

Sentence

Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5: 16

Collect

Father of all, Who gave Your only-begotten Son to take upon Himself the form of a servant and to be obedient even to death on a cross; give us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, that, sharing His humility, we may come to be with Him in His glory; where He lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.

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.

PSALM

112

O praise the Lord, Blessed are they that fear the Lord
Their children shall be mighty in the land; an upright race who will be blessed
Riches and plenty shall be in their house: and their righteousness shall stand for ever
It goes well with those who act generously and lend: who guide their affairs with justice
Surely they shall never be moved: the righteous shall be held in everlasting remembrance
They will not fear bad tidings: their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the Lord
Their hearts are confident and will not fear: they will see the downfall of their enemies
They give freely to the poor: their righteousness stands for ever, their head is uplifted in glory
The wicked shall see it and be angry: they shall gnash their teeth and consume away: and the hope of the wicked shall fall

EPISTLE

1 Corinthians 2:1 – 13

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom, for I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have

crucified the Lord of glory.

But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"--these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.

And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. "For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

GOSPEL

Matthew 5: 13 – 20

Jesus said "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp-stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

As far as I know, the reputation of the Old Testament prophets with preachers of the past century or two – with many commentators as well – was down in the pits because of their *apparent* doom and gloom expectations and predictions. My mother, brought up as a Methodist, told of loud thumping of pulpits and threats of hellfire; a fear that continued right up to the last years of her life. Even in my College career, some recommended commentators wrote of the same damaging messages.

I have mentioned before how my own reading of those ancient people came to a conclusion rather different. There was no threat of hell and punishment from God. There was often the challenge that continued selfish and extravagant living, and failure to respond to the needy, would result in the breakdown of community and collapse of country. That, of course, is palpably true and evident, but the same writers always pointed to positive directions to live, move and have being. This present prophet was no exception.

It would seem that human beings manage never to learn from history, and certainly not from the mistakes of history. This passage appears to be quite savage about normal religious observances, whereas the reality is that the savagery is directed to worship that runs by rote. Even modern Christians can relate to that, surely. Liturgy is designed to be instructive, challenging and pointing in optimum directions. Few there be who follow along those lines, sadly. But take note of the powerful impact of the imagery offered here; one's relationship with people around about is just as important as worship, and in fact is a real factor of it.

Psalm

Pardon me, but there seems to be something in the way of propaganda mixed into this psalm. As I mention often, there is a clear and developing evolution in the decades and centuries of Jewish understanding of God, and while this psalm may well illustrate the hope and perception of one particular age, the passage of time would have drawn the necessity for thinking and observing further. The ideals are great, but rather unrealistic, are they not.

If you find yourself somewhat offended by such comments, I would simply ask you to ponder your own development as a Christian (or as a human come to that!) If you retain strong adherence to concepts, ideas and theologies from earlier in your life, then I would dare to wonder about the value of your pilgrimage. Marking time, in my experience, is actually a going backwards.

Epistle

I once knew a lady who had great difficulty reading the Epistle in Church if that day's reading happened to be from St. Paul. She was a single lady of British background, and Land Army involvement during the war. Sadly, her views of the Apostle were somewhat jaundiced, and we would discuss the issues often. However, she was not to be convinced and retained her bias. She was sure that Paul was a misogynist.

This passage is one that may well have widened her vision a little, not in Marjorie's field, but in this confession of his own perception of his inability and lack of skills. None of us are perfect either in capacities or abilities; we each much operate within the boundaries of our talents and skills.

But there was also a twin issue: and that had to do with the perceptions of those on the receiving end.

Jews seek signs, Greeks seek wisdom, you will recall being part of the reading a short time ago. And there was a world of difference between Jewish and Greek understanding of 'wisdom.' For Jews, it was a practical issue; for Greeks, it was rather more theoretical. Jewish 'wisdom' could be described as nous, common sense¹ - something which lay within the common experience of people. For Greeks, their love of debate and discussion, preferably without reaching any clear conclusion, meant that wisdom was simply an exercise in their own mental agility. Paul's address on the Areopagus underlined that issue rather well.

