

Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2006

First Sunday after Christmas  
Naming and Circumcision of Jesus

**Sentence**

My eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory for Your people Israel.  
*Luke 2:30-2*

**Collect**

Saving God, Whose Son Jesus was presented in the temple and was acclaimed the glory of Israel, and the light of the nations, grant that in Him we may be presented to You, and in the world may reflect His glory, Who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever  
**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3**

**PSALM**

**148**

**EPISTLE**

**Galatians 4: 4 – 7**

**GOSPEL**

**Luke 2:22-40**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

**Old Testament Lesson**

It is rather terribly easy to read and misunderstand the writings of the old prophets, especially if you are not aware of the situation into which they were written, and to which they applied. There are those who still look for 'fulfillment' of prophecy, not realising that OT prophecy is not star-gazing stuff, but is rather pointing to God at work.

Isaiah was writing about the time of the end of the Exile experience of Israel at around 520BC, when the People of God were without country, capital or temple. That, in contemporary consideration, neutered both them and their God!

What Isaiah was expecting was the removal of the disgrace by the return of the people to their own land. When that happened, Israel's enemies (and bad-mouthers) would see that Israel's God was rather different to the rest of the world divinities, which, hopefully, would get them tsit up and take some notice. *It is as well to bear in mind, before we idealise Israel, that there were a great number of Jewish exiles who decided NOT to return to their own land, as life had proved rather too prosperous where they were. Hence the Diaspora was added to, after the dispersion of the Northern Kingdom some 200 years before.*

**Psalms**

Psalms may either interest you or perhaps bore you, but this one ought to make us sit up more than a little. There are a couple of rather interesting points that we modern sophisticates need to take on board, as we look at the way ancient Israel viewed the Almighty (they would never, never call Him God!)

Notice the strange (to us) way in which Israel could understand that their God was Lord even over things in nature and life that were beyond their own experience. 'Monsters and all deeps' may have been quite beyond the experience of the run-of-the-mill Jew, but even that Jew knew that God knew all about them and so they were not beyond Him. That may seem to be a somewhat naïve approach to us, but please do stop and see that said Jews tended to have a rather wider and broader picture of God than many preset-day Christians have. In other words, we need to take a leaf out of their book.

**Epistle**

This is but a tiny snippet of an Epistle today, but as someone once said, 'it dribbles a bibful!' There is a lot to ponder here. First of all, catch sight that Paul is making it quite clear that when God is at work in and with His people, it is always through a person, and a little person at that. Nothing of what you know as Gospel would have been possible without Mary. Nothing would have been possible with another human, Jesus. His identification with us had to be complete, so that we could and can relate to Him and His enormous work. But still see that Jesus' crucifixion would have been seen, by those who did it, as a nobody being got rid of. No big deal. And yet it *is!*

**GOSPEL**

The Song of Simeon as included in today's Gospel has been embedded in my mind since, as a choir boy, I joined in singing this at Evensong – and that from during the WWII years. That gets to be a while ago now. I have to confess that the impact of the words did not hit until teenage or later, for reasons I will record later.

There are quite some issues that this passages require us to ponder, not least of which was the obedience of Joseph and Mary in fulfilling their obligations to the Old Covenant as Jesus moved in infancy. The requirement at 8 days old was for Jesus' circumcision, (reflected in the BCP's requirement for baptism of children, and for the same reason. Circumcision was not showing Jesus' acceptance of God, but rather vice versa. It was the sign or sacrament of initiation into the Covenant.

Those two ancient worthies present at the time must have been fascinating old folk. Simeon has long held a firm place in my heart, as I picture the man, growing from youth to great age, awaiting the promise of which he was certain, but of which he was given no sign until not all that long before his death. Likewise Anna, who may well have been seen by some of her contemporaries as 'off with the fairies.'

What hit me with greatest impact about Simeon, was that he saw Jesus' purpose as going way beyond any introverted Israel, to the entire world. That underlines an enormous breadth of vision, especially for someone who may well have travelled not further in his lifetime than perhaps to Galilee, which, in this State, would equate perhaps from Adelaide to Port Wakefield. Hardly a jet-setter, eh!

