

Sentence

'I will turn your mourning into joy,' says the Lord, 'I will comfort you and give you gladness for sorrow.'
Jeremiah 31:13

Collect

Almighty God, You have filled us with the light of the Word Who became flesh and lived among us: let the light of faith shine in all that we do, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.
Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Jeremiah 31: 7 – 14

Thus says the LORD: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O LORD, your people, the remnant of Israel." See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labour, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock." For the LORD has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden. Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD.

Psalms

147: 12 – 20

Praise the Lord O Jerusalem: sing praises to your God O Zion
For He has strengthened the bars of your gates: and blessed your children within you.
He makes peace within your borders: and satisfies you with the finest of wheat
He sends His command to the earth: and His word runs very swiftly
He gives snow like wool: and scatters the hoar-frost like ashes
He sprinkles His ice like morsels of bread: and waters harden at His frost.
He sends out His word and melts them: He blows with His wind and the waters flow
He made His word known to Jacob: His statutes and judgements to Israel
He has not dealt so with any other nation: nor have they knowledge of His laws. Praise the Lord.

Epistle

Ephesians 1: 3 – 14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us.

With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

(The Word) was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

It is important for any reader of the Old Testament to be aware of the historical situation into which these writings were directed. Not much in the prophetic writings in particular can make a lot of sense until you get something of what the German theologians called *sitz im leben* –situation in life.

Israel was in exile in Babylon from around 597BC for about 70 years, and while most Jews thought that the end of Israel's existence had come, the prophets called for deeper thinking. God had allowed that disaster to happen; and God would bring them back to their own land. Please stop and realize that these prophetic insights were an enormous step forward in Israel's understanding of God, of history and of their lives in particular. What was even more encouraging came about when the return from exile began.¹

So apart from anything else, it is important not to look for 'fulfillments' of prophecy, not least for the reason that this one came true in 525BC. Never look for repeats: look for implications from those old events, and God's hand in them.

Psalm

This Psalm may look and rate for you as one of the more naive psalms, but it does offer an insight into Jewish thought and response to nature. Modern people tend to isolate themselves from nature and even reality: Israel was immersed in it, and so people then, and the Faith they produced, were rather more down to earth. Turn off your electricity for a day or two and get back to basics. One day in the future that process may well be forced on us, and the culture shock will be shattering.

Epistle

One of the sad outcomes of the enormous verbosity of the Apostle Paul is that because of his vast range of words and sentences, the nub of the issue is rather too easily missed. You know as well as I how often some people find ways of producing the most incredible garbage and claim it has Biblical warrant, when the truth is quite otherwise. Poor translations are sometime to blame, but most of the problem lies with people being quite silly, or even downright evil.

Read this passage and you tend to get caught in the runes of words and while you might see Paul being rather terribly holy and religious, he is in fact being quite specific about what he was trying to convey. Perhaps if you could read the Greek NT you might have a better chance. Maybe not.

In the first paragraph, you might be content to follow Paul in what is really quite straight-forward statements, tho' you may miss the implications. In the second paragraph, that word 'mystery' may have you bamboozled. But in Biblical terms, a mystery is something that may once have been hidden from general view has now been revealed and made known. The particular mystery here may still be news to you, only because it has never been pointed out to you. Other parts of Scripture present the same fact in different ways, but the reality still not preached about.

that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth All looks quite simple and uncomplicated, but what Paul is saying is that the 'mystery' is that God has made **Jesus the centre of reality and the reason for existence.** John says the same thing in his prologue to his Gospel, - today's reading for the same reason this Epistle has been chosen -

¹ Isaiah (II) gives a stunning report that Cyrus, whilst mortal threat to Babylon, would become a lesser messiah under God, for it was Cyrus who permitted the return.

and Hebrews says the same thing in different ways. But there it is, and it is staggering in its import. More on this anon.

GOSPEL

And there we have it. *ἡν ἀρχὴ ἡν ὁ λόγος* In the beginning was the Word. Logos, Reason for existence, and no, it is not Number 42.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It is a while ago now, but I recall that a friend of my daughter moved to change her name from whatever it was, to 42! This aged relic was somewhat bemused by such an action, even though my memory recalled the fact that, in the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy (I think it was,) the reason for existence of all in this universe was titled '42!' While that was certainly somewhat of a standing joke, it was also a strange move on anyone's part I would have thought.

Mind you, it has to be said that the search for a reason for existence has been long and laboured, and from most people's point of view, a hopeless one. Why that should be so is an indication of the perceived need on the part of everyman, so to speak. If I know why I am here, then I can respond and react to life in a rather more positive manner. And whilst atheism tends to regard any view other than theirs as superstitious, there seems to be little progress from that apparent darkness.

If this all seems like the meanderings of an old man, may I simply point out the fact, if not already known by Christians, that the Biblical record takes the view that the reason for existence is Jesus. **Yes, that Jesus.** It is not just a presumption that is offered; it is the statement oft repeated in different ways, which is held out there for the consideration of everyone. It is not a dogmatic statement but like the rest of Biblical information, it is held out for readers to consider.

In that Ephesians passage, there is something that tends not to appear in its full bloom until one reads the original text in Greek, the language in which the New Testament was written originally. There, where Paul is translated as saying *'to gather up all things in Him, things in heaven and on earth'* the Greek verb is *ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι* – *anakephalaiousasthai*. Huge word is it not, which when translated properly means 'brings everything to a head,' or more loosely it means that everything has its meaning only in Christ. Now if you feel that I am stringing a long bow, then go back to John, where Jesus is described as *Λόγος*, or Logos with which you will be far more familiar. In echoing the Genesis words opening the first Creation Story, John wrote *ἔν ἀρχῇ ἡν ὁ λόγος* – In the beginning was the Word. Logos was – in John's day and up till now, understood as 'reason for existence, knowledge, word (spoken and tacit)' and all those hugely important meanings. There was no mistaking what John was saying, regardless of the culture or language of the reader of these words. It is remarkably stunning stuff, and not to be put aside lightly.