So here Paul is making it quite clear that the 'wisdom of God' is not something out of touch with reality, but is rather more so than any theorising can ever be. This is not some sort of statement that God's wisdom never makes sense to ordinary people.

(I recall being appalled, some years ago, at a banner installed in one of the charismatic congregations where we lived. The banner read 'Reason and logic are the enemies of faith.' That is one of the most scary things I have even found in such groups – and no chance was offered to discuss the issue. I was relieved to find that the pastor of that group left the ministry some time afterwards.)

GOSPEL

Before you get all excited about being light and salt and all that stuff, stop to ponder a moment. The emphasis is not on salt, but you. Here lies a challenge of enormous proportion: as an old saying used to have it, *God has no hands but your hands*. So if you do not live up to the challenge, not only is God let down but so are those around you.

Salt has not had the greatest of wraps in recent years, and the reason for that requires attention. Abuse of salt in our generation tends to be the problem. From earliest times of human life and history, salt has been a most valuable commodity, without which life itself fades into a colourless or ailing pattern.

Light is also interesting. The first Creation Story begins with light, long before the usual sources of light, sun and moon, rate a mention. That, of course, is so because the real point of light is to provide the capacity to see and understand what is going on. It has more to do with what we may call insight – a capacity rather more available to those who are blind than those who are sighted.

One of the charges laid rather often at the feet of our Lord was that He ignored, bypassed or superseded the Torah, the Jewish Law. Whilst it may be true that He set aside some of the food laws and other matters that tended to be cultural rather than divine, He was never guilty of averting attention from the real and important issues. In fact, His attention to such shows up in His addition to the *Shema Israel*. Love God; love your neighbour is a singularly powerful summary of the Torah, and encapsulates the faith once delivered.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

In all the plethora of screams, yells and complaints from atheistic people in our community, calling us believers to be superstitious and pathetic, those who are against the Faith, *any faith*, seem to me to need to get their facts right before they push their buttons. Recently I wrote to the Atheist Foundation requesting a move from setting up caricatures and then blowing them over; far better to attack realities. I have had no reply – for there is no room at all for superstition or unreality in this faith once delivered. Nor has there ever been! Just look at those readings, and ponder them awhile.

The first lesson is stunning for its impact even at a time when robot-like response to worship seemed to be the norm for many. Not long before the return from exile, and perhaps because of the length of time – 70 years – Israel had been in foreign territory, there were those who had reduced their worship to a matter of going through the motions. This has not been a sporadic problem for adherents to Jewish or Christian Faith. Such a reaction may not

¹ 'Common sense' tends to be an oxymoron these days, does it not?

have a lot to do with liturgy, in fact, but for the apparently good reason that it can be a bother to take care of fellow-humans in the ordinary run of life. Far better, according to some, to make a quid, and stiff cheese to anyone who gets in the way. And that is the point: this problem has nothing to do with superstition; it has everything to do with natural justice. In fact the direction to which the prophet points is completely in terms of that *Shema Israel*; love God; love your neighbour. (My experience is that it is rather harder to love one's neighbour than it is to love God!)

I have been bold enough to wonder if today's Psalm had more to do with propaganda than with then-current realities; but even with that said, this passage shows concern for people at all sorts of levels and their sense of direction and purpose. It also conveys quite something about settledness and certainty.

For quite some years now I have been concerned at the extent to which modern society has turned its back on community and focussed on the individual. The outcome of such a change of direction shows up in the devaluation of the other person, who becomes reduced to being the rung on a ladder to my progress, or just an @#\$\$%^& nuisance who is forever getting in my way. Small wonder that violence, robbery and total disregard is building to endemic proportion in our part of the world. *And that is not superstition, now is it!!!*

Paul, bless him takes us along a very similar path, although we do need to see that he is not proposing some sort of superiority when he talks about being 'spiritual.' This Faith of ours offers a rather different look at life and realities, not distancing ourselves from the usual, but certainly offering distinction between what may be called 'Adamic' and 'Christian.' The latter Paul would describe as 'spiritual,' the latter as 'world.' That latter equates to caring about one's fellow people; the latter may try and look like that, but in the final analysis is summed up in the common Australianism of 'blow you, Jack I am all right!'