I takes enormous vision to realise that God's vision, too, encompassed not just a tiny minority (and rather despised) like the Jews. Simeon was aware too that the Gospel Jesus came to live and bring would NOT find widespread acceptance, and that would have severe repercussions on Jesus' Mum.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

I was not permitted to join the Choir in my Church in Sydney until I was at least ten years old. That prohibition was in place because, I understand, I was a noisy kid, and noisy kids had no place in the solemnity of a Choir. That was in 1944, but even 10 years later, I was refused permission to become a Lay Preacher because I was likely to whistle or make other comment if I made a mistake in the service!!!!) But back to the Choir,

In the old Morning and Evening Prayer services<sup>1</sup> Canticles were the order of the day, sung of course. Some canticles were Psalms, like the Venite<sup>2</sup> and others were Scripture passages like the Magnificat (the Song of Mary) and the Nunc Dimittis – this Song of Simeon. So, as mentioned above, the words were hammered into my thick skull long, long before they made much in the way of sense to me. But, when they did .....

I had been brought up in the era when being a Christian was one's very private preserve, and none of anyone else's business. That was a nice and safe way to go, all very Anglican I suspect, which led me at least to the perception that the business was so private that one needed only to hold all this close to the chest. It also removed me from the necessity, so it ran, of having to find any real reason to hold the faith. If it was private, then I did not need to explain it to others. I did not even need to explain it to myself. It was different to every other part of my life, and that is what made it 'spiritual.' It was a lovely and very useful escape clause. It has also explained why, for a couple of generations or so, the Faith has had no point of contact for very many people indeed, even of our own culture and country.

But Simeon mucked all that up for me. Simeon had the *hide* to sing about Jesus –and Israel, and the Church - being 'a light to lighten the Gentiles ' and that did not mean to make them less, but rather to provide them with the sort of light they needed to find their way in life. If that is the case, then it was incumbent on me to do a right royal re-think of what I understood the Faith to be.

What is it, then, that Gentiles needed then and now, which they did not have? The answer to that was not all that easy to find in that period of history after the War when, in my experience, almost everybody was caring and trustworthy, and life and livelihoods were valued, and one could always feel safe wherever they were. It was safe to travel on Sydney trains at night, even when passengers were few. I remember walking home after taking out a girl, and that walk home was about three miles in the outer suburbs.

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<sup>1</sup> Of the Book of Common Prayer, 1662 with some updates!

<sup>2</sup> So named from the old Latin .... Psalm 95 O come....

You may find this odd, but it was not until the very early '60s that I made a shattering discovery. By that time I was in orders, and assistant in my first Parish. And I found out how many of the other half lived. And it was not a pretty sight. Whilst I might still walk the streets at night, I found families dysfunctional, and kids left in cars outside pubs until quite late. From that time on, it became increasingly clear that even Christians themselves hid behind a Gospel that promised life after this, and also hid themselves from the harsh reality of present life. That was all too hard. It had become escapism at its most selfish.

Reconciliation is what people need, and that not just with God if I may dare express it that way, but also reconciliation with each other. The further one looks, the further this same dis-reconciliation becomes increasingly obvious, in communities, in countries, between countries and internationally.

**Sentence**

They saw the child with Mary His mother, and they knelt down and worshipped Him

*Matt 2:11*

**Collect**

Lord God of the nations, we have seen the star of Your glory rising in splendour; may the brightness of Your incarnate Word pierce the night that covers the world, signal the dawn of justice and peace, and beckon all nations to walk as one in Your light. We ask this through Jesus Christ, Your Word made flesh.

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Isaiah 60: 1-6**

**PSALM**

**72:1-7, 10-14**

**EPISTLE**

**Ephesians 1:3 – 12**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 2:1-12**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

**Old Testament Lesson**

For most readers, passages like this one can be confusing or simply incomprehensible. One of the helpful things towards removing confusion is to get to know the political and religious situation into which the prophets speak and write.

Some of us tend to think that all the excitement that Isaiah was expressing had to do with the return of the exiles from Babylon back to Israel. That would, of course, been part of it. But there had been another an enormous learning curve: during the harshness of their time away, Isaiah and other prophets had made some startling and interesting discoveries about God, about Israel's place in life and history, and even of Israel's role FOR the rest of the world. This discovery came with almost evangelical impact, for it lifted 'religion' from that personal and private realm to an understanding of life that offered a hugely different value-system to others.

This is why you will find, often, reference to the expectation of peoples from other lands and cultures coming to the feet of JHWH, and of Israel. Whilst there is reference to wealth pouring in, it was not some bonanza for Israel, but rather the widening of their tents, so to speak, as other people and other cultures joined them. The real prize for such a development was the growth and spread of justice and integrity, of love and compassion, .... And that would be the enormous benefit for all.

