

**Sentence**

Arise, shine for your light has come; and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

*Isaiah 60:1*

**Collect**

O God, by the leading of a star, You manifested Your only-begotten Son to the Gentiles; mercifully grant, that we who know You now by faith, may after this life be led to the vision of Your glorious Godhead, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Isaiah 60: 1 – 6**

**Psalm**

**72:1 – 7 & 10 – 14**

**Epistle**

**Ephesians 3: 1 – 12**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 2: 1 – 12**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS.....****Old Testament Lesson**

Sadly it is obvious to see the extent to which modern Christians manage to misunderstand the Old Testament, so I guess it is not so extraordinary that the ancient Jews did so as well, to some extent. It may be easy to try and enter the excitement of this passage from Isaiah, and then wonder why he was so worked up. Here is no artificial excitement – it is solidly based! Isaiah has been pondering the reasons and effects of what he understood God to be doing, not just for Israel, but for every human being that breathes. Judaism was not just for Jews but for everyone, as is the Christian appendage to that ancient faith. This Gospel has heaps to say to all searchers after truth and reality, so why in the name of fortune do we hide this lamp under a bushel so that we miss the basic points ourselves? This religion, this faith is not ours – it belongs to God. Let us never forget that!

**Psalm**

Now do you see how the psalmist was getting excited for the same reason. When the ancient Jews realized that God is Lord of all the earth, they also realized (or some of them did) that this meant that the faith as they had begun to perceive it had and has long and serious responses to life and to relationships, and that these applied to all human beings. The ancient themes of justice and integrity were seen to have validity for everyone – and that lifted Judaism from introspection to a far broader horizon. Think that through if you will.

**Epistle**

Dear old Paul – ever so verbose! And yet hitting the nail on the head. Mind you, I have some small difficulty with what Paul was writing here, because it seems to me that he has overstated the case somewhat. When referring to the Faith as being open to and available for the whole world, he seems to be saying that the mystery<sup>1</sup> has just been revealed, when in fact – as he states – the prophets were perfectly aware of the situation and referred to it quite often.

Much of our problem, I suspect, is that we don't always quite understand what the 'mystery' is all about. In practical terms, it is simply, powerfully and effectively, that the Gospel – in fact the entire Judaic-Christian Faith – is not something for some select and elite few, but for all humans of whatever race, creed, or even time in history. In other words, the faith either offers sense and reconciliation to everyone whoever lived, or it offers sense to none.

**Gospel**

I remember reeling from shock when it first hit me that the Wise Men (as we always referred to them) were in fact, Magi, magicians, astrologers. No, they were not Christian, nor even Jewish. In former 'Christian' terminology, they were pagans, occultists, and distant from God so far as to be quite immeasurable. And then this little incident. It would have had to have been some time after the birth of Jesus, if you note the Herodian edict.

So here is a powerful adjunct to the story of the Incarnation, stating that people who really were utterly ill-equipped to have any idea of the importance of Jesus, understood rather more than most of those who professed the Hebrew faith. The gifts that they brought indicated a clear and remarkable theology, for gold, frankincense and myrrh pointed to the purpose of the Incarnation: King and God and Sacrifice, as the Christmas carol has it.

<sup>1</sup> In the NT, a 'mystery' is not some deep dark secret but rather something that once was unknown and hidden has now been made clear.

People who should have been totally ignorant were more aware than the faithful ones. It is a bit of a poke in the nose, eh? Now come to terms with that little lot if you dare!!!!!!

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

One of the sad things, as I reiterate year after year, is that in our country, Advent comes when everyone seems to have closed down for summer holidays, and the 'reason for the season' hits rather empty airspace. Epiphany, in spite of its strange name, is singularly important and just as singularly exciting stuff, but manages to fluff off into cyberspace without touching many edges.

I have asked you to wonder why, in the notes above, that Isaiah – among others – got excited about their Faith. We become rather too blasé about it, or – like some rather fundamentalist brethren – focus on getting people to heaven. However the reality is far more immediate and far more relevant. Epiphany IS exciting stuff, but some redirection is required to see this.