So when it comes to the Gospel, the same theme is held up in front of us. I am not called to be salt *for my sake* but for yours. I am not called on to be light for my sake but for yours. And none of that is to get you to heaven, but to offer a *modus operandi* in life that is rather more significant than where you are at the present.

There was a time when what I have written would be seen as heretical, and may still be by some. However the Biblical reality is otherwise, and if this makes sense to you, then I am heartened. It may take a while to sink in to others, but one day it will.

Sunday 13th February 2011

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Sentence

Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the way of the Lord

Psalm 119:1

Collect

Almighty God, You gave the Law to guide our lives; grant that we may never shrink from Your commandments but, as we are taught by Your Spirit, may fulfill Your law in perfect love; through Christ our Lord and Master, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Deuteronomy 10: 12 – 22

O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today.

Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the LORD your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven.

PSALM

119:1 – 8

Blessed are those whose way is blameless: who walk in the law of the Lord
Blessed are those who keep His commands: and seek Him with their whole heart
Those who do no wrong: but walk in the way of our God.
For You, Lord, have commanded us: to persevere in all Your precepts
If only my ways were unerring: towards the keeping of Your statutes
Then I should not be ashamed: when I looked in on all Your commandments
I will praise You with sincerity of heart: as I learn Your righteous judgements
I will keep Your statutes: O forsake me not utterly.

EPISTLE

1 Corinthians 3: 1 – 9

Brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? When one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labour of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

GOSPEL

Matthew 5: 21 – 37

Jesus said "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or

sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

If you are game to come with me, there are some fascinating insights into the development of Jewish theology. This is Deuteronomy – which is Greek for *Second Law*. This 'edition' was rather later than the original Torah, and may well have been into the 7th or 6th Centuries BC.

I find it interesting that the emphasis here in this passage is on the 'Chosen People,' a narrowing down of the Abrahamic call to be a blessing to all nations. Is this evidence of the reduction of Judaism from a way of life to a religion, for this is the usual process. What is also beguiling is the reference to the fact that God 'is not partial and takes no bribe.' I would venture a solid guess that there would be few other situations in life then when bribes were not the order of the day, so for God to be seen as pictured here must have come as some huge relief.

Deuteronomy – generally – is a good example of development of a Faith, but it does show some slippage in theology, does it not!

Psalm

The story goes that, in the early stages of the reformed Church, clergy would leave the congregation reciting this longest of psalms whilst they went through the village rounding up the recalcitrants. It would cost a shilling if you refused attendance. *Bit of a fund-raiser for these days?*

This very long psalm has quite a lot of interesting tips and views – not least the recognition that God's Law is worth responding to. There is also the clear recognition that keeping the Law has its difficulties as well. It is well worth stopping to look at these matters: most Christians seem to have over-responded to Paul's constant attack on the Law, the Torah, but in doing so miss a valuable factor.

Without law we are without direction. In a world where anything goes, the outcome is that nothing goes anywhere, and the outcome is chaos. If you wonder why the (modern) world is the way it is, the answer lies in the anarchic view of life held rather too generally for anyone's safety or progress. *And never forget it!*

Epistle

If Paul's assessment here is correct, then most of us have a very long way to go. Mention was made several weeks ago that the Corinthian Church was no paragon of virtue, and here we see it was no paragon of maturity either. This is not to stand in judgement, but rather to see that both of those directions are important ones to follow, develop and grow.

'Milk, not meat' fascinates me, for one of my great hassles as priest has been to hold in front of people the enormous potential in a growing, developing and deepening faith. In my experience, rather too many present-day Christians are rather too content to mark time.

‘Like a mighty tortoise moves the Church of God,
Brothers, we are treading like where we’ve always trod’
and that brings nothing to the glory of God or His Gospel.