Nor is one expected to accept the proposition, so to speak, uncritically. In that Gospel, John makes a series of extraordinarily significant statements, and then, through the rest of his book, goes on to provide the evidence for his statements. Not only does he do so, but provides the clear insight into the fact that all this is not just applicable to those of Jewish or Christian persuasion, but indicates quite clearly that the experience of every human person validates what he is saying.

If this sounds all too twee and religious, then please look again. I repeat my now common call that this Faith is far from religious and even further from superstition. Nor is it the narrow thing as often presented. Look closer than that for heaven's sake.

Although it may not be stated as such, much of today's Western philosophy of life has to do with gaining happiness. This is often 'translated' as wealth, and soon after becomes greed. That this is so for many hardly needs any debate to establish; it is a fact of life. Add to that is the rather tragic view held politically that if you disagree with me, then we go to war and the force of arms will establish who is boss.

If you think this is too heavy, then look at the sort of thing expressed in personal relationships. More often than not, the same 'I'm right, you are wrong' is that which bifurcates people from each other at all manner of levels. In fact just this morning, at Westfields Marion, a young man had just discarded his trolley

at the head of an escalator and dived on to the line of steps absolutely ignoring a young mum with baby and pram and knocked her right out of the way. She looked at me with eyebrows raised, and my admiration was with her for **not** reacting against that rude young man. ‘I am boss; get out of my way.’” And you could provide multiple other illustrations.

In human terms today I guess that would be called ‘normal’ or ‘natural.’ In Biblical terms those sorts of actions would be called ‘like Adam, adamic’ – or more precisely, satanic. Not satanic in the airy-fairy sense, but as Genesis 3 portrays life, this is the path of unredeemed humanity (and all too often the path of some of those who would consider themselves redeemed.) Almost the entire Scriptures are full of the contrast between those of Adam and those of Christ. So that what has been labelled ‘religion’ for all these centuries is, in fact, and way to operate as human beings and to reduce the stress and strain of the internecine warfare that has been raging as long as humans have been on this planet. Reconciliation and restoration is on offer, with the rather more basic requirements of justice and truth and integrity. And for anyone deciding that this is all too *novel* to be considered, then –after reference to William Wilberforce in previous notes, kindly recall that that sage gentleman who was fired with the evangelical revival held to this same necessity 200 years ago, seeing it as quintessentially Gospel.

Notice that nothing, at this stage, has been about life after this. That is not to deny that promise, but to recall that Hebrew ‘religion’ has been – from its genesis – focussing on the rather more immediate issue of ‘what does it mean to be human and alive on planet earth?’

Wednesday 6th January, 2001

**THE EPIPHANY or the Manifestation of
Christ to the Gentiles**

Sentence

Arise, shine, for your light has come; and the glory of the Lord has risen upon us. *Isaiah 60:1*

Collect

Eternal God, Who by a star led the Magi to the worship of Your Son; guide the nations of the earth by Your light, that the whole world may see Your glory, through Jesus Christ Your Son, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever **Amen**

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 60: 1 – 6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Psalm

72: 1 – 7 & 10 – 14

Give the king Your judgement, O God: and Your righteousness to the son of a king
That he may judge Your people rightly: and the poor of the land with equity:
Let the mountains be laden with peace because of his righteousness: and the hills also with prosperity for his people
May he give justice to the poor among the people: and rescue the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor
May he live while the sun endures: and while the moon gives light, throughout all generations
May he come down like rain upon the new-mown fields: and as showers that water the earth
In his time shall righteousness flourish: and abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more

The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts.

All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him.

For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help.

He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death.

He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight.

Epistle

Ephesians 3: 1 – 12

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles-- for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ.

In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

GOSPEL

Matthew 2: 1 – 12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

I find it remarkably sad that the prophets of the Old Testament suffered from being ignored or misunderstood, and what is worse that same response tends to occur to this day. Maybe it is wisdom of hindsight, but Isaiah seems to convey rather more (or different) to me that he does to a great Jewish friend of mine. Ask me not why – for I do not know yet.

From where I sit, Isaiah was delighting in the fact that he had such a remarkable grasp of the role and reason for Israel's existence, and of its clear value to the peoples and communities around them. So great is that vision, that Isaiah could not imagine those other cultures doing other than turning to Israel to be advised of its view of life. Sadly not only did fail to catch sight of its own wonders, but that meant no one else managed to see what the fuss was all about. Talk about a lead balloon!!! *Does this ring any bells?*

Psalm

If the above seems to be stretching a long bow, then grab this psalm. It must have predated Isaiah by a considerable space of time, but the old psalmist knew what 'the fuss was all about.' Hebrew faith, law and custom, in the broad sense at least, were light years ahead of cultures round about them. Those other groups may have had laws, but they would have been control methods. Hebrews were about justice, and that is another ball game, is it not. And as I often ask people to see, there can never be any peace unless first there is **justice**. And when you have that, you are heading for terrestrial paradise.

Epistle

I am rude enough to express the view that Paul seems, like other Jews perhaps, to miss some of the point of the Old Testament development about Gentiles. Mind you, old biases die hard, but It took me a number of decades to realize that Luke was quite forceful in his writings to indicate very clearly indeed that Jesus had dealt with another of those prior biases: Luke illustrated again and again that Jesus did not share the then current view of women, and nor did God. The OT makes that quite clear. And the OT points quite clearly to the inclusion of Gentiles, in fact of all human beings, in that Old Testament faith once delivered.

Anyhow the point of Paul's comment underlines the experience of the Infant Church, that God did not draw the same lines between Jew and Gentile that Jews managed to do. No mystery really, for the promise to Abraham was that he was to be a blessing to all nations. It goes back that far.

Still, I guess it takes all of us quite some time – and heart ache sometimes – to move past defensive positions, and fortunately we have a God Who is patient with us.

GOSPEL

Another point of growth – for me! – is illustrated by this cameo from Matthew. It was silly of me for, from childhood, I assumed that this story of the Magi was just some sort of decoration to the Christmas story. Like the shepherds, and even Herod. In fact whilst we called them the Wise Men, there seemed no

reason to explore, but Magi! *Magi! Occultists!!!!*

Then the penny dropped. Whether this story is historically real or not, its inclusion was to prove a point, and Matthew, evangelists to the Hebrews, was just the one to make it clear that the Christ event is for all humans, even eastern 'sages,' and those occultists beyond the pale so to speak. It must have been shocking for the early Jewish readers, for it seemed, in fact **was** to them the denial of centuries of their best kept tradition. And traditions are far harder to shift than facts.