**PSALM**

And you do not need to look too far to see how such sentiments are expressed in the Psalm. What I find surprising is the extent to which the people of the world DO NOT WANT such benefits. It seems they far prefer to live utterly selfishly, or to stay within their own comfort zone, even when there is no comfort at all in that known and familiar way. *What fools we mortals be!*

**EPISTLE**

Dear old Paul never seemed to be lost for words, did he? And here he is as effusive as ever. Sadly, most of Christendom (or that part with which I have had to do, ) takes this all personally and individually, and delights in all the lovely promises here. However, please take the other readings (and the rest of the Bible!) into account, and realize that this is not some sort of blessing that all you have to do is let it pour over you. Stop and realize that all that God does for humanity is NOT to make you feel good, but is rather for the benefit and well being of all. (If this strikes you as odd, *then please talk to someone for whom life has always been a pointless, purposeless struggle. And then measure the difference between where you are and where they are.*)

**GOSPEL**

May you be well aware of the fact that the story of the Magi is not just a lovely addendum to the Christmas story, but is rather an enormous challenge to even the most one-eyed Christian. Are you sitting down?

The point and purpose of this story is to remind you of the fact that all people are searching for meaning, purpose and value, and have all sorts of directions in which that search is carried out. Here is a tale of people whose direction for the search came from a source that many of us would regard as illegitimate and wrong. The Magi were magicians. Were horoscope-readers. And they arrived at the truth at a remarkably clear level. So clear a picture did they have, that their gifts reveal a stunning understanding. Gold, frankincense and myrrh. King and God and Sacrifice, as that carol reminds us. *Not bad for mob of pagans*. The point is that truth is the basis if the search for many people, and that such search must be honoured – even by the most indignant of Christians.

### NOTES FOR A SERMON

Like the rest of us, I suspect, I grew up knowing all the various details of the Christmas and Epiphany stories, though imagining that the Wise Men part of it all occurred at the same time as the other. On top of that, we had certain of the aspects emphasised while most of the implications were not mentioned or even avoided. One was discouraged from questioning anything about the Virgin Birth, which meant that almost any other question was *verboden* – and the outcome of that was considerable failure to even recognize the point and purpose of it all.

If that sounds a little like a tirade, may I become specific. As far as most people were concerned, the story of the Magi was just a lovely little touch that added to the Christmas story, that made opportunity for more kids to be involved in Christmas pageants. As to any import in the tale, none was seen. However, for the Gospel of Matthew in particular, the issue was enormous. Traditionally, Matthew wrote his Gospel for a mainly Jewish audience, and Jews then and even now tend to be defensive about their Faith and regard themselves as the only ones God is interested in. That attitude prevailed in Jesus' day, in spite of such powerful statements as the Book of Jonah, of repeated statement by Isaiah, and comment by other of the major Prophets. Each of these preached and wrote in order to get Israel to look beyond itself, and to see the Faith as much as for Gentiles as for Jews. Such a removal of blinkers is often too much for ordinary folk.

The point and purpose of the story of the Magi is quite the same as the story of Jonah and the whale. There the emphasis is not on the whale, but on the preaching to Ninevah. The point of the Magi is a powerful and demanding one.

What is being conveyed is that a group of people **not** Jewish and not even Semitic, had come to the conclusion, by means of following their own means of search for truth, that something special was going to happen in a small, insignificant and remote place far from where they lived. As the story unfolds, it is clarified that these strangers from a strange land not only realized that an important event was to unfold, but they also were remarkably aware of the significance of that event. The gifts that they had brought from so far away, their gold, frankincense and myrrh, showed a profound spiritual awareness. King, and God, and sacrifice is how one of the carols puts it. And that is remarkable in terms of the utter lack of background knowledge of Hebrew religion. *In other words, this is what Epiphany is all about. People, unexpected people at that, finding out or being showed where truth lies even when it comes to Gospel.*

There are a number of implications that flow from this, few of which are considered by many I know as Christians. The first may just be a starter.

I have often had problems from many, rather narrow Christians, when commenting that the Gospel we preach was designed to be an answer to life for all human beings regardless of race, religion, or time in history. Gospel is not something exclusive, but inclusive. It is not something to defend or hold close to one's chest, but is something for all people wherever they are. So when Isaiah, in today's reading (and others) talks about other kings coming to see what is going on, it was not in order to be ruled over by Israel, *but rather because what they saw in Israel was something they knew they needed*. Sadly, there is often little evidence amongst Christians of much that is valuable for anyone else. It has all become more than a little introverted and isolated from life's harsh realities. In fact, what we have is often seen as an escape from reality, a hiding of heads in sand. How can that be changed?