GOSPEL

Part of the genius of Jesus was to bring that Torah, that Law, from the realm of action to the level of that which precedes but rather dictates action – one’s thoughts and – dare I say it? – lusts. Actual murder is brought down to nasty thoughts about the victim, here described as brother or sister. Is not the real issue in homicide the fact that the victim is depersonalised – just as the enemy is, during wartime. Adultery and divorce come under the same sort of examination, and whilst the strictures may seem severe, in each case there is no room left for that process of depersonalising.

It really does underline much of the Biblical values, especially that of community. The concept of the individual in Biblical situations is a rare event, and it should be noted where most Biblical translations seem to point to ‘you’ as an individual, please note that the original Greek may better have been translated as ‘you altogether.’ In old English ‘thou’ was the singular; ‘you’ was plural. Later usage has blurred the edges somewhat.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

We Anglicans are living in the hard times of the shadow of those people who have taken advantage of young children by abusing them terribly.. Part of the horror has been the discovery of the extent to which this ugliness has been exposed, permeating the entire society in which we live. It is no help to us, or to those outside, that the Anglican perpetrators may have been few in number. The damage is almost irredeemable.

Other denominations have suffered likewise; and I even take some encouragement from the fact that a certain Premier, not long ago utterly caustic at the slow response of the Church, suddenly fell remarkably silent when it was revealed that State public servants had been just as or more guilty of terribly extended abuse of children in their care.

The real problem lies, in Church or State or elsewhere, in the gradual erosion of moral values; paralleled one suspects by that similar erosion of the recognition of God. It is a common situation: once I deny the existence of God, and my response to Him, then my value for you drops rather terribly quickly, and you become threat rather than brother or sister.

The readings for today may well be seen by some as oh! so terribly olde-worldly, passé, naïve. The reality is quite otherwise. May I repeat a story often told in this situation?

It was in a Scripture Lesson at Primary School where the focus was on the Ten Commandments. Being aware that such rules and regulations were held in low esteem, I began where young kids tend to be focussed indeed. I asked what sport they played: answers came thick and fast, and included football (no comment on the type), netball, and one or two other lesser-known ones. Then I posited a situation where Rugby (well, it *was* NSW!) was played with a medicine ball, and netball with an AFL football. No lines marked on the ground, for there were no limits, no umpires for there were no restrictions, and when you got tired, you had to transfer to a swimming pool. The further I went in that lists of non-restrictions, the louder the noise from the class. Gradually, the noise turned to quite some anger. ‘You are being stupid, Pops!’ was the final response of the kids. I confessed that they were totally correct. So why did you even begin to head in such a silly direction?’ And so I told them.

That sort of scenario is what so much of society posits today. Rules do not matter; the ultimate focus of human behaviour needs to focus on what people want, what makes them happy, and nothing else matters. As the whole lesson began to sink in, and the kids began to see the chaos being presented as the panacea for life, their response to rules started to change significantly.

I pointed outside to the Highway, and asked about while lines, double lines, road rules. If people were free to drive on whatever side of the road they chose, ignore the position of others sharing the highway, road deaths would multiply geometrically. It is only if I regard the road rules as significant, regard other people as of equal importance to myself, only then can they and I drive safely.

What the Torah offered to Israel of old may well be marred somewhat by matters simply cultural of the time, but the overall *raison d’être* was hugely important and valuable. Not only were the Ten Commandments a gift from a very distant past, that Decalogue itself was based on the even more ancient Code of Hammurabi from around Babylon. Rules and regulations may well suffer from overbearing imposition from above a measures of control, but that does not invalidate the need for some containment of human tendency to step outside something that is

designed for all.

It has even been so and will ever be so. It remains true that no country or parliament can legislate against human stupidity or recalcitrance, nor stop people attempting to counter the clear sense of rules and laws. But the need for the community to protect itself from those who would step outside the law will always be an important factor *for peace*.