Now it was exciting enough to get those Magi, Wise Men, occultists if you dare, to leave their own culture, comfort zone and home to discover something for which they had longed for years. Most occultists I know of tend to think that they have all the answers – and get agitated if someone suggests otherwise. (Not unlike a lot of Christians, actually!) And oddly enough, those guys turned out to be rather more aware of the realities than those to whom the Faith had been entrusted. Gold, frankincense and myrrh. God and King and Sacrifice. Truth and reality and reconciliation.

Let's start from the other end. If you had the opportunity of sorting today's world out, dealing with its hurts and pains and terrors, where would you start? Most of today's leaders seem to think that the best way to stop terrorism is to blow the terrorists off the map. Even as I write this, Myanmar is trying to get its leaders to rethink their strategy, and the Buddhists' plea for listening and understanding is pretty solid stuff. Their leaders are answering with tear gas, bullets and force. Like they did 20 or so years ago.

Buddhists, like those Magi, have heard of a better way: and that is the exciting thing about this Christian Faith of ours. Don't get hung up on the so-called uniqueness of this Faith; it is its relevance and value that is the issue. I have difficulty, I must confess, with those blessed and impassioned folk who see the role of Christianity to get people into heaven because Jesus died for them. Whilst that is fine when the time comes, the real issue of the Judaic/Christian Faith is that offers an alternative *modus operandi* to this strange human propensity for belting the living daylights out of each other. Reconciliation – resolution of tensions and differences. Shutting up and listening to each other long enough to deal with that which divides us. Now, if there is the slightest possibility that this Faith of ours has a solution to the ills of the world, and that it can work, even if it takes some time to reach the goal, then surely it is worth the time to explore it. This Season of Epiphany focusses on the wide-ranging business of what the Faith – and life – is all about.

**Sentence**

A voice came from heaven, saying ‘This is My beloved Son, the Beloved, in Whom I am well pleased.’

*Matt. 3: 17*

**Collect**

Spirit of energy and change, in Whose power Jesus was anointed to be the hope of the nations; be poured out also upon us, without reserve or distinction, that we may have confidence and strength to implant Your justice on the earth, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Isaiah 42: 1 – 9**

**PSALM**

**29**

**FOR THE EPISTLE**

**Acts 10: 34 – 43**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 3: 13 – 17**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS .....**

*Don't we manage to get ourselves caught up on lesser or even non-issues and miss the real point and purpose? Like John the Baptist, the big question is 'why' when it comes to Jesus' baptism, when the real issue is 'for what reason?' So guess what will be the focus on these readings!!!!*

**Old Testament Lesson**

I can only hope that Isaiah grabs you like he has long grabbed me! (I ‘blame’ my old maternal grandpa, who always had a Bible reading after a meal and invariably chose Isaiah!) And here is one of the series of the prophet’s Servant Songs as they have been called. The old prophet had long pondered what God was trying to do with Israel - stubborn, one-eyed Israel – and searched back through Scripture and history to find the answers. The servant songs are the result. First he saw Israel as the focus of his pondering, then realized that in the end, only one remarkable and committed person would be able to point the way and live the calling. But that One was to be both progenitor and prototype for the People of God, - and like Israel, we have tended to reduce the calling of this Servant of the Lord to something we feel we could manage. On the other hand, we are!!!!!!

*Cop this, young Harry! You, like Jesus, have been called to be ‘a light for peoples, a lamp to the nations.’ To establish justice among the nations. And what have you done to offer this to even those around you? Don't blame Israel, nor even the ‘Church’ – although it is sad to say that the organisation tends to avoid the real issues. We tend to miss the point almost always, and wonder why things unravel. What fools we mortals be.*

**Psalms**

It is important to read and understand the Psalms in the way that the old Hebrews would have done. This looks like rather extravagant language, but do ponder the point. Here the ancient worthy was delighting in the point purpose and power of God, in a world where the ancient verities were largely disregarded. It is fascinating to see Israel, in its growing understanding of God. Unlike most people around them, the Hebrews realised that religion was not something unreal, but that it needed to express and portray those lasting and important values of truth, justice and integrity. Peoples and countries may well disregard truth and justice and integrity, but only the nation or culture that did hold them dear would ever be likely to survive for terribly long. Hence the ‘eternal’ values were seen to be inherent in the eternal Deity. And when people have a solid rock like that on which to stand, there was (and is) not a lot of other stuff to fear!

