leadership, and this experience marked the development of this person from 'doing his service' to a life-changing encounter with God. It is a very moving report, as he began to realize God as He truly is. And that meant seeing life and relationships as they truly are – and then as they should be.

I find it extraordinary that Christians, particularly modern Christians can seem to miss the huge challenge to reflect horizontally what is also a vertical response. Love God love your neighbour leaves little room for 'passing by on the other side.' As with Jeremiah, what leads on from the call to prophethood is that challenge to change the world virtually, with the same recognition that it will be hard work trying to get a deaf and dumb populace responding to the Almighty – and each other.

Psalm

If ever you wonder why the ancient psalmists and others used to get excited about God, then stop and realize that, in a world of inequity and injustice, that the author and guarantor of both was Someone to hang on to. Our own world is fast reaching that same destructive, self-obsessive level, and one may well confront a situation or life where the ancient verities are ignored or sidestepped. Then I suspect you will know all about rejoicing in God Who upholds all those values.

Epistle

This stunning passage about the Resurrection used to be embedded in the Book of Common Prayer Funeral Service, but at the time I was using it, general familiarity with Corinthians was fast waning. On the other hand, here is a remarkable statement of the resurrection, with its validity backed up by the evidence of so many people then alive having been first-hand witnesses. Although it often seemed strange to me that such an important matter no longer has such first-hand evidence, it is just as important to note that so much of life generally is shot through with resurrection evidence. From the farmer sowing his seed to the fact that living for oneself is death and for others is life, is surely evidence enough of the reality. Night and day; death and life. The line of evidence goes on and on, with one wondering why it is such an issue for many. On the other hand, read the 'Dispatch' section of any newspaper and see how many people who while they discard 'faith,' still hope for life after this. I find that a strange enigma.

GOSPEL

Even since my Sunday School days (about six decades ago now!) this story of Jesus has been very familiar territory. Sadly teachers in those days tended to focus on the amazing Jesus, whereas that Lord of ours was doing His darnedest to get His little mob to see past their own noses. It is slightly amazing that Peter, no bright scholar himself, began to catch sight of the significance of what Jesus was pointing to, but sadly seems to have gone back into his shell until just before the Transfiguration. Even then, Peter's progress was slow, limited by his lack of lateral thinking.

Once again, the whole reason for the exercise was to lift the disciples' attention beyond themselves to the people around about them, those *sheep without a shepherd*, for whom Jesus had such compassion and care.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

If ever there is a challenge that lies in front of every human being, it is to see past the familiar and safe to what amounts to a reason for living. I find it tragic beyond words that so many people, from whatever socio-economic background, seem to look no further than their own nerve endings and other jangling bits. Is it only a few who ponder deeper?

What may seem rather strange to folk such as those is the fact that, just as often, those who are in the circle of spiritual or religious issues have themselves the need to be challenged past the routine, ordinary, banal. (I do recall still, rather vividly, discovering after my call to the priesthood, that what I expected to be a life of boredom and ennui turned out to be a constant, evolving exploration of faith and of life and of God. There has been no room for boredom whatever; although I must say the somewhat enforced inactivity of 'retirement' has not been the hoped for 'peaceful' time that was promised.

I would love to have met Isaiah, and to have run with him through that experience 'in the year that King Uzziah died.' He must have been a very busy and important person in the hierarchy of the day, and it must have been quite something of a culture shock to have, so to speak, met the Lord face to face. The ramifications would have been quite enormous.

If ever you wonder at the part of the experience that relates to Isaiah's awareness of sinfulness, please do see it for what it is and not for what it isn't. Here is no cringe about his dirty past: come with me a minute or two please.

Isaiah had long been in the position, apparently, of leadership amongst the echelons of power. Such a position would have meant, surely, that he confronted both the weakness of leadership as well as the strengths, some of the latter of which would actually fall into the category of weakness. (Ponder that if you need.) Anyone of honest persuasion would then have recognized his own capacity of weakness – yes even sinfulness – and wonder why he had been chosen to the role.¹ At the very least, it meant that Isaiah was aware, from the inside, so to speak, of where human reality lies, and so was better able to minister to people. It is much the case of the 'wounded healer' being far better equipped to serve hurt people than is someone untouched by such 'weaknesses.' This God of ours is not idiot, let me assure you.

All the above, of course, is part of the proving ground for providing all the people of God with others who can really minister to them. Aware of strengths **and** weaknesses, they can bring greater light and heat on to awkward subjects. And to sidestep some of the baloney that tends to go on in tense situations.