Another factor, interesting for me at least, is the way in which the Infant Church did not feel bound by dogma and precedent, but rather responded to people and situations in terms of their growing understanding of what Jesus was saying and doing. This is evident, seems to me, even in the tale under review today. There is no 'preaching' about the Magi, but the simple relating of the story. There is no repeated 'do you get it? do you get it?' For any aware reader, the impact of mere involvement of outsiders would have given them furiously to think.

Traditionally, Jews tended to consider themselves as people quite apart from the rest of the world, with a God Who limited His human interest to those who were sons (and daughters) of Abraham. As a result, there was little or no thought given to people of other tribes, races or nations. One's religious and even national focus was inward, introverted, and one might even say insular. Even when the prophets asked or even required Israel to look beyond its borders, there was large and loud resistance. Perhaps the clearest evidence of this national trait is obvious in the story of Jonah and the whale. I find it remarkable when Christians miss the point of this little story: it has nothing to do with miracles and whales! It has everything to do with Israel's failure to respond properly and humanly with those of other cultures.

It is most helpful to realize that most of Israel's (and the Church's) growth in theology stemmed not from dogma or tenet, but from real-life experience. Watch the widening of vision in the Infant Church as a result of Philip's ministry with the Ethiopian eunuch – himself an utter non-person as far as traditional Jewry was concerned. Peter's experience with the Roman centurion is another instance of old barriers being broken down.

So the real point, purpose and emphasis of Epiphany is to make us take off our blinkers, to recognize that all humans are loved by God, and that the role of the People of God is to walk with such folk, perhaps to show them things of which they are mildly aware, or even to have ourselves grow in our understanding of God as we recognize truths in what those 'outsiders' are saying. Though I get into trouble saying this, *truth is truth wherever it comes from, whoever expresses it. And in the final analysis, all truth comes to us from the hands of God.*

*Epiphany reminds me to be very much more open to life, to people, and to truth.*

**Sentence**

We have found the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, the king of Israel!

*John 1:49*

**Collect**

Eternal God, Whose Son Jesus Christ is now revealed as Lord of all, and pours out His gifts upon the Church; grant us that unity which only Your Spirit can give, keep us in the bond of peace, and bring all creation to worship before Your throne, through Jesus Christ our Redeemer.

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**1 Samuel 3: 1 – 20**

**PSALM**

**139: 1-5 & 12 – 18**

**EPISTLE**

**1 Corinthians 6: 12 – 20**

**GOSPEL**

**John 1: 43 – 51**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

Old Testament Lesson

I am surprised, if I may say, at the extent to which so many of the old stories from Scripture are no longer well-known or remembered. If the comment that follows seems unnecessary for you, then I am most glad!

The story of the prayer of Hannah, Samuel's mother, (1 Sam 1) is remarkably parallel to the Song of Mary – it is worth a look! And here is the tale of the very young Samuel with one huge task dropped in his lap. When I was young, the Sunday School story (and a hymn to match) focussed on little Samuel to whom God spoke. It is a touching story but we were never pointed to the purpose of the tale, which was that God may well require young and inexperienced people to lead older ones to truth.

Can you imagine the fear in little Samuel, having to unload all that baggage on the old priest? Can you imagine yourself in a situation where you need to convey maybe unpleasant realities on someone close to you? In our day and age, we tend to prevaricate and pussy-foot. And then we wonder why nothing ever changes!

**Psalm**

This is a remarkable Psalm in its perception of God and His relationship to us. It may be a little much to assume that God's individual interest is so personal, but it seems to me that the point of this psalmist is ..... that God knows us inside out, and there is neither need nor excuse for either of us to hide from our own realities. I find that, when I realize that the Lord knows me inside out, and continues to care, that I can come to terms with my own weaknesses and even demons if it comes to that. If HE can handle it, then I guess I can also. Mind you, I will find it more than sad if YOU are unable to handle my realities.

**Epistle**

We live in a strange world these days, it seems to me. So much of the population is trying to be what it is not, trying to avoid facing the realities of being human, and trying to do all the wrong (that is, damaging) things and then assuming that no consequences will ensue. Life is simply not like that.