**Epistle**

Do not miss the point and purpose of this passage! Implications are enormous.

If there is one thing that religion, generally, does, it is to isolate the practitioners from the rest of the world. You are in; I am out. You know it all; I remain ignorant. And in spite of the constant barrage to think otherwise, both Jews and Christians have operated just like that, creating divisions even between adherents of the same faith. How stupid.

Here, however, the barriers are down and demolished. God has no favourites. In other words, He is aware of the extent to which people of all manner of backgrounds search for and pursue the truth – and that is the critical issue. Yes, Israel was the source of the information, as Church is intended to be these days. But it is disastrously easy for the truth to be hidden even from those who are said to be at the centre of things.

## Gospel

‘All that God requires....’ Once again we tend to provide ourselves with an invisible cloak to avoid all the implications. As Isaiah would have understood clearly, here is the Ephed Jahweh, the Servant of the Lord, Who **will do** all that God requires, and in a far wider context than simply adhering to the ritual actions. It is quite clear to me that Jesus was remarkably well aware of the Servant Songs and their import, for He lived out the calling to an absolute ‘t.’ Not least did Jesus live it out in terms of the suffering servant,<sup>2</sup> who lived out the process of reconciliation and not retribution. The Cross, and indeed all of Jesus’ life and ministry, illustrates the move towards reconciliation and forgiveness. And we are expected to follow it too, ourselves, however difficult a path that provides.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

I could relate a lot of stories about people bringing their children for baptism, and refusing to face the issue that baptism presents. There is the almost constant reiteration that one does not need to go to Church to be a Christian, and that certainly is true. But in our day and age (was there ever a time when it was any different) some people still like to go through the motions, but avoid the real response and responsibility. To head in that direction is to miss the point entirely.

My most vivid tale on the subject concerns a feisty young Mum who came asking for baptism for her first infant. Both her parents and grandparents were part of the congregation, but it was beneath her dignity. ‘Don’t give me the crap about having to go to Church to be a Christian!’ she roared at me. So I offered line of thought. ‘How long since you have been to Church, young lady, for a service, not a wedding or something like that?’ I asked her. Her fingers came out as she totted up the years: her answer, as a 23 year old, was nine years. ‘OK,’ said I, waiting for the reaction, ‘if your husband made love to you once in nine years, would you consider yourself married?’ It took a moment or two for the question to hit home, and she called me for everything before answering: ‘if it is once in nine *days*,’ she exploded, ‘he is dead!’ ‘I rest my case,’ said I, as she hated me because she received the answer she did not want’

I’ll leave the question of infant baptism for another time, but do realize that this process simply follows the Hebrew Rite of Initiation except that baptism, unlike circumcision, is now available to all the human race. The point does not have so much to do with the rite or Sacrament, but it does have everything to do with the commitment, lifelong commitment, that the ceremony illustrates. So when we talk of Jesus’ baptism, let’s not get sucked in to the question ‘quite what does this mean?’ but to see that it had everything to do with the total commitment of Jesus to the specific and demanding commitment that was His.

Have you ever pondered what the Gospel would have been like if Jesus lived out part of it, left important issues out, or – as He could well have done – disappeared into the dark in the Garden of Gethsemane? Half a Gospel would be no gospel at all, would it not, and less than a parody. It would have been totally useless.

So what sort of a person does it take to be so totally committed and involved? With some of us lesser humans, such one-eyed commitment would be utterly unattractive and even repellent. (There were those, remember, who found St. Paul a rather difficult person to cope with! And had Jesus been like that, it would have reduced the Faith to a great degree.