The real issue, of course, is that even Gentiles are included in the gracious actions of God towards the world – an issue that many Jews may still regard as impossible. But this cameo is the pointing towards that remarkable inclusion, and the broadening of the Hebrew Faith to become a world faith. The implications are enormous, at least for the non-Jewish part of the population, and engendered all sorts of changes in perceiving the nature of God. The Season of Epiphany, sadly hidden somewhat by the holiday period in the southern hemisphere, underlines the widening vision.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

If ever there was a clear and present clarification that the Hebrew-Christian Faith(s) were always evolving faiths, then the Christ event and that represented by the Epiphany are the *causes celebre!* In fact, so clear are those factors to Christians that I guess it is not surprising that Judaism still finds it too hard to cope with. Change never comes easily religion, which tends to be rather conservative.

As mentioned above, I recall as a young adult being mortified when we started translating 'wise men' as magi, with the realization that 'magi' actually points to 'magicians' and even 'occultists.' How could anything so pagan be associated with something as significant as the Incarnation? But there it is, and in the Bible to boot. So one **has** to face it, and see where it all leads. *It was helpful to have to enter into something of that struggle that the Infant Church themselves had with Gentiles.*

So then one starts to look back, and when it breaks in on one that the Genesis Creation Sagas are not there just for Jews but that this is a world-embracing view, then blinkers begin to come off. When one sees that the call to Abraham includes the matter of being a blessing to all nations, then it finally hits home that, from the beginning, the **Biblical Faith was always intended to be a world-wide offer**, and not just there for a select few.

One of my great moments of change occurred when I was first appointed to an outback parish in the early '60s. Having grown up in a somewhat defensive mode – as a Christian – the emphasis tended to be that the choice one made to be Christian or not was very much a private and personal decision. In fact much of the Church of those days operated at that level. Perhaps because the faith was seen as internal, that was as far as we all looked, but when it came to me being priest in a remarkably down-to-earth (and delightfully honest) situation, it really was required of me to do something of a radical rethink. As I moved from a behind-the-defences situation, it struck me that this Christian Faith **either** was designed for all humans of all periods of times and cultures and for even, **or** it did not fit or serve anyone. This may sound like an odd position for anyone to be in, but there it was. And the learning curve was steep, for it meant that I had to offer a Faith that (a) made sense to the hearers, (b) stood up to any examination or test, and (c) had constructive alternatives to offer to the world of people among whom I moved. *I must say that part of my problem then was being able to justify what sometimes looked like disloyalty to the faith I seemed to be leaving behind.*

Now it is precisely this sort of transition that, from where I have long sat, the Season of Epiphany (the **reason for** Epiphany!) takes us. It certainly does mean leaving behind some factors that may have been very comfortable, but invalid. It may mean stretching some friendships as people misunderstand where and why you are pointing into unfamiliar directions. Imagine how you would have felt had you been centre-stage in several of those stunning encounters in the Acts of the Apostles.

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. You may be unaware that such a person as that Ethiopian would have been severely *persona non grata* in polite Jewish society. Being black - at that stage – would have been barrier enough, and non-Jewish the final straw. Then add to his status as castrated and you have the final and total anathema. Mind you, the mere fact that this man had come from Jerusalem, and was searching for reality was remarkable enough. But still it is small wonder that Philip was a little bemused to be called to minister to this bloke who was goyim and untouchable. And Philip, in spite of being Greek himself, would

have been rather much aware of the bigotry that created the great divide.

And then there was Peter and the Roman Centurion. That soldier put Peter on the horns of a huge dilemma, for not only was that man Gentile, he was enemy, he was alien, he was outside of grace. And how does a Peter explain to the rest of the crew that he operated outside of the guidelines in ministering to the man. How did he explain to himself and to his Lord if he did **not**.

The whole business of who could be part of the Infant Church and who could not brought about the Jerusalem Conference recorded in Acts 15, because the whole issue was so controversial. And the debate raged from one angle to another, with Scripture, tradition and precedent all quoted with great heat and clarity. And you may be blissfully unaware of the fact that had the decision that day gone in the opposite direction, **you would never have heard of Jesus and the Church would have died out within less than a generation. I kid you not!**

So the matter was deadly serious, and remains so.

Sunday 10th January, 2010

**First Sunday after the Epiphany
The Baptism of our Lord**

Sentence

A voice came from heaven saying "This is My Son, My beloved, with Whom I am well pleased."

Matthew 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 justice on the earth, through Jesus Christ our Lord.,

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 43: 1 – 7

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth-- everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Psalm

29

Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendour of his holiness.

The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD thunders over the mighty waters.

The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is majestic.

The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.

He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion like a young wild ox.

The voice of the LORD strikes with flashes of lightning.

The voice of the LORD shakes the desert; the LORD shakes the Desert of Kadesh.

The voice of the LORD twists the oaks and strips the forests bare. And in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD is enthroned as King forever.

The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace.

For the Epistle

Acts 8: 14 – 17

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

GOSPEL

Luke 3: 15 – 22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and

because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison. Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

In this early Servant Song, there is the promise of God Who works for His people to rescue them from whatever it was that was holding them back. It is interesting to note that here is no interventionist God But One Who works through the events of history. The real point is that here is the God Who rescues, and often when His people have reached the end of their tether.

Psalm

In the light of the First Lesson, this psalm looks remarkably out of step, does it not? Here is all the imagery of power and control, and it really does look, on the surface, ever so slightly ridiculous. But look closer.

In the Eucharist, Sunday by Sunday, we use similar sorts of powerful and glorious words. But there and here they need something in the way of translation. For wealth, in the Eucharist, read true value; for power read 'the rather more creative way to go.' There is **no** contradiction here, for we rejoice on a compassionate God, thankful that He is no punitive, capricious Divinity. Love is what conquers all, even though love may take one hell of a lot longer to reach the goal. And the goal, when reached, will be far more substantial and lasting than if it were reached after warfare. How often do we need to repeat that war resolves nothing? It only offers a greater evil – as Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq (I and II) illustrate to the nth degree.