It was a wonderful and very basic and realistic call to the prophet. God knew, as Isaiah would have guessed, that most of the Jewish folk of the time would have little or no interest in the realities of faith and life. They would be (*or act!*) blind, deaf and dumb rather than listen to matters of justice and truth. Little progress is possible in such a situation, and yet that is precisely what needs to be changed *It is rather interesting to note that as I write this, the local ABC radio is reporting on the Obama-led change to the previous regime where the CIA was permitted the most extreme abuse of prisoners in order to obtain damning information. Ironically that nation which held itself to be the paragon of virtue, and to be led by*

¹ I remember debating with the Lord about my own call. Several of my mates at the time were far more holy than me – still are probably. I was very aware of my disqualification from such service, but that seems to have turned out to be the opposite. Being aware of one's weaknesses means one's feet are kept well and truly on the ground. Not a bad place to be!

Christian conviction, was doing precisely the opposite – and then went on to wonder why its name stunk in the nostrils of both allies and enemies.

In other words, the issues held to be important even from such an early stage in Israel's religious and cultural development seem to range well outside the ambit of other religions and cultures. There seems to be a strange but fascinating aspect to Judaism in its profound concern for ordinary human beings, and their treatment either by nation or religion. To my knowledge, there was never any parallel group that began to move in the direction that Israel did, nor see any need for their gods and goddesses to be interested in such vital issues.

So there is it: I find people exploring Judaism to try and see where its interest in life after death began, and yet avoid or sidestep this most immediate and proper focus of such a life-giving concept.

Sunday 14th February, 2010

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany – Year C

Readings for Sixth Sunday after Epiphany are:

First Reading: Jeremiah 17:5-10

Psalm 1

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Gospel Reading: Luke 6:17-26

N.B: Canon Ron Keynes has prepared the Sermon Outlines below for ‘The Transfiguration’- Last Sunday after the Epiphany. However, the Transfiguration is celebrated in the Diocese of Willochra on 6th August. There is a choice and some dioceses celebrate the Transfiguration on the last Sunday before Lent.

Sentence

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen His glory, the glory as of a Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth
John 1:14

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 in the blessed steps of His most holy life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Exodus 34: 29 – 35

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them.

Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Psalm

99

The Lord is King, let the nations tremble: He is enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake
The Lord is great in Zion: He is high above all nations
Let them praise Your great and terrible Name: for holy is the Lord
The Mighty One is King, and loves justice: You have established equity, You have dealt righteousness and justice in Jacob.
O exalt the Lord our God: and bow down before His footstool for He is holy
Moses and Aaron among His priests, and Samuel among those who call upon His name: they called to the Lord and He answered.
He spoke to them from the pillar of cloud: they kept His teaching and the law that He gave them
You answered them, O Lord our God: You were a forgiving God to them, and pardoned their wrongdoing.
O exalt the Lord our God: and bow down towards His holy hill, for the Lord our God is holy.

Epistle

2 Corinthians 3: 12 – 4:2

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

GOSPEL

Luke 9: 28 – 36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, (*Greek lit exodus*) which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"--not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

This is a fascinating little cameo, and one which St. Paul was later to adapt when he wrote to the Corinthians (see above.) Can you catch sight of what is really being conveyed here? When you look at the story of the transfiguration,² it is a similar picture you are offered. It is a matter of someone suddenly realizing the huge significance of someone previously taken for granted.

The sad commentary about taking veil off and putting it on had to do with the incapacity of Israel as a whole even to begin to understand the nature of God, and Law and worship. Quite a common human experience would you not say?

Psalm

Has it ever struck you, as it struck the author of the Apocalypse (Revelation) that the Biblical Faith seems always to have focussed on the belief that God 'will make the nations tremble' by and because it is only by exercising justice and truth that cultures will survive, and it is because of refusal of other cultures

² The Transfiguration was not something for the benefit of Jesus; rather it was the eye-popping experience for Peter, James and John.

and cultures that they will sink to their deaths. There is no call for arms, nor exercise of judgemental power. In fact, the Biblical view is that humans and cultures judge themselves by precisely the above criteria.³

Once one begins to catch sight of what some of the OT and Psalms have to say, then a very great deal becomes rather clearer, *and a lot of oddball issues put to bed, so to speak.*

Epistle

It is a telling way that Paul conveys the significance (to him) of the OT story in today's reading. It is a matter of sight and blindness, and often the latter being deliberate and determined. An ordinary human experience, I find, is that sometimes it takes quite some time for us to have the veil lifted: how often has a view or approach to a subject burst on you, in spite of the fact that you would have heard it often before. The time has come for it to impact on you, and from that can come a life-changing experience. This is not the same as deliberate and determined blindness: that tends to be a fatal 'disease.'