It may well be that, in the past, people reading this passage limited their view of what Paul is saying to matters sexual and therefore naughty! I doubt very much if that is the case. What Paul is saying, seems to me, that there is a freedom in being human, but that freedom does not extend to anything --- shall I say *super human* ? I am human, certainly, but I am not superman. Nor am I God. I do not and cannot set either the rules nor the limits, nor even the consequences of going beyond the values of being human. If I act or behave in a sub-human or super-human way, then I am likely to encounter some problem. For instance, if I try to breathe underwater, then the water will win and not me! However, if I work within the parameters, then life can be rather beautiful indeed.

Gospel

It is probably important for any reader of this passage to know something about the original story of ascending and descending angels. To miss that point is to miss the purpose of the tale.

Go back to Genesis and the story of Jacob fleeing home and heading for Haran. (Genesis 28:10ff) It was a simple tale and yet hugely significant. Jacob was fleeing from expected retribution from his brother, having stolen the birth-right. He would have expected retribution from God as well. What he did know, from contemporary belief, that when he moved from God's territory he also moved from God's protection.

The dream of Jacob that night was what we may well call a transfiguration. What was expected turned into something quite unexpected. Behold God is in this place and I knew it not was the startling discovery for that renegade. And that is the nature of the surprise all the time. God in the unexpected, in the unfamiliar or even the familiar.

Here, the epiphany is not FOR Jesus but *of* Jesus. It was Nathanael who was taken by surprise in this instance, taken aback by Jesus' awareness of him. There is nothing miraculous in this for you will almost certainly have the experience of somehow knowing the credibility and depth in someone you may have just met. And please remember that 'Israel' means 'the one who struggles with God.' In other words, the answers about life may well come with some difficulty.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

It strikes me that Epiphany is somewhat like Advent – there is rather more in the Season than meets the eye. Epiphany, certainly, has to do with light coming into a dark place, as does Advent. And sometimes, that light surprises. Occasionally, it shocks!

I wonder if you can follow along with me! In today's Readings, it strikes me that in just one of the passages there is the expression that growth or epiphany comes from Scripture. In the other readings, I wonder if you dare follow me in seeing that growth or epiphany comes from *outside* Scripture. Perhaps I should give you some time to get past the shock.

What Paul wrote about in the Epistle goes back to the Ten Commandments, basically. That business about adultery. I find it interesting that he takes the matter rather beyond the deed, so to speak, to the reality of what happens in such a situation. What he pointed to was the lie that is created. And lies damage people. In this sort of situation, the damage is bi-lateral. Mind you, in quite recent days, I recall a radio programme where an avowed atheist lady bemoaned the way modern kids seem to rely on other people's views and theories about what is right and wrong. That lady made it quite clear that her own parents encouraged her and her siblings to look inside, and think and ponder before doing anything – for there, said her Mum – one finds their real answers. Now, if I shocked you a little while ago, be ready for another shock – or epiphany.

I would go along with what that atheist mother said to her daughter, although I would go on to see that in situations like that, it is the Holy Spirit at work, in believer or unbeliever, for anyone who searches for the truth will find it. Epiphany outside of Scripture, do you see?

In Jacob's situation, his epiphany came with total unexpectedness, as he could not have imagined that the writ of God extended to where he was, in hostile and godless territory. In spite of Jacob being a rather less than pleasant fellow, supplanter and cheat, God still spoke to him in the same way God spoke to that atheist lady and her daughter. I am not being at all dogmatic about this – in fact I ask you to look way beyond the confines and control of dogma. I am asking you to look at life, at the reality that surrounds you, and to see, in fact, that God is right there in it, and in a rather bigger way that Jacob expected, and that we expect. We are talking about God after all!

And the same sort of revelation came to Nathanael. Like the rest of us, dear old Nathanael thought that our innermost self is not all that visible to other people, and that we can hide behind the self-erected screen. But this is rarely so: we may fool some of the people some of the time, but very rarely will be fool all of the people all of the time. And that has repercussions on how we should operate as human beings. What I really am will become more clear to you the better you get to know me. That is not to be some sort of disadvantage to either of us – but it does mean I need to be more fair dinkum with you and with others if you are ever going to begin to trust me.

So when Scripture talks about epiphanies, (and remember that the word simply means that light is being shown in a dark place) it is not talking about matters entirely spiritual. It is talking about life as it is lived. That is where the Faith is designed to operate, and we remove it from that sphere only at great damage and disadvantage to ourselves. So this *Epiphany* works somewhat in reverse to what otherwise we may have thought.