For the Epistle

Perhaps it would help, if you are not familiar with this part of Scripture, to read the entire Chapter 8 of the Acts. It is not an entirely pretty story, along most of human stories, but the outcome is the real delight. Samaritans were the lowest of the low as far as most of Israel was concerned, having been bastardized through invasion in the 8th century BC. Whilst Jesus had no problems accepting such folk, it was far more difficult for most Jews. (The incident of Simon, something of a rascal, does not do a lot for the tale, but then there are often miscreants getting in the road of real spiritual progress, However, in spite of considerable pressure not to go ahead, the apostles prayed for them and baptised the believers. And even Simon got in the act – so how about that!

Gospel

Whilst there tends to remain a plethora of debate about this whole business of baptism, it has to be said that much of the discussion stems from misunderstanding of the situation. In a way the Baptist was quite right when he demurred from baptizing Jesus, and the real point to notice (in line with that passionate OT reading) is the quiet determination of Jesus to ensure that, in all He did, He cared about its impact on others. That strikes me as being the real issue. 'Fulfilling all righteousness' is a rather Jewish way of expressing 'ticking all the boxes' so that no one was put off.

Baptism, at that stage in Jewish history, was actually the sacrament used when a 'God-fearer' made a move towards becoming Jewish. The word simply means 'washing' and whilst debate has raged about the means and method, the real issue is and always was symbolic. In Christian terms, it is a sacrament offered whereby one is aligning oneself with Christ and His Church. It is not 'I have accepted Christ' as 'Christ has accepted me!'

All the imagery of Divine approval of Jesus are there in this cameo; heavens opened, dove appearing and the voice from above. The quotation from the Psalms is very well-known. So Jesus identified Himself with all of humanity, which was ever the mark of His life and ministry.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

One of the strange things that emerge in today's world, if I may dare make an observation, is the extent to which people can and do manage to distort facts to an enormous extent. Recent decades have

illustrated this in relation to the Christian Faith, with so many odd and even dangerous distortions emerging, in particular, from the Deep South of the US of A. Small wonder then, that people who are not of the Islamic Faith have little to go on in determining what is real Islam and what is distortion. This is in no way a reflection either on that Faith or its adherents. It does, however, make the reality unclear. And the capacity of people to distort the religious realities, are not limited to adherents of whatever Faith. However, as we see above, there really is nothing new under the sun!!!!

What I find more disturbing these days is the extent to which the Internet is used to peddle all manner of idiotic and even evil material, so the total issue is one of determining what is truth and what is falsehood, which way is up and which is down. And it is not made easy.

As one deals with human relationships, and the obvious and felt need for finding ways of being better equipped to relate and respond, here is a direction to head that will make any attempt at reconciliation to much more possible. Mind you, it also needs to be said that here lies a difficult path to follow because it requires great compassion and greater patience.

And what a compassionate picture one gets of the Almighty in this Servant Song of Isaiah. From what I understand, Isaiah was in exile in Babylon with his country people, and while there in the searing experience, expected the final *denouement* which would see the end of Israel and people. However, aware of the fact that his nation had always understood itself to be called by God for a particular mission, the prophet found it hard to imagine such a pointless end to it all. *What is God doing in this hideous experience?*

The series of Servant Songs provides the answer to which the prophet moved. It was not for disaster and death: it had to be for something rather more creative. As he pondered, as he looked back over Israel's history, warts and all, he came to the conclusion that God was **still WITH** and not against His people, and would continue to work through those vicissitudes of history to bring about His aim.

It is a remarkably encouraging picture that Isaiah paints, and one that has remained embedded in the mind both of Israel, and of the Church. There is 'a future and a hope' but there is also enormous responsibility and challenge. The People of God began existence as a handful, or even one – Abraham. But that person to become a tribe to become 'more than the sands of the seashore' were always designed to be **a blessing to all nations on earth**. They were there to offer something that the rest of the world needed, even if sometimes (often?) it did not want. The removal of what we moderns call 'the human dilemma.'

Two things come to mind in all this: the first is – as I mention above – that strange attitude to the Scriptures that evade the real issues and attempt to turn the faith into some sort of kingdom-building exercise.² Exercise of power stands right outside the Biblical guidelines, seems to me. And whenever clergy of any denomination or none impose their own will and narrow view on others, the result is distortion of Gospel.

The second thing that exasperates me, as evidenced recently in Letters to the Editor of the local paper, is the tirade from atheists who carry on remorselessly about 'superstition' and such and themselves take not the slightest notice of the genesis or direction of this Faith. My attitude to superstition is somewhat identical to that atheistic view, and I discover that the goals of the Faith and me are likewise similar. It is in the very unresponsive tirade that I find the greatest difficulty. If I am yelling at someone, then I have no time to listen, and that is an attitude unchristlike for them or for me.

I have often mentioned my experiences as Prison Chaplain in this State, and if there is one thing that both riles prisoners and provokes sometimes violent reactions, it is the refusal of those in authority even to begin to listen to what bothers them. Having spent a lot of time trying to be intermediary, I have to say that it has been very rare indeed to encounter a situation where the complaints were unreasonable. Prisoners are often very aware of what is fair and what is not. And that includes being painfully aware of the arrogance of refusal, mostly without reason offered, of the simplest request.

And then the Corrective Service Departments continue to bewail the ineffectiveness of the prison system. When will we ever learn?

² Human kingdoms, you understand!

Sunday 17th January, 2010

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Sentence

Jesus revealed His glory and His disciples believed in Him

John 2: 11

Collect

Bountiful God, Whose Son revealed His glory at Cana of Galilee, help us to believe and obey so that, as our Saviour promised, we may be filled with the wine of new life, and show forth His joy and love, Who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. **Amen**

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 62: 1 – 5

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall you marry the One Who rebuilds³ you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

Psalm

36:5-10

Your unfailing goodness, O Lord, is in the heavens: and Your faithfulness reaches to the clouds
Your righteousness is like the strong mountains: and Your justice as the great deep; You O Lord, save both man and beast
How precious, O God, is Your enduring kindness: the children of Adam shall take refuge under the shadow of Your wings
They shall be satisfied with the good things of Your house: and You will give them drink from the river of Your delights
For with You is the well of life: and in Your light shall we see light.
O continue Your merciful kindness toward those who know You: and Your righteous dealing to those who are true of heart.