GOSPEL

It is surprising to me how hard it is to get people to see that the Transfiguration was not something for Jesus' benefit, but a challenge almost literally pushed at the trio of the disciples, the Leadership Group. It was not dissimilar to Jeremiah's and Isaiah's visions nor was the reason for the experience dissimilar. Those three men, who had long spent time with Jesus, needed to be faced with the prospect that what lay in front of them was not easy, supine life, but the enormous challenge of taking the Gospel to a world that did not wish to know. That was no easy task for Jesus – nor was the disappointment for Him in that cameo that followed down the mountainside. Real life has always to come as a *contra* to the 'mountaintop' experience.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I have told the tale before and if you have heard it you may switch off now for a few moments. It has to do with transfiguration and it has also to do with being open to something almost without realizing it.

It must have been 25 years ago, and I had been in the same parish for six or seven years. It was the first Sunday in Lent, and the Temptations (Testings really) of Jesus was the subject under review. Asking people to regard the story imaginatively, I tried to get them to see what really was being described, as quite obviously the whole business took place in the head and heart of our Lord. Asking them to see that stones into bread was an attempt to short-circuit the potential ugliness of the Cross by giving people what leaders did, bread and circuses, which Jesus rejected on the grounds of its sheer artificiality and manipulation. As we looked at the other temptations, neither miracle nor even turning truth into a lie and lie into truth was a path Jesus would take for similar reasons, the congregation was asked to note that rather similar sorts of temptations lie at the heart of most human positions, including parenthood.

One of the women almost raced over to me after the service to rejoice in the fact that, for the first time in her life, she understood the story as it hit her between the eyes so to speak. 'Why have you not told us about this before?' she implored, to be taken quite aback when I drew her attention to the fact that this was the 7th First Sunday in Lent, and that I had done exactly the same each year, hoping it would reach pay dirt sometime. And it was her time and she went away rejoicing.

Transfiguration. It is not so much something extraordinary, but it is the almost explosion of truth hitting airspace in a person's heart and mind, and providing a spring board for rather faster and greater future growth. So it was with the 'leadership group' on that day up on the mountain.

In some ways it is funny how such bursts manage to come upon us. There is nothing terribly unusual about their coming, but there is always the necessity for each of us to respond significantly to the light that comes. It is sad to report that, in all the disciples' hearts and minds, the progress towards understanding their Lord sufficiently was microscopically slow. There had been the incident a week earlier where Jesus had asked them 'who do people say that I am?' That was not to give Jesus a chance to check on His ego scale; far from it. It was a well-designed kick under the table to get the disciples seeing that their life together had far more importance than just enjoying the fellowship with this most interesting of itinerant preachers. They

³ For anyone aware, this has a very great deal to say about what Paul calls 'the wrath of God.' That is no terrible judgement or hell, but rather (Paul again) 'God gives them up' in the hope of repentance, but more often it will be determined refusal of the light, with the embracing of the only option, darkness, death.

really were a slow-learning lot, as we look back. In reality, it was not until well after the Resurrection of Jesus that they began to reach a better speed in their huge learning curve.

Transfigurations. They are always to be valued in any person's life, whether that discovery has to do with understanding and/or following Jesus or in other areas of life, thought and discovery. Most moves forward in most human endeavours stem from what really are bursts of energy or insight or inspiration from outside of us. And modesty tends to demand that we recognize that.

Transfigurations. Do not leave home without them, eh?

Wednesday 17th February, 2010

Ash Wednesday – Year C

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 and everlasting 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

Isaiah 58: 1- 12

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

"Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Psalms

51: 1- 17

Have mercy on me O God, in Your enduring goodness: according to the fullness of Your compassion, blot out my offences

Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness: and cleanse me from my sin

For I acknowledge my rebellion: and my sin is ever before me

Against You only have I sinned and done what is evil in Your eyes: so that You will be just in Your sentence and blameless in Your judging

Surely in wickedness I was brought to birth: and in sin my mother conceived me

You that desire truth in the inward parts: O teach me wisdom in the secret places of the heart.

Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean: wash me and I shall be whiter than snow

Make me hear of joy and gladness: let the bones which You have broken rejoice.

Hide Your face from my sins: and blot out all my iniquities

Create in me a clean heart O God: and renew a right spirit within me

Do not cast me out from Your presence: do not take Your Holy Spirit from me

O give me the gladness of Your help again: and support me with a willing spirit

Then will I teach transgressors Your ways: and sinners shall turn to You again

O Lord God of my salvation, deliver me from bloodshed: and my tongue shall sing of Your righteousness

O Lord, open my lips: and my mouth shall proclaim Your praise

You take no pleasure in sacrifice or I would give it: burnt offerings You do not want

The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise

Epistle

2 Corinthians 5: 20b – 6:10

We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute.