It is a worthwhile exercise, it seems to my small mind, to stop and ponder the enormous value and yet the patient gentleness, of the Gospel as we have it, because it had been offered by the sort of Person, the likes of Whom we have rarely if ever encountered before. I have long found it stunning that this Person attracted all manner of people, rough and smooth, to the faith that He proffered, for religion is rarely the most popular activity in the world. So spend some time imagining, eh?

*And see where that challenges us to grow and develop as human beings*

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 52:12 – 53:13

**Sentence**

God is faithful, by Him you were called into the fellowship of His Son. *1 Cor. 1:9*

**Collect**

Almighty God, Whose Son our Saviour Jesus Christ is the light of the world; may we Your people, illumined by Your Word and Sacraments, shine with the radiance of His glory, so that He may be known, worshipped and obeyed, to the ends of the earth; Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Isaiah 49: 1 - 7**

**Psalm**

**40: 1 - 14**

**Epistle**

**1 Corinthians 1:1 – 9**

**GOSPEL**

**John 1: 29 – 42**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS .....****Old Testament**

If any reader has not read and considered the series of Servant Songs by Isaiah, it may well be a good time to start now. Without a clear picture of Isaiah's musings – and the reason for them! – much of the prophet's work and writing will go for nothing.

In *this* Servant Song, there is an interesting move as the prophet pondered what he understood to be God's call to Israel. He began, as would any good Jew of the time, with the clear perception that Israel was chosen of God. With the myopia fairly current then and much later, the sense of being chosen became something of an isolationist bent for the nation. They became introverted, self-obsessed somewhat, and as a consequence, rather useless in the hands of God. (This tends to be the nature of religion, and in Israel's case [**and the Church's**] almost emasculated the effectiveness of the People of God. )

So Isaiah tended to rediscover and realize that the reason for Israel's existence was, and always was from the call of Abraham, to be a **light to the nations**. Although (then and now) that light may not be appreciated generally, for the genuine searcher, the offering tendered by Israel (and the Church) can revolutionize people and their relationships at all levels.

*I find it sad and remarkably myopic of when many Christians see 'Gospel' only in terms of 'eternal salvation.' Small wonder that many antagonists to the faith see Christians as devaluing life, and present experience.*

**PSALM**

Along with the rest of you, I suspect, I had long discounted the psalms because they seem to present an inward-looking view of life, along the lines of those Christians mentioned above. However, if you dare to see beyond the individual (a concept almost unknown to Israel; it was the community that was important) it becomes clearer. Here was a somewhat lost soul letting the world know that JHWH was the source of balance, including that sense of justice which was emerging in Hebrew faith. It is rather difficult for people to see past what they had understood their responsibilities lie – popularly that was in offering the required sacrifices. However, notice the emphasis on righteousness (justice) and loving-kindness (grace) even this early in OT understanding. Perhaps we need reminding that the Hebrew Faith was really very radical indeed in comparison to contemporary religions.

**EPISTLE**

*And God keeps faith.* If there is nothing else that hits you between the eyes, please stop and recall this most significant faith issue that remained constant throughout both Hebrew and Christian faith.

**GOSPEL**

Two things or three stand out for me in this passage: (a) that Lamb of God issue that tends to be misunderstood and somewhat reduced by contemporary Christians; (b) what a task for the Baptist, whose role as to slip out of sight when his job was done. No easy task for usual egocentric humans to watch your own disciples change sides so to speak. (That is how it must have felt to John. What a man!) And the double announcement from the Baptist that *'I did not know who He was'* which is surprising coming from him who was cousin. Mind you, that connection would have made it as hard for John as it would have for Jesus' siblings, James (later Bishop of Jerusalem) in particular.

The 'Lamb of God' endorsement has all manner of Jewish precedent. First of all there is the clear reference to what we Christians tend to call the 'sacrificial system' – which for centuries was the most important form of worship of God. Whilst the scapegoat idea remained popular with some theories of the atonement, it has its very bleak shortcomings.