Epistle

1 Corinthians 12: 1 – 11

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

GOSPEL

John 2: 1- 11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to

³ This is more a REB translation, to make the sense more clear.

him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now."

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

Perhaps it is necessary to mention that one needs to read the Scriptures imaginatively and not in some wooden way. Here is poetry that needs to be read as poetry and very vivid stuff at that. One must note, also, that this was written and said in Babylon, when Israel was in exile and feeling quite helpless and hopeless. With little or no chance of escape, these words may well have fallen on deaf or certainly unbelieving ears. That time of history was not all that unlike the present when many people fear for the future of both Church and Faith. Like Isaiah we are called back to that vision of the Father that removes all sense of hopelessness, and offers the unspeakable possibility that His weakened People may well once again become the vanguard of hope for the world. The image of marriage here is that solid one of profound commitment and delight: it is far from what seems to be becoming an image of strain and discontent.

Psalm

Now stop and realize that this old psalm may well have been written long before the Exile – in fact up to 400 years before, when life would have been rather more astringent than in later centuries. Still the ancient author takes great delight in God, Who – contrary to all of the gods of those around Israel – had far more significant issues in mind for His people than the self-serving demands of those lesser gods. Notice the emphasis on kindness, justice and light. No then-local religion had any such thing of the sort to offer.

Epistle

If ever one looks like getting carried away with short-sighted views or experiences of the Spirit, then one needs to read the several chapters surrounding this passage in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Here is balance, unlikely to be offered by some 'pastors and teachers.' And one needs to see that this Spirit is and has always been available to all humans, even though they are often unaware of that fact.

Pagans tended to be led astray, for they assumed that other people had something they had not. It is not unlike the present when I find it appalling how easily some people are led up all manner of 'gum trees' because they assume that others are wiser than themselves.

Please notice a couple of important issues: the gifts of the Spirit are for the common good, **not** the aggrandizement of someone who assumes they have gifts unavailable to you. And second, notice that gifts are **gifts**, not the natural talents of a person.

GOSPEL

I am often surprised at the failure of people to enter in properly to the information offered in the Gospels. See the word 'miracle' and the point of the tale tends so easily to be lost. Other biases tend to emerge as well, including those who feel certain that Jesus never had anything to do with wine. However, οἶνος - oinos is most certainly alcoholic and always was.

So Jesus was invited to a wedding and feast so it is quite obvious He was no party-pooper. He was welcome, and also enjoyed the celebration. In fact, He was so involved that He made sure people had enough good stuff to drink.

But it is not the miracle but that to which the sign⁴ points that is the issue. It is not what Jesus could do, but to what He was directing people's attention. And the real issue in this cameo is the vast difference between conventional Judaism as it was then practised and experienced, and the rather more effervescent and

⁴ It has been mentioned before often, that John never used the word 'miracle' in his Gospel: he used the word σημειον – sign, something that points away to a significant issue outside of it.

lively Faith He came to bring. There are the elements not only of ‘better wine,’ but also of more vast quantity, overflowing in fact, and far more than was necessary.

That little interlude with Mary also has point and purpose: Mary knew in her heart where Jesus was heading, so she pushed for His action in the matter. Our Lord, on the other hand, seemed more concerned to take more time, looking for people to catch sight themselves of the import and direction of His teaching.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It is important to remember that this is the Season of the Epiphany and the emphasis is on reaching out to the Gentiles, or in our case, to those who are not yet aware of the Faith and its hope and joy. And whilst present-day disciples are well aware of the fact that dourness and dullness and negativity are not factors at all in the Faith, it remains true that this is the perception of most of today’s people, in our culture at least. Today’s readings, it seems to me, are provided as the antidote reminder that this is the case.

If there is a recurring theme in these passages, that theme has to be one of joy and delight!!! Please read those passages again and catch sight. I remember, many years ago, a visiting preacher holding forth on that ‘first of the signs’ in John’s Gospel, and drawing everyone’s attention to the fact that **800 gallons of rather tasty wine** would provide for some really sore heads the next day. It is an enormous amount of plonk, is it not? Mind you, that would take more than a lifetime for me to finish, but it does somewhat make nonsense of so many complainants against the booze. It was overwhelming in its generosity and provided a huge fillip to the party that day. And when it is seen as a pointer to what Jesus was offering Israel (and the world,) the very idea of a constrained and constraining religion was not – and is not! – apposite to the sign.

And yet we manage to turn the Faith into some sort of drag and bore and misery! So where have we gone so terribly wrong?

Part of the reason is somewhat historical; part of it seems to stem from a strange capacity of Christians to follow a popular pattern and demand conformity, with both pattern and conformity altering – depending on the time in history. Some of the reason for that strange action is to ensure ‘orthodoxy’ but often really means ‘control.’ Sadly, that whole process runs so contrary to the entire Biblical Faith which has come to us over an enormous period of time, with just-as-enormous moves and developments and evolutions. (Yes, and I use that word advisedly.)

This whole issue is likely to raise vast debate if anyone takes notice. Whilst there is a danger if protective barricades are taken down, there is greater danger if they are not. I wonder if an illustration might help.

In the dear old *Ecclesia Anglicana* (Anglican Church if that phrase is a mystery!) the attempt was made in the 17th Century to enforce ‘An Act of Uniformity’ for precisely the reasons outlined above. However, it took not much time at all to show up the fact that such a process is not viable. However, the Book of Common Prayer (1662) was set as the only standard of Anglican worship, and it persisted unaltered until the 1920s. It is a matter of some interest that all of the recent revisions have not really changed the pattern of worship, but have responded to the changes of word usage and translation.