**Sentence**

The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel

*Mark 1:15*

**Collect**

Bountiful God, through Your Son You have called us to repent of our sins to believe in the good news, and to celebrate the coming of Your Kingdom; teach us to hear the call to discipleship, and forsaking the old ways, to proclaim and live the gospel of new life to a broken world, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Jonah 3: 1- 10**

**PSALM**

**62: 5 – 12**

**EPISTLE**

**1 Corinthians 7: 29 – 31**

**GOSPEL**

**Mark 1: 14 – 20**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

**Jonah**

One of the ways many Christians seem to have of avoiding the real message of Jonah is to assume that this book is about miracles. That business about the fish is not reality, but metaphor. It **is** about the rather too normal human reaction against evangelism, and in particular against rather too normal human hang-ups. The fish business is just a bit of embroidery on a tale to get the reader in.

Jews were, traditionally, very isolationist. They were God's Chosen and nobody else really mattered in the Divine scheme of things. In order to shake them out of their lethargy, this (hypothetical) story was told to get the so-and-sos thinking. Jonah, deciding that his call to preach to Ninevah was all a bit too much, fled in the opposite direction to avoid being obedient. When his hand was forced, and his preaching effective, Jonah spat the dummy big time, as young people would put it these days. So the Ninevites repented, - or to put it in general terms, saw the truth of what was being conveyed to them, and changed their ways. Once again, this epiphany thing came to Ninevites through the ministry of dear old grumpy Jonah. God always works through ordinary humans, sometimes even when they are disobedient!!!!!!

**Psalm**

The more I see and read of the Psalms, the more my understanding of the direction of these musings deepen, not in any esoteric, religious sense, but very much in terms of ordinary living and the best way to operate. On the surface, we seem to have the moanings of an inadequate person who can only survive by leaning on God. While there may be smidgin of truth in this, the force of the observations are rather more down-to-earth.

As the Psalmist looked at life, he was aware, clearly, of the inability or unwillingness of mere humans to operate with any sort of integrity. He has an interesting comment in verse 5 – in a play on words not evident in English. *Adam* is humanity, and *adamah* is the environment (the dust) from which *adam* comes and to which *adam* goes. And even *adam's breath* is given, that spirit (*pneuma, ruarch*) given by God to humanity. In other words, there is a terrible brevity and impermanence about *adam*, but that is balanced by the permanency of God. It is that for which the Psalmist is most grateful, because that permanence of God is guarantee of the permanence of the eternal values of justice, integrity and 'constant goodness.' It is a gratitude that we of this current age need to recognize, value and uphold.

**Epistle**

When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he, like everyone else, thought that the Parousia, the Second Coming, was really quite imminent. Because of that, there was a sense of urgency in living the life of faith in a world that didn't. It was a matter of witness to those around that there was a viable alternative to self-centred and self-obsessive living.

While modern Christians (or the greater number of them) understand the Parousia in less immediate terms, the need to live the life of faith is increasingly necessary, especially as the world of (Western culture at least) becomes increasingly self-focussed.

## Gospel

There is something of a two-edged sword in this introduction to Mark's Gospel. While he makes sure the emphasis is on *repent*, there is also the immediate focus on Jesus' call to ordinary humans to be involved in this Gospel of changing life and living.

The Kingdom of God<sup>3</sup> is not something mysterious or esoteric. It is simply the situation where the rule or reign of God becomes more visible and tangible where people live in obedience to the Divine will. This is not essentially a religious matter – it is a matter of justice, integrity, compassion and love. The Kingdom is present wherever such attributes are found and expressed, And if you dare to see it, this can be by those who profess unbelief, when they accept the eternal values mentioned above.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

I remember when I first arrived at a new parish many years ago, being in a situation where families had lived for generations, and had kept their little Church going for, then, over a hundred years. However, one of the things that surprised me was that the younger generation of young parents seemed to have no real idea of why they were part of the show. I was really quite surprised at what was vast ignorance about the Faith, until it became clear that *their* parents were rather vague about things, too. That was at the time when Church and Faith were seen as quite intangible, and somehow dissociated from real and ordinary life. Your job was to believe, but no one had apparently told them what to believe. It was all so ephemeral. That is not what any Faith is about. However, that vague and amorphous perception remains. And it may take a long time for that to disappear.