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see--we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

GOSPEL

Matthew 6: 1 – 6 & 16 - 21

Jesus said "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

There is enormous and often missed or bypassed wisdom in the Old Testament and it is a great pity that it is not better known than it is. There was a time when Anglicans were 'People of the Book' – and both my grandparents and parents still saw things that way. So did their own predecessors.⁴

It comes as some surprise then, that people like Isaiah saw through the then-normal practice of going through the motions of worship, sacrifice and fasting, and called for, even demanded, a rather more significant response to God and to reality in their lives. This is a passionate and powerful call to honesty in worship and life, and kindly notice the demand to see the connection between honest worship and genuine response to truth, integrity and justice. It is a constant and profound call from all of the prophets. And they saw it as 'true religion.'

Psalm

⁴ Call it skiting if you will, but I even have a great-great grandparent who was one of the committee who formed the British and Foreign Bible Society!

This is said to be the Psalm that David composed after his dalliance with Bathsheba. That adultery was added to by the wilful murder of her husband, which just goes to show how easily a normally level headed person can go screaming off the rails.

This is a heart-felt confession and repentance, and a measure of the monarch's recognition of his failure and evil. It is not a bad place to start for anyone who has passed that way themselves.

Epistle

Paul was not alone in having all manner of difficulty and contrary pressure in his ministry, and this was particularly so in his Corinthian ministry. Mind you, Corinth was a rather wild spot, sea port and focus of all manner of cultural and evil currents. It was a strange place to begin a Church, but he did it and although (if you read the Corinthian letters you will understand what I am saying) it was hard yards for him, it was also strangely fertile ground for the Faith,

So here too Paul was pushing that traditional wind uphill, but persisted. **And that is the point.** It is never easy to plant and help to foster a church, especially in what amounted to real pagan soil.

Gospel

Herewith is part of the Sermon on the Mount, a fascinating digest of much of Jesus' teaching and preaching. Apart from anything else it is a solemn call to sheer honesty in both worship and its associated practices, and something of a repeat dose of all that Isaiah had to say. Apparently so distorted was Judaism of Jesus' day that not only was the faith turned into a ritual religion, it was also a stage for really heavily over-acted 'religious' activity. The same sort of practices seem to recur from time to time, as religion is distorted out of shape to be a sort of ego-measure from those who consider themselves a cut above *hoi polloi*.

You may well be aware of the fact that 'hypocrite' comes from the Greek word for a 'play actor,' or movie star. This has to do with people who are not themselves but play act as someone they are not. Not a bad parallel, eh!

So, as Lent should be, this passage points to the real choice of real treasure in life, and the avoiding of anything less than the real thing

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It has long been a firm conviction of mine that the general practice in this Season of Lent tends to get us looking in the wrong direction. This is one of the reasons that, for the first time in ages, I have chosen to use the alternative readings as above. You are free to try to convince me otherwise, but it has always seemed that the real point and purpose of the Season is to get back to basics, with the great emphasis on looking outwards. *In other words, no introspection – we are here for the world at large.*

I recall making the decision, each Ash Wednesday, of giving up smoking. The latest attempt was when cigarettes cost 50c, so it is a while ago. Failure reigned at about 11am on each fateful day, and it was years later that I surrendered. But the focus had been on **me**, and that is the issue. I should have been heading outwards, you see.

To miss this point is to head, I would reckon, internally, away from others and away from the world of people out there who – whether they realize it or not – need the Faith, not to save their pretty little souls, but to mature as humans in world where it seems to be a lost art. Here is no superstition or escapism, but the offering of a far better way to operate.

It used to be a surprise to me to find so much sense and wisdom in the Old Testament prophets, and nowadays I delight in what they have to say. And their world is not all that different to ours, in spite of vast technological and scientific progress: people are remarkably similar in outlook, attitudes and even biases. In Isaiah's time, people then would adhere to their religious rites, but only as a formal, dry means of getting what they thought they wanted. 'Going through the motions' would be today's expression of it. And the prophet made it clear that there is a world of difference between 'process' and 'reality.' Be real, would be a way of expressing that prophet's emphasis.

Then and now, the rites and ceremonies are there to point to something deeper, something far more significant, far more real. For Isaiah, a **real** fast was 'to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke.' Now the imagery may be out of date, but the challenge is quite immediate.