As even later Old Testament writings, the prophets in particular show, that bleak approach was long invalidated. Perhaps the author of Revelation had the finer picture as he, who turned many older apocalyptic expectations upside down, made clear that the 'lion of Judah' was in fact 'the Lamb upon His throne,' the Cross. Forgiveness and reconciliation lies at the heart of the Gospel, and our Lord made that abundantly clear, constantly.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

Epiphany tends to remain that important season that tends to get covered over by summer holidays, at least this side of the Equator. In fact, the entire Church Year tends to have its reversal here, which we need to take into account in our thinking under the Southern Cross.

Epiphany is that Season which takes us through the hugely significant messages of the fact that the Faith is (and always has been) designed to be useful, helpful and effective for the entire human race. The Sunday a fortnight ago is no nice little heart warming and threatening tale, but a solid reminder that the Faith and its Lord is not so much unique and alone, but meets all humans in their quest for point purpose and direction in life, and values by which to operate. One of the greatest tragedies of human history is that religions of all sorts have tended to be divisive and generating of hatreds. *Quell dommage!*

Last Sunday underlined for us the nature of the role of the Servant of the Lord, seen either as Jesus or as whoever is one of the Lord's people belonging to the Church of God. What Jesus epitomised His people must reflect. And that tends to be the point where many part company, though the challenge is rarely expressed.

Before you reckon that the problem is only recent, it has to be said that Israel of old fell into the myopia trap constantly. Whilst one might expect it early in the peace whilst there was still very much the effect of pre-Judaism blues. When one has a background of fear and violence, and pre-Jewish superstition contained such tenets, it would have been harder to buck the trend than to go along with it. Those old stories of how God demanded all manner of violent and vengeful reactions to people and their sins. However it has to be said that God has been traduced somewhat: the reality was rather that was what people *thought God demanded.* That sort of response from leaders was more a matter of control than of theology. (Not a great deal has changed, now has it?)

Back to basics: even dear old Isaiah saw that the real contribution that the Hebrew/(Christian ) Faith offers the world (and Isaiah meant the world!) was something far more significant than some new religion. All of Israel knew, from their Creation myths, that the real human problem that brought so much unease and trouble to relationships, was that great propensity for humans to demand control over and obedience from all others. This is what Jews would call sin, this control freak thing, this determination that you will fit my scheme of things. It occurs at all levels of human relationships, from within families, communities, and particularly between cultures and nations. 'You are different and that scares me, so I will do my darndest to force you to accept my pattern for you. Ku Klux Klan or simple (?) racism, sexism, and all the isms that foster hatreds and divisions amongst people. And the old prophet saw, clearly and marvellously that the role of Israel, even if it focussed on one Person in the end, was in response to this ongoing, devastating flaw in human relationships. The answer to the problem was not an immediate solution offered freely, but a pattern of life, a choice of priorities whereby the evil can be met and overcome. Any careful reader will note, as the Servant Songs are examined, that this does not mean some isolationist religion but a commitment to and involvement in ordinary human life and relationships. *If and when antagonists to the Faith discover and realize this, there may well be a totally different response from them, However, I submit that it will take a quantum shift on the part of Christians, too.*

SO this is Epiphany: the bursting on to the scene of the possibilities that all (well, most anyhow) humans long for, and it is our task to share this, meaningfully, with the world of people around about us.

**Sentence**

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. *Matt 4:23*

**Collect**

Loving God, the light of the minds that know You, the life of the souls that love You, and the strength of the hearts that serve You: help us so to know You that we may truly love You, and so to love You that we may faithfully serve You, Whose service is perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

**Old Testament Lesson**

Isaiah 9: 1b–4 ... 7

**Psalm**

27: 1 - 10

**Epistle**

1 Corinthians 1: 10 - 18

**GOSPEL**

Matthew 4: 12 – 25

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

*For the sake of clarity and connection, extending the First Reading for a few verses. As the Lectionary requires, it would seem somewhat remote and even slightly weird, but when the wider context is available, I would hope it makes a little more sense to people. The italics make clear what I have added.*

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

You may be a little bemused by Isaiah's reference to those northern tribal areas of Zebulun and Naphtali – but there are a couple of reasons for this. First of all, Israel suffered greatly from being on the 'King's Highway,' one of the great trade routes of the ancient East. Who controlled Israel controlled the trade, and you need no information surely about trade and wars and control and cash!

