

**Sentence**

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

**Collect**

Lord God of the nations, we have seen the star of Your glory rising in splendour; may the brightness of Your incarnate Word pierce the night that covers the earth, signal the dawn of justice and peace, and beckon all nations to walk as one in Your light. We ask this through Your Son Jesus Christ, Your Word made flesh, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and 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.

This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

**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." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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.

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## NOTES ON THE READINGS ....

### Old Testament

One is left suspecting that when many people read today's passage, they assume either that the prophet has taken leave of his senses and gone off with the fairies, or that this is simply the way that the people of God talk and write and carry on. Neither of such views gives any cognisance of that to which the prophet was pointing.

Several times in recent weeks, these notes have pointed readers to a rather more immediate point and purpose of Gospel and Faith; insofar as the Biblical Faith has always pointed to a means of resolution of the human condition of strife, hatred and destructiveness. **Always, from Genesis 3 on.** Somehow we manage to translate and limit the Faith to the business of what we call salvation, seen in terms of life after this. The Biblical Faith has always been more immediate and relevant, and for some reason both Church and Christians have turned their eyes away and headed for 'religion.' Small wonder people out there ignore the Faith!

Mind you, when the Faith is seen for what it is, there will remain most people who will turn their backs. But that does not limit the point, power and purpose of the Biblical Faith. It has the potential to reduce human conflict **without cost** and with singular immediacy. No wonder Isaiah was excited – do you see!

### Psalm

Now please read that Psalm once more with feeling. Look and see where the almost constant emphasis lies. Righteousness (justice actually, do you see?) equity, peace, and on it goes. In a world back then hardly noted for such significant issues, even the old psalmist knew which way was up, and what was important. Please begin to realize how utterly revolutionary was this Faith way back then.

Force was how kings governed, and even Israel was not exempt from that attitude. Other cultures were fierce and very bloody. And you know that peace will never emerge unless and until justice reigns. Justice is NOT revenge. Justice is the exercise and response to the total truth in any situation. Integrity and truth are vital and irremovable cohorts.

### Epistle

It may help to mention that whenever the New Testament talks about 'mystery' it is not referring to something dark and unfathomable at all. It is talking about something once secret (or at least not generally known) that has now been revealed. Oddly enough it has to be said that Paul's 'mystery' about the inclusion of the Gentiles in the affection and interest of God, was not new by any means. Even a cursory reading of the OT prophets will show that those ancient worthies always tended to see that the Faith they represented was spread, and intended to be spread **world-wide** and not focussed narrowly as ancient Jewry seemed to demand. In other words, this Faith was not designed to be offered to a select few, but was something that was of vital interest and concern to all of humanity. It really does escape me how anyone over the intervening millennia failed to catch sight of this: it is as plain as the nose on your face. We humans have a remarkable and foolish capacity to turn something to life-giving and beneficial into something narrow and bigotted as a religion that divides. What fools we mortals be!

In several different epistles, Paul expresses his conviction in several different ways, that Jesus is the meaning of life, the focal point of history to give it meaning and purpose, and that everything in life and human history will be 'brought to a head' in Christ. What is the meaning of life? Jesus. *Not 42!*

### **Gospel**

It should come as no surprise that the story of the Magi figures as the Gospel focus on Epiphany - it is a moving and salutary tale, whether it actually occurred or not. (Some recent commentators seem convinced that the story is not historically true, but lots of Biblical writers never let the truth get in the way of a good parable or significant illustration.

Actually, the story would have been absolutely shocking to a contemporary Jew, or most of them. It should be just as much a shock to Christian purists, for the tale relates how occultic searchers came to find the Christ Child, convinced by the data of their own horoscope that an event of enormous significance was / had taken place. Magi = magicians = occultists for heaven's sake; and by the gifts they presented, they showed a far greater awareness of the coming Christ than did the People of Israel themselves.

These men represent the rest of the world people of other cultures and life-views, and would have represented quite something of an abomination to people of Pharisaic persuasion. Let that gell a moment or two .....