And – from the point of view of these sermon notes, can you grasp now the difference between internalising and externalising. For Isaiah, one's faith and faithfulness had to reach to whoever is operating under difficulty. *And do not be silly enough to consider that no one near you comes under the umbrella Isaiah offers.* And who is my neighbour has both local and world-wide significance these days of the global village.

If all this is not enough, then go to the Gospel, where Jesus Himself made it clear that fasting and even praying has to be done behind closed doors, for the real point of those activities is for the betterment of those around you. There was a time in my youth when my spiritual pastors and teachers were requiring of me a response so internalised that it was somewhat beyond me. Mind you, I could sort of 'act it out' when the need arose, but there was a fundamental dishonesty that I found hard to deal with. Harder still to persist in. It had become a sort of 'spiritual contest' to see who was most prayerful, most spiritual, most away with the fairies, and I recall finding it hard to cope with young people at the time who turned away from the Faith because they perceived it to be rather ridiculous. *And they were often right!!!*

Lent: may I be rude enough to suggest that you spend this time in the lead-up to Easter to look at what is most basic in the Faith, certainly of repentance and forgiveness, but just as much of justice and truth, integrity and compassion, especially because we are living in a world that has passed those values by, and replaced it with the very Me that we need to dilute considerably.

Sunday 21st February, 2010

First Sunday in Lent – Year C

Sentence

Worship the Lord your God and serve only Him.

Luke 4: 8

Collect

O Saving God, You led Your people through the wilderness and brought them to the promised land: so guide us that, following our Saviour, we may walk through the wilderness of this world and be brought to the glory of the world which is to come, through Your Son, Jesus Christ, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.

Amen

Alternative

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 lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Deuteronomy 26: 1 -11

When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.

You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "*A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.*"

You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

Psalm

91: 1 – 2 & 9 – 16

Those who dwell in the shelter of the Most High: who abide under the shadow of the Almighty
They will say to the Lord, ' You are my refuge and my stronghold: my God in Whom I trust.'

The Lord Himself is your refuge: you have made the Most High your stronghold
Therefore no harm will befall you: nor will any scourge come near your tent
For He will command His angels: to keep you in all your ways
They will bear you up in their hands: lest you dash your foot against a stone
You will tread on the lion and the adder: the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot
'You have set your love upon Me,' says the Lord and therefore I will deliver you: I will lift you out of danger because you have known My name.
When you call upon Me I will answer you: I will be with you in trouble, I will rescue you and bring you to honour.
With long life will I satisfy you: and fill you with My salvation.'

Epistle

Romans 10: 4 – 13

Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law that "the person who does these things will live by them." But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

GOSPEL

Luke 4: 1 – 15

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.

The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

I don't know if you have ever spent the time to read through this most formative of passages in the Old Testament. While, in one way, it is a sort of Harvest Festival celebration, it is also a celebration of one's roots and beginnings. *Á wandering Aramaean was my father* takes things back to Abram and his journey of discovery, without which (it has to be said,) the world would have been a much poorer place. One wonders how many other 'Abram's' that the Lord tapped on the shoulder without response. It is fascinating to realize that the Lord of the universe has always operated in the manner that requires the open and loyal human response, and that means each of us, too.

Psalm

You may well consider me terribly naughty, and you might be quite right, but I find real difficulty with a psalm such as this that seems to promise the earth, ... with so little reality. I have no difficulty with having a Lord on Whom one can lean in difficult and even dangerous times and places, but I would not rely on any intervention with adders and lions around. Hyperbole it may be, but one needs to recognize that even Biblical authors can go 'over the top' on occasion!

Epistle

And Biblical authors are not only hyperbolic, but at times they can be downright confusing. One may need to be both Hebrew and Pharisee to follow fully the argument that St. Paul expresses here. The final outcome is clear, but his means of getting there are rather obscure. I would not build any great theological statement on this, until we get to the end of the passage.

GOSPEL

Here is a most highly significant part of the Gospel, and sadly one that tends to be misunderstood. If you have coped with my prior naughtiness, then I ask you to have another go, for to understand the nature of Jesus' 'temptations' is to understand much of your own calling as Christian, too.

I have long since stopped calling this incident a temptation, for it is far more compelling than that. Here is a challenge to Jesus to alter the nature of His calling, ministry and even value system (yes, even that!) in such a way that would reduce the strain on Him, even remove the possibility of the Cross, and reduce the whole Christ event to a fizzer of total proportion. Why do I say that? Please read on.