Sentence

You shall be holy for the Lord your God is holy, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. Lev. 18:2f

Collect

Hidden God, Whose wisdom compels our love and unsettles our values; fill us with desire to search for truth, that we may transform the world, becoming fools for wisdom's sake, through Jesus Christ, Your Word and Wisdom made flesh, to Whom be glory for ever. Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Leviticus 19: 1 – 2 & 9 – 18

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God.

You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD.

You shall not defraud your neighbour; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a labourer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbour: I am the LORD.

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.

Psalm

119: 33- 40

Teach us O Lord the way of Your statutes: and I will honour it to the end
Give me understanding that I may keep Your Law: that I may keep it with my whole heart
Guide me in the paths of Your commandments: for therein is my delight
Incline my heart to Your commands: and not to selfish gain
Turn away my eyes from looking on vanities: as I walk in Your ways, give me life
Make good Your promise to Your servant: the promise that endures for all who fear You
Turn aside the taunts that I dread: for Your judgements are very good
Lord, I long for Your precepts: in Your righteousness, give me life.

Epistle

1 Corinthians 3: 10 – 17

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw-- the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire. Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

GOSPEL

Matthew 5: 38 – 48

Jesus said "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you,

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

Before we go anywhere, I wonder if you noticed (how could you miss?) the constant attention give in today's readings to God and to His Law. What is reiterated also is that business of *being perfect as God is perfect*. While that tends to be an impossible call, it all underlines where one needs to start when looking at both faith and life. It is no so much an impossible dream as it is an unshakeable foundation.

Old Testament

Now no one in their right mind could gainsay these ancient words from Leviticus. There is nothing vaguely 'cultural' to be sidestepped, or unreasonable to offer a chance to refuse attention. In fact there is that marvellous example of what we might regard as the focus for Centrelink. Whilst modern methods of pensions and dole tends to demean people, Israel was made of sterner and yet more generous stuff. Nobody seems to value what they get for nothing. Ancient Jews knew that, too. If you were starving, you had recourse to gleanings, but you had to get off your backside and go to get it. That has always delighted me.

Each of these imprecations are ended with 'I am the Lord your God.' As early as Leviticus, this parallel of worship and caring about people was clearly factored in to what was considered a real response to God and to people. *Most other religion is focussed on the person concerned and what is in it for them!* This passage is worth re-reading and taking to heart all that is written, including 'you shall reprove your neighbour or you will incur guilt yourself.' Boom! Boom!

Psalm

There is an interesting dichotomy in this Psalm. On the one hand there is the clear recognition that the Law of the Lord is immensely valuable. On the other is the similar recognition that anyone who heads in such a direction is likely to wear the taunts and pressure from those who do not. Ponder that a moment or two.

Epistle

And the process goes on. I have been in the building game myself for quite some years, and even since have become more aware of the capacity of some in that trade to attempt to avoid the normal standards of erection of buildings. Here Paul offers a contrast between those who would follow valid standards in their life and work, and those who would respond fraudulently. He is saying the same things as psalmist and lawyer (Leviticus!) Levite.

GOSPEL

And once again Jesus takes the whole issue into the light-years ahead.

It looks like entering an impossible world to turn the other cheek, and yet it was something that Jesus Himself was quite prepared to risk and do. Before you write this off as totally impracticable, stop and see that Jesus' method of dealing with evil was to absorb it. The Cross illustrates this most completely. Yes, it cost Jesus His life, and yes, it would not be until *post eventum* that any perpetrator would realize the extent of his own evil, if then. But that is the nature of reconciliation, starting as it always must, with the one who is sinned against.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I seem to recall that when apartheid was finally reversed in South Africa, that shock waves tended to emanate when those in charge of the country opted not for some sort of witch-hunt to get rid of the evildoers, but for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. What was sought was not some punitive response, though anyone would have understood such a thing, but only the requirement that perpetrators confess their ugliness, after which forgiveness was offered. It has to be said that there were still those perpetrators who failed or refused to open their pasts, but stop a moment and see what came out of it.