### **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

I grew up in a world where people of different Christian persuasion were, more often than not, considered to be totally beyond the pale as far as the rest of us Anglicans were concerned. It was not just a matter of (Roman) Catholics being beyond redemption, but so were many of the people of other sects and hangers on. When it came to those of other faiths, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Callithumpians, well, forget it. They knew nothing of Jesus, so they were consigned to the then popular eternal hell. (Actually, this burning fiery furnace view stems not so much from Scripture as from Dante and his Inferno. Many people do not seem to know that!)

So the atmospherics of those days of yore so long ago were terribly snobbish and isolationist. I guess, in those days, Australia was really very isolated geographically anyhow, and the White Australia Policy was hardly ever challenged, until World War II. So everyone was tucked up snugly and safely in the cocoon of their particular 'theology,' and later people were to wonder what the Church had done to have so few respond to the Gospel.

Denominations were isolated and isolating by their Eucharistic theology, and one was expected to fit the respective 'sausage skins' and look down the nose at others' skins, so to speak. As recently as the 1960s, there was no way the Anglican sisters at Coober Pedy Hospital could share in the Easter Communion at the Lutheran Church there, unless they first became Lutheran. I kid you not! So the very Sacrament of Unity was used as a tool for division and even revulsion. How stupid could we have got?

From the very call of Abraham, the move in this then-new Faith was designed for the entire world into which it was introduced. Look at the call of Abram and the precise and expansive wording of it. He was to be a blessing to **all** the world. At Horeb, that same sort of breadth of vision was expressed, and of course the Old Testament prophets punched the wide drum again and again and again. The tragedy of Israel's blindness to that breadth of vision was echoed for another two millennia in the Christian world.

And here, at the Incarnation, the Biblical writers ensured that the message was heard even over the voices of people's bigotry. It is rather interesting and quite something of a profound challenge how the Scriptures, written and revised over thousands of years, really, so often show evidence of various writers who have challenged the status quo and popular view of some subjects. Perhaps it is too gentle a way to move for change and yet that seems to be the process Biblical, all along. Didn't it take 1,800 years for English Christians to move to abolish slavery; 1950 years for Christians to see the Biblical imperative about being green, and a little longer to espy the need to embrace the equality of the sexes. All that may well have been because of the time it took for most of the population to be educated and inquisitive, but even so the story of the Church's rejection of Galileo and his explanation of the Earth revolving around the sun was a shocking indictment of the power of conservatism against truth. It would seem that people look to the Faith for security instead of finding in it the strength to follow wherever truth leads.

There, it strikes me, is the present challenge for us all that Epiphany brings.

**Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2012**

**Baptism of our Lord**

**Sentence**

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; and He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. *Acts 10:38*

**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 the confidence and strength to implant Your justice on the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Genesis 1: 1 – 5**

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

**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 splendor 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 19: 1 – 7**

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied--altogether there were about twelve of them.

**GOSPEL**

**Mark 1: 4 – 11**

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

## NOTES ON THE READINGS.....

### Old Testament

If you wonder why this passage has been chosen for today, about the only explanation I can offer is that here is the beginning. Beginning of everything, so to speak. And a baptism is a beginning, with all the possibilities and risks that lie ahead of the person baptized.

This Creation Story is beautiful and well-designed story, paralleling other old stories but having a mind, shape and direction all of its own. Sadly, those who treat this tale as literally true miss almost the total experience for it is far more interesting than that. Note the fascinating business that, in this portrayal 'light' was created days before sun, moon and stars. 'Light' is regarded as far more significant than its providores, sun and moon.

### Psalm

Do not be put off by the repetitive nature of the verses of this psalm. Notice that, although the emphases appear to be on **power and strength**, what modern readers can draw from all this is that the real issue is not power but truth and reality. What the Hebrew Faith was ever pointing to is the absolute and unshakeable truth of the Faith and the direction to which it points. Oh, you can mutter about the carry-over baggage about lightning etc., and the fear it always seemed to produce in the ancients, but even then the point being made is that one mucks about with the ancient realities of truth love and justice at rather great risk really. If you do not follow what I am trying to convey, just spend a few moments in front of the TV News and see how often families, communities and even nations absolutely come apart when violence and hatreds overpower. Actually we are living though the tragic outcomes of parental abuse of children, not necessarily in sexual abuse, but in emotional and other forms. Any real community is powerfully aware of the need for nurture of the young; for heaven's sake, even animals are so clearly and obviously aware of such needs, even to the extent of risking their own lives for their young.