From whence comes temptation anyhow? TO all of us, it comes from within, does it not. While someone may try to tempt me from 'outside' me, the final word of acceptance of that comes from **me**. **I tempt me**. If you are game to follow up this, Satan, in all Biblical references, can be defined as my capacity to chose evil and to follow it. **My capacity**. If you are going to yell at me, that is fine, but do not quote chapter and verse because I know them all. Evil always comes to us from a human hand, or hands plural. It is not some external force. I delude myself and try it on with you too. And you do to me. I cannot blame Satan for my sin, or anyone else's **I am responsible for my contribution to the evil in the world, and you for yours**. If you can come further with me, please do stop and realize that, unless Jesus was capable of surrendering to the proposition of finding an easier path to His glory, then the whole exercise was a fraud. Yell again if you need, but listen first.

For Someone who was deeply endowed in and with the Scriptures, Jesus – aware of His calling from at least 12 years of age, - would have known all of the Biblical imagery, especially the Servant Songs of Isaiah. Particularly would He have known (very well) Isaiah 52 and 53. So here, right at the beginning of His ministry, came the challenge as to how to operate, so to speak, how to minister, how to gain a following from a people that must have been taken quite by surprise at the nature of His revelation.

This singular passage is not about being hungry, but about leadership. **What sort of leader must He be to be obedient to the Father, to accomplish the goals in front of Him?** And three (at least) possible patterns were considered by Him, and – thank the Lord! – rejected.

1. Stones into bread. There was no lack of stones around the place in Israel, both then and now. In the wilderness, they would have been far more abundant than in other places. Stones and bread. In the Roman Empire of the time (and often in the centuries since) political leaders have controlled the populace by 'bread and circuses.' Feed their gut and reduce their threats. Give them what they are looking for. *Had Jesus done so, followed that pattern, He would have gained a following but for the wrong reason. Loyalty would have been around only as long as the tucker*. Or, as Jesus said, there is rather more to life than a full gut. Rather deeper issues need to be considered.
2. **Fall down and worship me** from the Tempter. In Biblical terms, Satan, the Devil, by whatever name you like is always presented as the Great Deceiver. Better, the Great Liar or the Father of lies. So, do you see, this is the temptation that seems to motivate far too many politicians and leaders, especially in our own day and age. What is this test: to turn the truth into a lie, and the lie into the truth. Spin, baloney, or – there are lies, there are damn lies and there are statistics. In fact this process tends to lie at the heart of so much in the way of human relationships and connections. Thank God Jesus turned His back on such a destructive path, for it would have negated the Gospel in less than a flash.
- 3 **That pinnacle of the Temple**. Miracle. Stun 'em into belief. Had Jesus gone in this direction (and note that He did not, as I will ask you to see), not only would He not have gained a serious following, but all they would do is to ask for bigger and better surprises. Notice the reaction recorded in John's Gospel to the Feeding Sign in John 6. 'They wanted to make Him king' for if they could do that, then all they had to do from then on was to sit on their proverbial behinds and wait for handouts. Out 'Evil' old Evil Kanavel. I may be very cynical, but if someone did a miracle in front of me, my first reaction would be to ask 'How did he do it?' **There would be NO impetus towards faith of any sort**.

It was imperative that Jesus should not surrender to the easy path for that would have been to negate the Gospel entirely. There would have been nothing left, because Jesus would have had His credibility totally destroyed. Thank you, Lord!!!!!! I could not have been so true and loyal and dependable. And none of us would have a hope now let alone into the future, if He had failed. And never forget it!

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It was several years ago now, but I had been asked to preach at the installation of a new minister and ministry at the local indigenous Uniting Church, and it was the First Sunday in Lent. It was an honour for me to have been asked, and – oddly enough – it was in a situation where the other minister was not noted for preaching *at all!* In fact, even Scripture Readings were not regularly read! So I asked for the reading for today, and later had some words to say on the subject.

I will presume that you have read my comments above on the Gospel, so will not repeat it. But I presented the story of the temptations as being that huge challenge to Jesus, at the commencement of His own ministry, as to the nature of the way He should operate if He were to be true to His calling. Whilst Jesus must have been rather terribly aware of the danger of using His position as one of power to demand attention or manipulate people to get it, (for He would have seen enough of it already in His own faith and synagogue), He would also have been even more painfully aware that the only other clear true way of operating would require enormous patience with an often wilful humanity. So this Lord of ours foreswore the use of miracle, blandishment and lie or less-than-truth to gain a following that would be loyal and life-changing.

As I preached to that group made up largely of indigenous folk, it had occurred to me that this whole business of Jesus' temptations would be **exactly the same for anyone who followed in His footsteps, those in leadership positions and those who followed.** If I am to be true to the Gospel, than as priest let alone as human, I must foreswear the same temptations to become overbearing, power-hungry or manipulative, or I will disqualify myself from ministry as totally as Jesus would, had He succumbed.