I discovered many decades after the event, that one of my very prominent forebears, John Maynard Keynes, did his darnedest at the Versailles Conference after World War 1, to stop or at least limit this vengeful response of the Allies on to Germany, in retribution for the enormous personal and national cost of the war. Keynes' constant plea was not responded to, for most of the Allies were determined. Keynes was painfully aware of the fact that while the Allies were determined to reduce Germany to shreds, the economist knew that the only foreseeable outcome of such an action was exactly what happened under Hitler. That was another war of even greater bitterness and destruction. No self-respecting nation would bow to such hideous demands, however well justified.

The terribly human response to such evils is to render enormous punishment on those who held the nation in thrall. Similar punitive measures are laid at the feet of all sorts of people, and it has to be said that even our own country, New South Wales in particular, is still recovering from the ugly convict past.

So how does the Judaic/Christian Faith approach this matter of human evil? The answer is interesting – and even may be seen by some as inadequate. Stop and ponder a while yourself if you will.

For our Lord, evil is destroyed by being shown for what it is. Once again, the Cross is the example *par excellence* of that. Once it is clear visible, evil is destroyed. And you then ask, how is that so?

The answer is somewhat demanding, but leaves the responsibility right where it ought. Once I can see evil uncovered, then I am freed to choose against it. Obviously, I am also free to ignore the evidence, but I am still in a position – however weakened – to take a stand against it. Like my Lord, such a stand may cost me my life, but evil has been disempowered.

One of the most depressing things that have been rattling away at me ever since I discovered that so many people on both side of conflicts have lost their faith is God is because He did nothing to stop the wars. Now who is really responsible for such ugliness, and it is not God. It is us. And who would appreciate the Divinity breaking in and stopping the wars? That would be to remove our humanity, our freedom of choice, and turn us into nothing more than robots, automatons, puppets-on-a-string. Would there not be yells of enormous noise if that approach was employed on us! It is noisy enough when Governments attempt to operate that way.

Last week we looked at the practicality or otherwise of Law, rules and regulations. This week the attention is pointed to the source of Law, or better still, the Source of reality, truth, common sense and – most of all – justice. As I wrote to the Atheist Foundation some months ago now, as a 'religionist' I remain loyal to Christ simply because no one else I have read about, encountered, or studied makes as much sense of life, history and relationships than Jesus.

It has to be said that, even in this post-modern and post-almost-everything-else world, all manner of old canons, standards and values seem to have lost the loyalty of very many people. For some,. That seems to mean that God is dead, anything goes, and nothing matters anymore. People interested in history will be quite aware of the fact that this is not the first time that this stage has been reached by civilisations. They will be aware, also, that what tends to follow is not the end of the world but the end of that culture. Greek ruins, Roman ruins and lots of others too bear testament to the rise and fall of civilisations. And you may be interested to know that in times past it has been Christians that had both the faith and the awareness to become the glue that held people together through such dramatic times. St. Augustine's *City of God* provided almost as much ammunition for Christians back then as did John's *Revelation*. Whilst we may, as Christians, feel a little like Port Power or the Crows, the problem is simply to keep one's nerve, keep the Faith – and understand and realize what it is truly all about, and weather the storm.

Those ancient verities, long held as sacrosanct by Christians will prove to be the solid rock on which anyone and everyone can stand. And that is just another way of saying that the God Whom we worship and the Lord Whom we follow will outlast any lesser philosophy or lack of it that humanity might choose or reject.

Sentence

Do not worry saying 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we wear?' Strive first for the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 6: 31, 33

Collect

Grant O Lord that the course of this world may be so peaceably ordered by Your governance that Your Church may joyfully serve You in all godly quietness, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 49: 8 – 16a

Thus says the LORD: In a time of favour I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; saying to the prisoners, "Come out," to those who are in darkness, "Show yourselves." They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be their pasture; they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them. And I will turn all my mountains into a road, and my highways shall be raised up.

Lo, these shall come from far away, and lo, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene. Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones. But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.