Added to that was the somewhat general view of outlying areas of the country: even the fishermen disciples of Jesus would have been regarded as hayseeds, back-of-beyonders so to speak. Like rural people in today's world. Out of touch and in the dark and not of concern to the more closely populated areas. Telstra would have had no interest whatever in those parts, do you see!

The delight for the prophet was that even those benighted areas would be fully aware of the light that was to come. God's interest was not limited to big numbers – and nor should His people's interest! So those tribal areas most likely to be involved in military conflict and bloodletting would find themselves as part of the wider and better action. Remember that much of Jesus' ministry was exercised in this and the Galilean regions. *Now do you see why I added the italic section, wondering why the devisers of the Lectionary did not!*

**PSALM**

However could any person or group of people feel at all safe if they lived in Zebulun or Naphtali? How can any person in Myanmar, Iraq or Palestine feel safe? The answer is not all that easy to find, except that those wise old Jews tended to take the long view of life and history, finding a certain amount of comfort or support in the fact that, with JHWH as God, His vindication of the faithful who followed His values would show up who was right and who wrong, in that final analysis. We moderns who tend to expect every solution to be as instant as our coffee need to learn more than a thing or two from those worthy ancients. Instant solutions are *rarely* worth the paper on which they are written. NEVER forget that, please!

**EPISTLE**

Another thing not to forget is this plea of St. Paul for unity amongst the People of God. We who live in a very sad age of increasing division and schism need to take to heart what Paul was on about. There is one Gospel, one Lord, and whilst we may well look at Gospel and Lord through somewhat different eyes, we still should belong together. Failure to do anything like that, bearing each others' hurts and failings, is, in the final analysis, blasphemy if you think it through. And in terms of Paul's final verse in this passage, it gives those outside the Faith another reason to deny and defy it. And we are the cause of that escape valve. Silly us.

## GOSPEL

Now after that intro to the OT Lesson, does not the impact of this passage hit you right between the eyes? Jesus always seemed to head for the outsider, the forgotten ones, the people on the edges. And that is something the Church, in its middle-class comfort zone, needs to take very seriously indeed – and emulate..

The beginning of the Gospel of the Kingdom<sup>3</sup> was going to hayseeds, and the Lord even chose His Twelve from amongst their numbers. Remember how Peter's accent dropped him in it, during Jesus' trials? You are one of that backwoods mob, Peter!

In this Season of Epiphany, here is the ultimate reminder that even the Lord Himself began His ministry on the edges, and that is a very fine place to start. As an old Bishop of mine once said to me, 'Don't you EVER play the numbers game, Ron.' I was apologizing to him for the fact that, in that remote settlement, there would not be a big congregation to welcome him.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

I shall never forget the shock to my system to have been introduced in my College career to a book written in the very early 1900s. I cannot recall the author, but the title hit me: **Missionary Methods, St. Paul's or ours?** The fact that I was reading this book 50 or more years after it was produced was shock enough, and the fact that it had not been heeded was greater shock indeed. Now, half a century after that again, I remain appalled at the capacity of the Church to be so taken up by the colonising mentality. For when I was young, and missionaries from all around the world came to speak at the Church of my youth, there was ever this controlling, patronising presentation of the faith to outsiders who must have been shattered by the Christian Raj mentality. Even the missions were built in a sort of compound, separated from *hoi polloi*<sup>4</sup> protecting the missions and the missionaries. Think that through and see the blasphemy in that!

We Christians – particularly we Western ones – find it almost impossible to separate the Faith from our cultural garbage. The Fall of Singapore made clear to Asian people that Europeans were not invincible, and even if not before, Christians ought to have learnt the lesson, Not even Jesus did His preaching and teaching from any position of untouchable power, but was as vulnerable as the next bloke to life's risks and problems. So we can begin to see, can we not, that Epiphany constitutes a series of challenges that takes us right out of our comfort zones .... If we are going to be true to our Lord.