Epiphany: it is reminding us of the need to be lights in a dark place, to be reaching out to those who are unaware of why Church and faith exist, and who are concerned increasingly at 'the way things are going.' It is in that direction that we need to be following the paths of the Magi, of getting the clear picture of the faith and of being able to share what we know – growing in understanding God-in-Christ, and growing in the capacity to share this significantly with people around about us. In other words, Epiphany is not just something that we celebrate because it happened 'back there,' but to continue the process in our own day and time.

For many, many decades, the Church has not seen the need to share the Faith. Both the Church, and people in it, saw the faith as something very personal and private, very intangible. So much was this so, that any talk about believing was regarded as quite outside the bounds of propriety. Perhaps this is why the Jonah story was reduced to the miraculous. All about the fish. And neither you nor I are capable of miracle. But Jonah was precisely what the Church needed – the challenging tale of a people of God who did all in their power to avoid the Divine challenge to share faith and experience. That old book and its tale must have got up the nose of contented and powerful men in Israel – they must have perceived that it was aimed against them. And no one likes snide attempts at getting them to look and think wider than their comfort zone.

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<sup>3</sup> When writing his Gospel, Matthew refers to this as the Kingdom of Heaven. For his Jewish audience, Matthew used the alternative phrase, Kingdom of Heaven, in order to avoid use of the Divine Name.

Sentence

Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. *Matthew 9.35*

Collect

O Lord, You have taught us that all our doings without love are worth nothing: pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love, the true bond of all peace and of all virtues, without which whoever lives is counted dead before You. Grant this for Your only Son, Jesus Christ's sake. **Amen**

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm

111

EPISTLE

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

GOSPEL

Mark 1: 21 – 28

NOTES ON THE READINGS

*Whilst the Epiphany was once focussing on the calling of God to the Gentiles, it strikes me that the readings set down this Year B tend to focus on the calling of the People of God to reach out to those who might be called 'Gentiles.' Today's Readings, it seems to me, encourage that outward look, and give some tools to do the job.*

**Old Testament Lesson**

One of the difficulties of taking anything literally is that it tends to narrow one's perceptions and expectations. Israel – from the time of this *Second Law*<sup>4</sup> had been looking for an expecting another prophet like Moses. As history shows, the reality was not about ONE prophet, but about a line of them. And if one takes a little notice of the NT, then that line becomes rather wider. Many of the people of God are called to be prophets, that is, to help people look at what God calls us to, in relation to those all around us.

Certainly, in Moses' time as in our own, there is always the temptation of some people to step into the role with great falsity: you could name a few such people over the previous handful of decades. So the warning remains valid: there is that enormous demand on the prophet to speak only of the truth, not of their own hang-ups and biases!

**PSALM**

Once again, it would seem to be easy to lead oneself up a garden path. But notice a couple of things: the delight in God which this psalmist expresses has to do with God's righteousness – justice. Such are His marvellous acts. Without justice – and all those other characteristics that are attributed to God – being expressed in normal human relationships, life becomes chaotic and even dangerous. I suspect we are seeing the beginning of that chaos these days.

'And when the psalmist talks about God giving 'His People the heritage of the heathen,' it is not a matter of 'the holy ones' suddenly becoming wealthy! It is a matter of the so-called 'heathen' seeing where real truth lies, and following it.

**Epistle**

In some ways, it is hard to imagine how some matters became so difficult for the Infant Church, but in others, we find apparently unimportant issues gaining enormous stress for modern day Christians. Eating meat offered in pagan temples – and there was no other way of getting meat to eat! – created enormous problems for those who saw such stuff as having been sacrifices to gods that are not. In the usual terribly human way, the whole business became a basis on which some people asserted superiority, and made others their inferiors. These days the criterion tends to be something like 'speaking in tongues.'

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<sup>4</sup> For this is what Deuteronomy means

Paul's means of dealing with the conflict is one which can be used in a wide variety of similar problems. On the one hand, Paul recognized the freedom of people to have their own views, and on the other, the call for all to cope with the differing views, and to take care not to run rough-shod over people with different views.

## **GOSPEL**

You should be used to me by now – asking you to look past 'miracle' to catch sight of what is being conveyed in the story. When it comes to the 'teaching with authority,' I suspect everyone has had the experience of listening to a preacher who simply regurgitates stuff that everyone knows, and how boring and uninteresting that is. Compare that with a preacher or teacher who offers fresh and interesting insight into issues, and with them time seems to lose meaning. One could listen to them for hours. I doubt if anyone could imagine Jesus doing anything but the latter, grabbing the interest and attention of those present.