Psalm

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O Lord, my heart is not proud: nor are my eyes haughty
I do not busy myself in great matters: or in things too wonderful for me
But I have calmed and quieted my soul like a weaned child upon its mother's breast: like a child on its mother's breast is my soul within me
O Israel, trust in the Lord: from this time forward and for ever

Epistle

1 Corinthians 3: 18 – 4:5

Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future--all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.

GOSPEL

Matthew 6: 22 – 34

Jesus said "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in

all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you--you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

The preaching of Isaiah must have come as enormous relief to those exiles in Babylon, though there must have been lots of people who disbelieved the prophet. In the event, there must have been little room for optimism, for that fortress of Babylon was itself under threat from Cyrus, the Median king.

But the prophet remained constant, certain of their deliverance. And where did that certainty come from? It is interesting for us to note that the source of Isaiah's confidence stemmed from the nature of God. God is ever a God Who rescues His people – even at a point where they see only death.

Small wonder that the prophet expressed such enthusiasm. Glowing terms are used in this description of their rescue, though the reality would have meant a lot of hard work and stress, walking the vast distance between the Euphrates and Israel.

Underlying the promise is that rather beautiful cameo of God as mother. 'Can a woman forget her nursing child? Yet I will not forget you.' With a foundation like that, is not almost anything possible?

Psalms

Motherhood comes into the picture again in this very short psalm. Certain of the constancy of God, this psalmist is content to be humble – in the real sense of the word. Humility is a strange thing really: if one does one's best to be humble, it can so easily turn into its reverse. Perhaps the best definition I can find for humility is in that great Aussie phrase, *fair dinkum*. Humility is being honest, real, knowing where the truth is and responding to it.

Epistle

Today's series of readings seem, to me, to focus on basics, actually. Here the Apostle deals with responding not to fatuous or popular views of things, but to life's realities. *I have just been reading today's paper, and commenting to my wife about the strange and silly - but popular - choices people make, and how artificial those choices are. And people then go on to wonder why life and relationships disintegrate and community crumbles.*

Trustworthy. It says it all, does it not, and is there anything so basic to life that is almost completely absent in our political, social and commercial world these days? When you do find it, value it very highly indeed. It is something on which a person can depend.

GOSPEL

The Sermon on the Mount presents enormous challenges to people of the present day, who - in our culture at least - seem to be wedded to the idea that one has to sell oneself if one intends to get ahead. Much of the time that means standing on the shoulders of other to get the advantage, whether that is in wealth, status or power. Sadly, I find that even some clergy are influenced by such attitudes, which renders their value to the Gospel as less than it should be.

No one can serve two masters; schizophrenia is not an option for a balanced life nor a Christian one. (I am not referring to the disease that used to be called by that name, but the split of loyalties that divides a person into two - or more.

One wonders why this pursuit of wealth continues to have its attraction. Recent 'schizophrenia' world markets should underline the uncertainties of that factor. Yesterday (7.06.10) saw reports of \$57 billion² off the value of Australian investments, which only goes to show how volatile things are really.

If there is one thing that is being stated absolutely in this rather remarkable passage, it is that there is not a lot that is solid and substantial in life. And that IS reality. It is not a case of God being unfair; it is a matter of

² Pardon me, but that should read 'thousand million' should it not?

observable reality. Even the enormous advances that have brought us to this 21st Century have not provided any guarantee over that. So we had better get used to it, eh?

NOTES FOR A SERMON

If ever there was a series of readings for the day that was designed to prick one's bubble, then these are it. After a while pondering the readings, and the life-experiences of those who wrote them and – in the Gospel's case, -preached them, one is left with a startling but reliable reality. It was Elizabeth Taylor who once stated that 'no one has a mortgage on tomorrow' – and she is quite right about that; and our Lord Who stated quite starkly that 'no one can serve two masters.' Any and every person has choices to be made in life, and those choices need to be made on underlying realities, not on castles in the air.

It is a salutary message, especially in this day and age of ours when anything and everything seems possible. In fact, I suspect that, instead of some impassioned sermon, we might simply take a moment or two to ponder where our own realities lie, and what our response needs to be, to life, to God and to each other.

And you cannot have a shorter sermon than that, now can you?