Out of that has stemmed quite some resistance in many quarters to the perception that Anglican worship is dull, repetitive and boring. (One has to say that, in the hands of some clergy, that perception is reality.) However I would like to make a serious comment and contribution to the debate on this subject.

Many years ago, as a theological student, I was fortunate to be a catechist⁵ to an elderly priest⁶ who may have suffered some disadvantages through age and illness, but who took me by the hand, so to speak, and offered all manner of experience in leading worship and pastoral ministry. My most memorable experience with Rollo came after one Sunday morning service. In the vestry afterwards, he threw his prayer book down on the desk there, his finger pointing to one of the prayers in that service. ‘Ron,’ he boomed out, ‘I have been saying this service for 45 years, and look what I have just discovered!’ He pointed out ‘the dew of Thy blessing’ – and went on to underline what this revelation meant to him. That was in 1959. I, who had been worrying at the prospect of using the BCP for the next 45 years began to realise that the Prayer Book

⁵ Sydney Diocese-ese for trainee, I guess

⁶ Well, Rev’d Rollo Hobden was my age (75) then

was no chain of iron but rather a tremendous source of thought and prayer, of discovery and searching. Ever since I have encouraged people to follow their thoughts as the service proceeds, keenly aware of the fact that when they are ready to return, their familiarity with the service will enable them to 'click in' within moments. 'Use the words as windows!' I will reiterate; for worship is not designed to be repetitive and dull, but exciting and explorative, feeding people to move forward in their pilgrimage, and **grow**.

A sad example of the opposite is exposed by the tale of an older man, who turned charismatic in his mid years, who complained that it was not until he was in his mid-thirties, after years in an Anglican parish, that he first heard the Gospel. I found his story amazing, for the very formularies of the Church are designed precisely to provide food for the worshipper even when the preacher or preachers are totally inadequate. The Gospel is there, in Mattins and Evensong, in Eucharist and even Burial Office. And that is also true of almost all denominations.

Mind you, the Gospel is rather more than just helping the individual soul in its path to heaven. The reality of the Gospel is far more immediate and challenging: it has to do with living the Kingdom here and now. As a direct opposite to the story above, it was only last Sunday in Church (29.11.09) that we heard from a now retired priest who felt the need of direction and goal in life, and who sought his answers in his local parish Church. Attending the Sunday Eucharist that then-illiterate man was fed, not so much by the words of the Eucharist, as by the manual acts of the Eucharist itself. The breaking of the bread was the point at which powerful light dawned on that man, delighting him into a life of discipleship that still, 50 years later, shone through as he preached to us.

And that is what the turning of water into wine is all about. It is not miracle, proving anything. It is pointer, looking for an imaginative response to the sign. Spelt out in straightforward language, it was Jesus offering to tired, tasteless Judaism of the time, a step up to joyous, overflowing worship and response to life and to each other. Water is necessary, wine has rather more vigour, does it not?

And that is what Church, and worship, and the Faith is designed to provide. If you have not found it so, please keep looking – *and please do realize that most of the hard questions that people ask about faith and God do have answers!* **So keep looking, and asking, and exploring.**

This is what Epiphany is all about, is it not?

Sentence

'The Spirit of the Lord God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives.'

Luke 4:18

Collect

Life-giving God, Who sent Your Son Jesus to proclaim Your kingdom and to teach with authority; anoint us by Your Spirit that we too may bring good news to the poor, bind up the broken-hearted, and proclaim liberty to the captive; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Nehemiah 8: 1 – 3, 5-6 & 8 – 10

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Psalm

19

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament declares His handiwork
One day tells it to another: and night to night communicates knowledge
There is no speech or language: nor are their voices heard
Yet their sound has gone out through all the world: and their words to the ends of the earth
There He has pitched a tent for the sun: which comes out as a bridegroom from his chamber, and rejoices as a strong man to run his course
Its rising is at one end of the heavens, and its circuit to their farthest bound: and nothing is hid from its heat
The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul: the command of the Lord is true, and makes wise the simple
The precepts of the LORD are right, and rejoice the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, and gives light to the eyes
The fear of the LORD is clean, and endures forever: the judgements of the Lord are unchanging and righteous every one.
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold: sweeter also than honey, than the honey that drips from the honeycomb
Moreover, by them is your servant taught: and in keeping them there is great reward.
Who can know their own unwitting sins?: O cleanse me from my secret faults.
Keep your servant also from presumptuous sins: lest they get the mastery over me: so I shall be clean and innocent of great offence.
May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight: O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer.

Epistle

1 Corinthians 12: 12 – 31

Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks,

slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be?

As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

GOSPEL

Luke 4: 14 – 21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*"

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

I wonder how long it is since you read from either Ezra or Nehemiah in the Old Testament. It might well repay a visit, to get matters into focus. Some of Israel had returned from Exile in Babylon, and while attempting the enormous task of rebuilding, had the extra difficulty of great resistance from Sanballat among others who were not Hebrew and had been in possession of the land for the previous 70 years or so. In spite of the huge difficulties, Ezra and Nehemiah had encouraged people to rebuild, and in the process, asked people to look back to their origins, laws and faith.

It was a fascinating business, especially as the people realized the great value of their faith, tradition and history. (We really only understand who we are when we realized from whence we have come.) And it is often only through rather great tribulation that the ancient verities and values are treasured once again. This is not because of their great age, but because of the recognition of their constant value, regardless of circumstance.

Psalm

It has taken me quite a large part of my lifetime to learn the value of the old Biblical verities. Mind you, this psalm has always resonated from the time of my youth, but I could not then see that anything 'law' could be exciting! But this is what the people on their return from exile realized, as did this psalmist who would have been writing long before either the Northern or Southern kingdoms of Israel lost their existence.

As this ancient worthy saw and understood, not only does the world surrounding every one speak with eloquence to whoever will listen, so too does the ancient Hebrew view of things. Certainly there are many issues and areas in which we have passed the ancients by, and that is not to be surprised at in a religion

(faith, better) that was designed and did evolve as people's understanding of their surroundings grow and develop. **It is much of the genius of the Hebrew revelation that the old ones searched through their real experience of the real work to gain their insights.** Here was no wandering off into some other-worldly scene to understand things.