Those readings today are part of the fascinating challenge. Zebulun and Naphtali. Names and cultures and situations that tend to be quite foreign to us, so the impact of the prophet and even of Jesus Himself, does not touch us, because of our ignorance, and failure even to wonder or care.

One of the great issues that affect towns and parishes and Dioceses in the part of the world where I live comes right down to the issue of distance and remoteness. It is not only Church that suffers but many other institutions and organizations as well. Feel a story coming on.

Many moons ago, I was talking to a young Lutheran couple who had been appointed as teachers to the small school at Oodnadatta. Now for the unwary, Oodna is a very long way from Adelaide, from when this couple had come. There was a mixed bag of kids at that school, some indigenous and some white. None of them terribly fancy. But the response of the couple was devastation. 'What have we done to be appointed to this school? Are we that bad as to receive such a posting?' As one who had, several years before made the move from Sydney to the Outback, I could at least sympathise with their distress. One thing I did ask them to ponder though: "suspect you will find that, before your first term is up, you will see things very differently. In fact I suspect that when the time comes for your transfer, you will fight it tooth and nail!" The derision and even anger with which I was greeted was overwhelming.

Through that first term, when I saw them periodically, their wail was constant. They had tried every means open to them to get shifted back to 'civilisation.' Utterly unsuccessful. And their distress grew until towards the end of that term. Then they found themselves at home, part of the fascinating community of that part of the world, and life took a solid turn for the better.

Three years afterwards, they received notice of their transfer back closer to the city. And they yelled and they screamed their disapproval of the intended move. They loved it there, and they wanted to stay on. *And they had forgotten entirely that conversation we had at the beginning of their time in the town.*

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<sup>3</sup> For the sake of the unwary, always notice that Matthew refers to the Kingdom as of 'heaven,' a polite and important periphrasis for Jewish people who would never (and still don't) refer to the Deity as God, for that is far too familiar. The other evangelists, writing to a wider audience, had no such deferences.

<sup>4</sup> That doesn't mean 'the nobs!' It is Greek for 'the mob' actually. The many to translate correctly

My point in relating the yarn is simply that we seem to be breeding a generation or two who find it ‘impossible’ to live outside of tight, city areas and lights. All mod cons are demanded these days, it seems, and the bush has become almost the distinct preserve of the grey nomads. It is fun for them, it appears, as they travel the country in hordes, taking their city comforts with them. *I had planned something similar, having spent decades in the Outback, but the thought of competing with millions of caravan people has long left me cold. Such a pity as I had hopes of catching up with people I had known.*

I find it rather sad that quite some of the Christian population runs great competitions with each other in the matter of what is euphemistically called ‘church planting’ – noticing that most of it takes place where there is likely to be a large and captive audience. This is so contrary to the spirit of this Lord of ours, who began, and almost entirely carried through His work in what we might call remote areas. It was not because He thought that the hayseeds would run with what He was on about, but rather that He took the view that those in more closely settled areas had rather more chance of finding the faith and the realities because of their greater opportunities. It is also interesting to note that Paul operated somewhat similarly, certainly choosing places of strategic worth because of trade routes and so, but also leaving the little churches he ‘planted’ with the responsibility of growing their own congregations and even traditions suited to their parts of the world. Nor was his strategy without value!

Mind you, as the early Christians realized, it was also important to have close links and ties with other congregations in other areas, although later centuries saw that ‘connection’ become little other than a means of control and power. Another rather blasphemous aberration that has been very hard to alter.

Epiphany. Right here at the beginning of our New Year, and sadly hidden by holidays<sup>5</sup> which means that the emphases tend to get lost. Hopefully, there will be some who will grab the opportunity to come back to roots and reality.

*Happy New Year!*

**And beware ..... Lent is now just a matter of ten days away – Ash Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> February**

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<sup>5</sup> You will realize, of course, that ‘holidays’ came from ‘holy days’ ... and isn’t that something of a joke!