It is a rather shattering lesson to learn, for Christian history is full of leaders, clerical and lay, who have either missed the impact of this story or not even taken the slightest notice of it. Pardon me but I have great difficulty with clergy, with whatever compunction or lack of it, are little more than empire builders, or control freaks, and manage virtually to destroy their own ministry by reversing the point and purpose of both Gospel and this cameo under review.

That little congregation was remarkably receptive to the points I was trying to convey, as was the young minister being installed. We all need to be **very** sensitive to the aspects of Gospel and ministry to which this story points.

Sentence

Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Philippians 3:20

Collect

God of our ancestors, Whose chosen servant Abraham was given faith to obey Your call and to go out into the unknown; endow Your Church with such faith that we may follow You with courage, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Genesis 15: 1 – 12 & 17-18

The word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." But the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.

Psalm

27

The LORD is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid?

When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh, when my enemies and my foes attack me, they will stumble and fall.

Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident.

One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.

For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock.

Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his tabernacle will I sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the LORD.

Hear my voice when I call, O LORD; be merciful to me and answer me.

My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek.

Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper.

Do not reject me or forsake me, O God my Saviour.

Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me.

Epistle

Philippians 3: 17 – 4:1

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

GOSPEL

Luke 13: 1 – 9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

Before we go any further, may I refer to that rather grisly scene of the sacrifices that seem to mar this challenging scene? Do not be put off by it, for it marks very much the spirit of that age and in fact marks yet another stage in the covenants made between God and Abraham. In fact it is hugely important to take note of and respond to the various covenants, and realize that this process continues with what the modern Church tends to call 'sacraments.' Signs or sacraments are designed to help us see both the constancy with which God works with and through us, and also underlines something of the nature of that calling and challenge.

Abram was a most remarkable human being, without whom the entire story of what the Germans call 'holy history' would not have been possible. Just stop and ponder awhile how vastly important was this person, whose background and previous history had more to do with paganism than with He Whom we call God. Augustine is reputed to have said that 'our souls are restless till they find their rest in Thee,' and that dissatisfaction with his pagan gods may well have lain at the heart of Abram's move from Ur onwards. Sarai deserves huge credit too, for she was prepared to go along with the exploration, which is the example *par excellence* of what this whole business of faith is all about. Search and discovery. However and where-ever it takes one. Thank God for Abram, but also wonder how many other people God 'tapped on the shoulder' before He received a response.

Psalm

I wonder how many readers of the Psalms really enter in to what is being said. Judging by some writing and reports I read, a remarkably literal approach tends to be made by some, who then discover that all is not as it seems. Here in this psalm is no promise of rescue either from stupidity or even from violent action of others, but rather a rescue from within it, if you understand me.

For all those who complain that the Almighty does not step in and stop human idiocy, and then say they stop believing in God, I would have to say that they manage to miss the point. None of the Biblical stories (except a few of questionable historicity, included for other reasons) do anything but portray how the People of God must always face the realities of life, however rugged, in the sure and certain hope that God is there in it with them. Notice the situation in the Cross, where it was – as usual – a matter of going through the ugly business and not avoiding it. The genius of the Hebrew faith and its growing perception of God, at least portrayed in the Old Testament, is that there is no day-dreaming or mystic process to understand and know God: it was always in the vicissitudes of life that the clearer picture of the Almighty emerged. It was, like any other discovery, a sort of evolution of concepts and ideas as old perceptions had to be replaced as later experience disqualified the old ideas as no longer valid.

Epistle

It may be rude of me to say so, but if there is a clearer picture of quite some of today's (Western) culture, I do not know where it is. 'Their god is their belly' is a fairly clear reflection of today's self-obsession and hedonism. And the tragedy is that remarkably few people seem to get past it. Whilst some may say (with some justification) that there are Christians who are so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly use, the Biblical reality is that the believer operates on a rather more broad and longer-term view of life than the gratification of today's nerve-endings.

Gospel

Now if this is not a great follow-up to the Psalm and notes on it, I do not know what would be. It is a pathetic reality that, rather too often, 'religious' people are rather prone to measure other people at a lower level of society than themselves. (Do not mistake what is written above for that same 'superiority!')

One of the enduring 'mysteries' for lots of people is the fact that there are those who seem ever to be 'in the wrong place at the wrong time.' The particular situations raised for Jesus to consider included the horrific response of Pilate to some Jews, or those involved in the collapse of a tower. One could say that 'accidents will happen,' or that comment just above. Neither position will really do anything for thinking people, for the real answers lie further afield.