When it comes to the story of the man with an unclean spirit, please stop and attend to Jesus in His contact with the ordinary, hurting human being. First, it was a Sabbath, which theoretically precluded Jesus from offering any help. Jesus ignored the strange restriction! The man should not have been anywhere near the synagogue, as he was 'unclean.' In fact, whenever 'unclean spirits' are mentioned, you can assume that whatever was wrong with the person was something beyond the comprehension of the medical profession of the time. That seemed to be of no concern to Jesus.

The point in this whole episode, simple as it appears, is that much of Jesus' ministry (and it needs to be ours as well) is carried out simply by meeting people where they are, completely unaffected or unoffended by their situation, and relate as caring person to a person in need of care.

*If we remained with the simple miracle, we could sidestep the issue by saying that I am unable to perform miracles. Maybe that is so, but simple touch and care can produce small miracles anyhow.*

## **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

One of the things that has long bothered me is the contrast between the warm acceptance of Jesus by ordinary folk – and the opposite reaction from lots of people these days. How on earth was it that Jesus had that remarkable capacity to attract such men as those fishermen, who left their nets and followed him. Do not give me any baloney about their recognition of Him as Messiah and Lord. That did not come until long afterwards, even after the Resurrection. There must have been something very appealing, very powerful in a quiet sense, about that Lord of ours. And it goes without saying, does it not, that dear old Mother Church is not all that appealing, and I am not talking about forms of worship, or anything like that. There still tends to be a brittle edge in there somehow

I have more than a sneaky suspicion that if anyone these days is going to appeal to people, it is the ordinary, dinki di human like you. And it is not going to be any great wisdom you have, nor any great theological education that you have. It is going to be if you operate, simply and without sham, as Jesus did – as person to person.

One might be forgiven for wondering otherwise, with that polemic statement in the OT Reading about The Prophet. However, I suspect that the real challenge then and for prophets now, is to offer 'the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.' Living as we do in a world of spin, half-truths and mistruths, it becomes difficult to uncover the reality about things. On the other hand, it is only the basic reality that offers any chance to move forward. Truth is freeing, releasing stuff – and like love – it is what the world needs now.

What today's readings underline for me, is the call to a prophetic and compassionate role and ministry. The pattern is always Jesus Himself, in a caring, open, accepting style of life, ministry and caring. Mind you, it does not require a profound reading of the Gospels to realize that, whilst Jesus' ministry is our pattern, there is always a cross in there somewhere.

One of the aspects of life that has reared its ugly head the days, is the way in which 'the world' has had an enormous effect in encouraging a managerial and controlling pattern in Church life. For decades now, I have encountered clergy who see their task as directors. For all the talk of enabling, there is ever the activity of control. There has to be a more determined attempt to redirect our goals in the pattern of Jesus. This does not require some return to any idyllic past, or even a return to mediaeval views, but a genuine expression of the approach of Jesus to people around us. All that is required is the taking a long hard look at the way Jesus went about things.

Today's Gospel is a useful exercise. There was a person with a disability beyond current repair. In contemporary society of his time, that disability was the lever used to isolate such sufferers from any connection

with normal life. Ostracism was complete and immovable. It does not take great imagination to see how such folk must have felt: abandoned, untouchable, and incommunicado.

How that man could attend a synagogue escapes me, but he was there – possibly with the strong feeling that surely there, some help could or should be available. Had Jesus not been there that day, there would have been nothing but continued rejection.

I find it interesting that the Gospel writers often use stories that show how often those who were part of the religious establishment has no real idea of what their role was, whereas the isolated ones, the sinners and outcasts, all seemed to have a pretty clear idea. It was the case in this incident.

Jesus' command for silence was, I suspect, aimed not at the so-called demon, but at His sensed need not to advertise His position, but allow people room to think it through for themselves. But whatever the reason, the man was healed, back in his right mind.

The point of looking closer at such incidents is to notice the way in which our Lord was always so careful not to tread on another person's humanity, but to treat them with complete respect. He came as no powerbroker to use great strength to overcome disease. In fact, it was all rather low-key and simple, if you see what I mean, and the healed one always had room to go from there without obligation. It is one hell of a risky way to operate, but the only way to work without overpowering the client person.

This sort of ministry can only be expressed by individuals. It is a one-to-one activity, out of the spotlight, and full of humanity.