So from these two significant sources came the remarkable Jewish Faith on which foundation the New Testament is based. Never forget that.

Epistle

Another stunning factor of Paul's contribution to understanding oneself and one's world is this analogy of the Apostle on the body. Who knows quite where Paul began the source of this parallel, but it is revealing both of his theology and Gospel. It is somewhat simple on some ways, and yet remarkably powerful in others. 'No person is an island' is a study that our local priest initiated only a couple of weeks or so ago. One of the things that tends to escape modern humanity (or perhaps they try to escape it!) is the great need for community. I need you even to begin to understand who I am, and without you I am nothing. On top of that, Paul was aware of the enormous differences between all of us, not only of culture, and colour and even religion. But we are one body, and all attempts to operate otherwise become little else than very destructive elements.

GOSPEL

I may have reported earlier my great surprise in looking at the Servant Songs of Isaiah with Jewish mates, to discover that they see no connection between the Servant Songs and either Israel nor Jesus.

While the latter connection is not a surprise, the former is. Who else was Isaiah pondering about than the divine call to Israel, nation and People of God. In a way, mind you, that *disconnection* may well provide an answer as to the apparent utter rigidity that seems to be expressed in the political *mores* between Israel and Palestine. That (to me) complete failure to live up to its professed faith is as bemusing to me as the similar failure with Islam and its adherents. Or maybe I have misunderstood both religions. (Mind you, Christian history does not bear close examination in terms of failure to live up to theology either. It is clearly a case of people in glass houses and yet it is an issue that screams for resolution.)

In this as in previous quotes from Isaiah, there is that very passionate, caring and self-disregarding atmosphere in the Servant Songs, where the Servant of the Lord is called very much to be the agent of reconciliation. And so was Israel, *and so is the Church. And that means you.* And make no mistake: there is very likely to be the same or similar antagonism ranged against anyone who tries to offer peace instead of a sword. They crucify people who try and do that, don't they!

NOTES FOR A SERMON

If there is anything that used to amaze me constantly, in my study of Scripture and the Gospels in particular, it was the observation of that peculiar way in which the people of Jesus' day would find extraordinarily stupid ways of avoiding the 'bleeding obvious.' It rates no mention in today's Gospel, but the response of the congregation that morning in the Capernaum synagogue was to 'wonder at what He was saying and then do their damndest to reject the very thing they knew to be truth and real. How could people be so bloody-minded and contrary? In that cultural situation it was accepted generally that you would reject someone whose background or family was unknown to you, but be open to anyone whose provenance was known. **Here they did an about face!**

How can one possibly have any sensible dealings with such intransigence? And the answer is ever so slightly twofold. Something that had not occurred to me in my original observation of such events is that the person or people who obfuscate in such a way **are actually showing themselves up as they really are.** *In Biblical terms they are judging themselves as 'unreliable witnesses and purveyors of untruth.* Little can be done with such folk until they move away from their folly. The other thing is that not much else can be done but observe and withdraw any reliance on such a person or people.

On the other hand, such events in Scripture or elsewhere are very reliable illustrations of human perfidy. Whilst rarely will people move in such a way on their own, when there is the support of a crowd of people, they are immovable. And it is as well to react to such a situation with eyes wide open. Jesus

certainly know how to cope with such a situation, and the only reason for His patience with such clods was to hope that, in some finer moment, they may well think through their utterly untenable position and move away from it. (There lies, of course, the reason Jesus rejected that twelve legions of angels at His trial and execution. TO have belted the living daylights out of the totally dishonest sods would have been to remove from them any slight opportunity to repent, change direction and loyalty, and become rather more honest respondents to truth.

And there lies one of the most marvellous aspects of Jesus' ministry and Gospel. Here again is the 'bruised reed not being broken, and the smouldering wick not being quenched.' Whilst I can say with considerable honesty that in the earlier years of my ministry whilst I would take no nonsense, I would also be very patient and indicate why. In latter years, I have not been so relaxed about human stupidity. But Jesus never wavered, and thank God, the Father remains constant in His nature towards us humans, and for that I will remain eternally grateful.

So there is no room for surprise when we find similar waywardness with people today. The leopard rarely changes his spots, and that remains true whether we are talking about the high and powerful ones of this world or lesser lights and luminaries. I am amazed constantly at the capacity of politicians in particular to talk spin, garbage and baloney⁷ and expect *hoi polloi*⁸ to swallow the lies. Sadly said *hoi polloi* seem to have very short memories, which may explain why any sort of progress tends to be limited remarkably.

SO apart from anything else, one needs to be reminded that this Faith and Gospel we have, far from being divorced from reality or 'off with the fairies' is remarkably down to earth, immediately relevant, and is totally distant from superstition. In fact it is very destructive to that latter.

⁷ I am trying, valiantly to be reasonably polite

⁸ And that means 'the many' – not the elite if you know your Greek

Sunday 31st January, 2010

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Sentence

Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully even as I have been fully known.

1 Corinthians 13:14

Collect

Righteous God, You confound the world's wisdom by giving Your blessing to the lowly and pure in heart; give us such a hunger and thirst for justice, and perseverance in striving for peace, that in all we do, the world may see the promise of Your kingdom which has been revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Jeremiah 1: 4 – 10

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

Psalm

71: 1 – 6

To You, Lord, have I come for shelter: let me never be put to shame
In Your righteousness, rescue and deliver me: incline Your ear to me and save me
Be for me a rock of refuge, a fortress to defend me: for You are my high rock, and my stronghold
Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked: from the grasp of the pitiless and unjust
For You, Lord, are my hope: You are my confidence O God, from my youth upward
On You have I leaned since my birth: You are He that brought me out of my mother's womb, and my praise is of You continually.

Epistle

1 Corinthians 13: 1 – 13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

GOSPEL

Luke 4: 21 – 30

Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And

He said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian. "

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

Pardon me for 'cooking my cabbages twice,' but I do get agitated when atheists in particular complain about Christians being superstitious. Please read again that opening passage in Jeremiah's large tome, where (like Isaiah also) he reported the experience of his call to be prophet. Here is no weird, wonderful or even otherworldly rantings, but the rather solid resistance to being involved in what looked like a rather significant role. It was no fun being a prophet, and even at that stage, Jerry was aware of that.