We live in the real world, and the real world is a rather risky place to be. In the first instance, we live in a world of despotic people who – almost always – are insecure to their bootstraps, and will take out all they can on others to prove they are powerful. In the second illustration, we also live in a world where we are bound together in community. You must have seen enough examples, mostly from overseas, where builders have taken short cuts, and erected buildings that have not the capacity to carry the loads they were built for. There is no excuse these days, but dodgy builders will ever be with us, and they must carry the responsibility.⁵ But then, so must I if I take the risk of buying or using something of questionable quality. We are all in this together, and need to be able either to rely on each other, or to ask the awkward questions.

That rather interesting (if obscure to some) cameo about the fig tree had to do with precisely what we have been pondering. You and I are fig trees and others must have the benefit of us producing what can be expected. We are human; we are responsible, like it or not. However note that the interesting thing about this passage is that the Lord of ours is likely to be more patient with us than we are likely to be with others.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It was only last night I was watching a programme on TV that was reporting some of the horrific stories of wild and dangerous youth in our cities, and the complete disregard those young people have for themselves, for anyone else, and even for the ambulance staff. It was so disturbing that the television was turned off, as we were glad to see that it was not about our fair city. If one has to make a judgement, it must be along the lines of how totally tragic it is in any culture or community to find people so utterly alienated even from themselves that they live rather less than the animals. Whatever is their goal, if it is not complete anarchy? There can only be for them some sort of immediate gratification – and how utterly destructive is that???

I don't know if you follow me as I look at these readings and see the close connection between the world, brutish and short so to speak, and the tendency of Christians – and others- to assume that the Almighty will protect His chosen ones from all the nastiness around us. Disappointment expressed by millions of people in a 'God they can no longer believe in' really does show a strange unwillingness to think beyond their own little safety net. I am rude enough to wonder how such people brought up their kids and must assume that they protected them from all harm. The parallel is painfully clear.

If you stop and see past assumptions about God, that He is Almighty and also that He is into breaking in to humans' situations then a little light may dawn – hopefully. May I dare to offer a merely human illustration to offer some direction and hope?

⁵ This is not lightly written: many years ago I was in that trade, and know, even as a labourer, that workmanship and proper materials were critical for proper building.

One of the most remarkable things that my eldest daughter said to me in the years after she left home to go nursing (in the big wild city!) was ‘Thanks you, Dad, for letting us make our mistakes.’ The mere fact that she understood what I was trying to do with my family was reward enough; that she also saw the reasoning behind it was even more stunning. (She also ‘criticised’ me for not teaching her ‘chapter and verse’ to respond to critics of the Faith, knowing full well that such an approach was a *non sequiter* and quite invalid.) My reason, as with any concerned parent, was to ensure that my kids had enough nous, sense and self-assurance to cope with the bumps **in order to live and grow from that**. Protection of people is the fastest way I know to produce medicant nonentities. *And your Heavenly Father is not into that, and thankfully, even our Hebrew forebears were just as aware*. Bumps and challenges are far from nice, and can be most disturbing, but without them, one grows to be really quite inadequate to cope **with anything!**

There is another factor about all this that rather too many people miss. It may sound strange to people now, but I grew up in the period after WW11 with the assumption that there was not a great deal of difference between Christian people and ‘the rest.’ Doors were rarely locked, and things were not stolen, and nor were families dysfunctional, except on **very** rare occasion. In those days it really was difficult to see any marked distinction between ‘churchies’ and non-churchies. Well, that remained true until I was in a parish and finding out how some of the other half lived.

Nowadays, there is a clear and very marked distinction to the extent that I would be rich if I had a fiver for everyone who has asked me ‘where will it all end up, Ron?’ It is becoming increasingly possible to see that many people take all manner of options on how they live their lives and how (or not) they relate to other human beings. Violence of all sorts is common; greed is the common goal, and ‘bugger you Jack I am all right’ is an almost acceptable creed. For many people this sort of declension is proof positive of the non-existence of God, whereas the reality is quite different. It has long struck me that this decline and fall is full and total evidence (a) of the existence of God and (b) the relevance of the Gospel, for the Biblical Faith has always – and ever will be – scone hot on the subject of justice, truth and integrity or, to quote Scripture itself, ‘You shall love the Lord your God and your neighbour as yourself.’ When I discard God, **I have already discarded you except as a something I could use to forward my own position.**

I suspect that all the above has, as one recently-deceased Archbishop of Sydney once said, ‘dribbled a bib-full.’