### For the Epistle

This is a strange little cameo from the story of the Infant Church , where it seems that some unknown disciple of the Baptist had been busy long before the Crucifixion. It may come as some surprise to be told that members of this tiny denomination exist still: several years ago such folk were to be found amongst refugees at the Baxter Detention Centre at Port Augusta, where members of Churches from that city were involved in contact and service of them.

There is sadness at such a discovery – there are people for whom just a part of the Gospel is available, but if the truth is known, there are still people who have been given only part of the picture. (Sometimes they are given a fraction by those who are convinced they have 'the full Gospel,' but have nothing of the sort.

## GOSPEL

And now we come to the real issue for today – the Baptism of Jesus. Sadly, baptism is one of those things either disregarded or misunderstood somewhat totally in this day and age. Part of the reason for that is the rise of the rugged individual in our culture, led by Americans. Individuals were not part of the ancient scene, because the real issue was the community. (And where is community available these days?)

It has long been an issue for some, from the Baptist on, that Jesus was baptized, but please go back to that community thing. If our Lord was to be part of the whole, to be identified with the People of God, then He needed to express that being part in that sacramental manner. Baptism is not a matter of 'I have accepted Christ,' but very much a matter that 'He has accepted me into the community of the People of God,' a community without which I am far less able to survive as believer or as participant.

In other words, Jesus identified very much with us, thank heaven. He may be leader, but a good leader needs to be part of the people. And the remarkable outcome of this involvement was that statement from JHWH – here is My Son, My Beloved. JHWH identified Himself with Jesus – and no one can get a better endorsement than that, eh!

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

Any baptism, even these days, contains the promise of a new beginning, a commencement, a fresh start – yet sadly that promise may take quite some time to reach fulfillment. I recall talking baptisms to a previous Rector of Clare (whom some of you may know) and his life beginning was rather hopeless if you looked at the then

realities. Apparently his parents has little or no interest in the whole business, and said young man in his formative years had nothing to do with Church. But he would never decry even those circumstances, because not only did he become part of the faith community, but was later ordained, and really has had a quietly remarkable ministry, which continues to this day. Mind you, he has a few years on me, so he may well be even slower these days.

New beginnings. While it is true to say that there are quite a lot of times when the promise does not ever emerge, one also needs to recognize that such a promise can be an enormous challenge especially for those to whom the promise reaches fulfillment.

Here today we have an interesting rune of lessons for the Sunday – marking as it does the (adult) commencement of Jesus’ ministry, and going on to echo some of the difficulties His disciples encountered as they attempted to offer a firm lead to those whom they served. I do have to say that one of my *huge* difficulties in ministry was in attempting to encourage people to move past their comfort zones, as humans let alone as Christians. We so easily forget that this Faith is a pilgrimage, **not a full stop**. And if / when we stop moving forward, we actually head backwards. **Pilgrimage. Never forget that.** When ever Israel became settled, then they stopped growing; whenever they encountered enormous difficulty, they had either to explore and move forward, *or revert to a comfortable if not comforting ‘religion.’ (And how I hate that word.)*

As mentioned in the notes above, the ‘portion of Scripture appointed to be read as the Epistle’ as it used to be expressed, underlines one of the great and pivotal periods in the history of the Infant Church. With the wisdom of hindsight, we might feel the move to have been easy. But when one has grown up with all the pressure to regard any such response to Gentiles as really denying God, then you have troubles.

Israel, in spite of its written Scriptures, had always considered itself to be God’s Chosen, which is simply another way of saying that no one else was worthy of consideration either by the Almighty, and therefore unworthy from the point of view of the Israelite people. Even Samaritans were considered far beyond the pale, even though they had blood connection, at least in part, to the children of Abraham. Yet oddly enough, one of the unexpected outcomes of Roman occupation was the fact that there were those of Roman and therefore Gentile connection, who were attracted to the Jewish Faith. In one way, that was not surprising; Judaism – for all its faults – must have been head and shoulders above what we may call pagan religion in its concern for moral purity and issues of justice. (I find it rather odd, in this day and age, that people outside Christian Faith do not find similar points of connection and interest – but perhaps they will one day.