In spite of some people's perception that the role of the prophet was to star-gaze into some distant future, the real role of this remarkable group of people was to tell people 'like it was.' In one way it was preaching; in another it was the challenge to be true to the calling or true to God if you would. And the young man was painfully aware of the fact that there are not many people wanting to know the truth, which was is up. It was a risky business being a prophet.

And look at that final coda: "***See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.***" One cannot make omelette without breaking eggs, and – as Jesus knew – getting people to move ahead is a bit like pushing wind uphill. However, thank God for the prophets those days and these!

Psalm

There are those who seem to feel that the Psalmists were something of self-protective wimps, but in the light of what we have seen of the prophets, please look closer. Jeremiah was painfully aware, as was Moses if it comes to that, that being leader is not the most comfortable position in the world. Being prophetic leader is far harder still. And in his own day and age, the psalmist would have been operating at a not dissimilar position to prophet. And that meant running against the tide.

It is a lonely business being leader, and one would find that self-questioning would result from constant contrary pressure from people. 'Am I being silly?' would be a constant query. But the Psalmist here is recognizing that the antidote to depression is to look again at God, at the timeless verities of life, and be reassured that there is but one track to follow.

How often have you questioned yourself?

Epistle

This must have been one of the most well-known passages of Scripture but sadly it has become less than a memory for most. Paul's panegyric on love is a remarkable statement, poetic and thrilling, as well as redemptive. These days 'love' tends to have more to do with nerve-endings, leaving people wondering if they are not chasing some will-o'-the-wisp. That is because they think love is **getting**, when rather it is **giving**. *And that is not the spirit of today's age. Small wonder relationships are so tenuous.*

Perhaps this is the place to mention, if you have not heard it before, that in Greek of the NT variety, there were three words that translate love. Eros, Philadelphia and Agape. Ερος, φιλαδελφια, αγαπε – for the purists. Eros is 'I love you because of what you do for me.' Philadelphia (literally 'brotherly love) is I love you because of who you are. And Agape is 'I love you in spite of who you are if it comes to that.' Agape is the Divine Love, and it is agape that is referred to here. The challenge is for the People of God to reflect the Divine Love, and that is no easy feat.

Gospel

Never *never* assume that Jesus was lovey-dovey all the time, without blot on escutcheon. Here is a rather pointed and powerful Jesus making a very strong point indeed, for those people who knew Him were, like many before and after, trying to deny the reality facing them in order to escape responsibility to respond affirmatively to Jesus.

This is Chapter 4 of Luke, OK? Very early in the peace. There is almost a pugnaciousness as Jesus reacted to the resistance of His hometown people. Not only did He throw that ‘prophet’ business at them, He also threw the fact that Israel’s own history relates the number of times that people outside the Covenant, people outside the pale, responded more truly to God. Elisha’s ‘widow of Zarephath and Naaman were Gentiles, nobodies and beyond consideration, and yet they responded to the God of Israel. To have had Gentiles flung in their faces would certainly have enraged the populace, though how one can be enraged with the truth rather than respond to it escapes me somewhat. Like the prophets, Jesus shows that the ‘faith once delivered’ is neither an escape from reality nor some sort of superstition: it constitutes a challenge to people to respond to each other with truth and justice.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

If ever you wonder why it is that the congregations of many of today’s Churches are down somewhat, part of the answer lies not in the failure of the Faith, but rather in the rather sadly self-driven culture in which we live. I guess that the Faith has never been all that popular, but there have been times when people have been rather more open to the truth than is the case these days. However, if that seems to be some sort of insuperable problem to you, then – as I often ask people to do – just look back in history. One of the lessons we learn from history is that we do not learn the lessons of history – and almost require ourselves to repeat the mistakes of the past. What fools we mortals be!

There remain those who consider that the past is dead and gone, and that Scripture needs to be consigned to the waste-paper basket of history. On the contrary, that remarkable series of books we call the Bible⁹ has a vast and invaluable collection of observations of people, leaders and history that we ignore at our own peril, whether we are Christian or not.

From Abraham on, through Moses and the prophets, comes the observation that – as my father would have said, ‘people are funny cattle sometimes.’ Perverse often and determinedly recalcitrant! So that anyone who feels impelled, by whatever compulsion, has one hell of a job trying to get people to think and act more sensibly. It is a bit like trying to move a flock of sheep, which you can do with dogs, but not with persuasion, eh! Not only will there be passive resistance; there may often be far more wilful refusal to listen and occasional violent reaction. So when a leader has only the appeal to conscience and common sense¹⁰ to convince people, then that leader has a thankless task in front of him or her.

And that was the situation for Jeremiah. The reference to being a boy was not actual fact, but how he felt about the call. It could hardly have been a great help to be presented with the challenge that included setting up and breaking down, either. But, as recorded in the notes, it is not possible to make an omelette without breaking the eggs. It can be a thankless task, and often remains so during the leader’s life time. We value the old prophets far more than their contemporaries, and that perhaps is because we are quite some steps removed from the situation in which they lived and moved and had their being. Hindsight can be 20/20 can it not.

So this is the time to stop again and realize that the Faith, Hebrew and Christian, has always been a challenge to the *status quo* and not so much in terms of culture but far more in terms of justice and truth and integrity. These are not issues that are limited to some religion or creed; these are issues that determined whether a community or culture can survive to the benefit of all involved. It takes no great stretch of imagination to see how destructive life can be when the ancient verities are ignored. Strangely those who considered that the 19th and 20th Centuries were pathways to progress and prosperity are confronted by the fact also, that those were the decades of some of the vilest and most destructive events in history.

Perhaps it is not until both adherents and others begin to realize that the Faith is not about ‘religion’ but about reaching towards the best in life for everyone that there might be a return to a balance and safety and value of each and everyone.

⁹ You are aware of course, that ‘Bible’ is from the Greek for ‘book!’ Yes, it is as simple as that.

¹⁰ Notice how often ‘common sense,’ these days, is an oxymoron! I kid you not!