Now, on the one hand it is rather beaut to find that there will be people who think and care outside the square; on the other, one needs to realize that people of conviction will still find it very hard to cross boundaries held so firmly by their contemporaries. You may well have found it hard to step outside generally-accepted norms of belief of behaviour; and then go on to wonder who is right and who is wrong. Never imagine that Peter never had such compunctions. On top of that he was – from all the evidence of the New Testament – not the strongest of leaders and quite something of a prevaricator.

But just as the Magi from last week, and Jesus in His baptism from this, the need for the spread to wider fields and to the demolition of bigotry of however many centuries, burst on the hearts and minds of the Infant Church. It caused enormous tensions within the Church, as Acts 15 underlines – it required the collective wisdom of all of the People of the Way. And thank God those people voted the way they did. All the evidence pointed to the need for change even when all the tradition pointed unequivocally back towards narrow vision. Had they not decided so, you would not be sitting in Church or even reading this on the Web. The Faith we profess would have disappeared off the face of the earth something less than 2,000 years ago.

And all that before the Gospel account of Jesus’ baptism. May I underline yet again that when we draw conclusions from the Biblical evidence, we need to take **all** of it into account, careful not to limit our vision or anyone else’s to a narrow and unbending response to the Father.

The Biblical story traces from the call of Abraham right through to here, and all is connected and interdependent. So the Incarnation never was just some later ‘knee-jerk’ reaction on the part of God because ‘nothing seems to have worked so far.’ The whole story is part of one piece.

**Sentence**

We have found the Messiah; Jesus Christ the Son of God the king of Israel.

*John 1:41,49*

**Collect**

Eternal God, Whose Son, Jesus Christ, is now exalted as Lord of all, and pours out His gifts upon the Church; grant it that unity which only Your Spirit can give, keep us in the bond of peace, and bring all creation to worship before Your throne; through Jesus Christ our Redeemer Who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**1 Samuel 3: 1 – 10**

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. The LORD called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again."

Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

**Psalm**

**139:1 – 5 & 12 – 18**

O Lord, You have searched me out and known me: You know when I sit or when I stand, You comprehend my thoughts long before.

You discern my path and the places where I rest: You are acquainted with all my ways

For there is not a word on my tongue: but You, Lord, know it altogether

You have encompassed me behind and before: and have laid Your hand upon me

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me: so high that I cannot endure it.

I will praise You for You are to be feared: fearful are Your acts and wonderful are Your works

You knew my soul, and my bones were not hidden from You: when I was formed in secret and woven in the depths of the earth

Your eyes saw my limbs when they were yet imperfect: and in Your book were all my members written

Day by day they were fashioned: and not one of them was late in growing

How deep are Your thoughts to me O God: how great is the sum of them

Were I to count them, they are more in number than the sand: were I to come to the end, I would still be with You

**Epistle**

**1 Corinthians 6: 12 – 20**

"All things are lawful for me," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything. "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food," and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power.

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The two shall be one flesh." But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

## GOSPEL

John 1: 43 – 51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

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## NOTES ON THE READINGS.....

### Old Testament

Most of the OT stories of Samuel make rather good reading, so it is small wonder that this person was a real focus for OT Jews. This one is particularly indicative and present-day readers are encouraged to read on in your Bible. There is told the tale of this novice and youngster been given the task of telling Eli that his faults and failures were leading to his downfall. Strangely enough, Eli was sufficiently aware of the truth of Samuel's divinely-given charge that there was no explosive response.

It always makes me ready to hear 'from the mouths of babes and sucklings, for while kids may be immature, very many of them have an innate awareness of the truth and certainly of fairness. *In other words, do not be surprised if you come out with some devastating truth even if it be unpopular.*

### Psalm

Speaking of unsophistication, this psalm is a delight and yet carried real impact in its attitude to life, oneself and God. I find it enormously encouraging to know that God knows and understands me inside out, and whether I am right, wrong or off the rails, His care continues. So far, I find that such awareness saves me from all manner of stress and strain and worry. I am free to get on, past mistakes and sins, and learn from all, good and bad.

### Epistle

You may not be aware of it, but one of the damn nuisances of the emerging Church was the then widespread 'religion' of Gnosticism. This sort of thing is not all that distant from New Age stuff, most of it baloney, and certainly an approach that pandered to people's terribly human pursuit of being superior. A little like some Masonic material, it was a matter of if you knew the rules that others don't – then you are head and shoulders above them.

It was against such practices and beliefs that Paul wrote, preached and spoke. Constantly. He would have been quite strong against 'New Age' which is really nothing of the sort, but as old as the hills in spite of its recurrent emergences.

That sort of thing was very much part of the Pharisaic *mores*, so its appearance in budding Christianity was no surprise to the Apostle. (The second issue of fornication was very much a Greek and Roman 'thing,' and here he was focussing on the real thing. (Much of OT literature speaks of it, but rather more in terms of religious fornication, turning to other gods and goddesses.)

Only recently I was burdened with a great load of literature, pounding me with my fault and failure in not celebrating the Sabbath as 'demanded by Scripture.' I find it enormously sad when people can expend such enormous energy on non-issues yet manage to 'overlook the weightier matters of the law,' so to speak.

## GOSPEL

This short but clear pen-portrait of Nathanael is interesting and poignant to me. It is fairly clear that here was a determined person, searching for truth and yet not likely to be led by the noser by anyone, least of all his mates. If I am allowed to express it, he follows the pattern of the sort of person often touched by God, a person exploring the possibilities and yet not a little hidebound by bias and perhaps bigotry, Nazareth was no favourite for this man, for reasons unexpressed, a little like the jealousy between Sydney and Melbourne.

However it was Jesus' reaction to the man, that not only described him but also surprised him.

For the record, it is quite likely that Nathanael was also known as Bartholomew.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

There is an interesting compare and contrast in today's lessons: between Samuel as a youngster and Nathanael as an adult. Both were searchers, and both responded to a reality presented to them. There is nothing fancy about either character and yet both were involved in really useful and helpful ministries at various times in Hebrew history. The real point at issue is that neither was chosen because of being an important personage. One does not see much of any such emphasis in Biblical history.

And that strikes me as being what today's readings are getting across. Although such a proposition is not a real issue in Australia of today, it used to be very much the case that it would be only important people whom God would call to minister and serve in His kingdom. Most of the rest of us felt totally inadequate or ill-prepared by life. Sunday School lessons, in my time at least, seemed always to underline the great faith and enormous purity of saints of old, and disciples and Apostles. Reality was always somewhat different. In fact, (again in my experience, which is all I can go by!) those who were all too often go-getters and ladder-climbers seemed to appear and demand positions of authority and go on to make messes monumental – **because** they operated from the very false base.

Spend some time looking at such a contrast, even if only through Biblical stories. The perceived require-ments of high spirituality and piety are rarely evident in the lives of the go-getters. This does not apply only to Biblical stories but is rather more evident in ordinary history and leadership. So what does that say to us?

The answer is a bit of a shock in a way. Is God calling you to some ministry or service for which you feel inadequate? Then that just may be the very attribute that will be required of you for the task. I kid you not. (For instance, I could never understand why God called me to priesthood, when one of my great mates was far more spiritual, far more holy and far more religious than me. We started off together, but he never continued. Not towards ordination

anyhow. He remained a faithful Christian all his life. But God chose to put up with me, as did many people from quite a few parishes over a large number of years. Goodness me!

**Sentence**

The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the Gospel.

*Mark 1: 15*

**Collect**

Bountiful God, through Your Son You call us to repent of our sins, to believe the good news, and to celebrate the coming of Your Kingdom; teach us to hear the call to discipleship, and to proclaim the gospel of new life to a broken world; through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Jonah 3: 1 – 10**

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

**Psalm**

**62: 5 – 12**

My soul, wait in silence for God: for from Him comes my hope  
He only is my rock and my salvation: my strong tower so that I shall not be moved  
In God is my deliverance and my glory: God is my strong rock and my shelter  
Trust in Him at all times O my people: pour out your hearts before Him for God is our refuge.  
The children of Adam are but breath, the children of earth are a lie: place them in the scales and they fly upward,  
they are as light as air  
Put no trust in extortion do not grow worthless by robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart upon them  
God has spoken once, twice I have heard Him say: that power belongs to God  
That to the Lord belongs a constant goodness: For you reward each one of us according to our deeds.

**Epistle**

**1 Corinthians 7: 29 – 31**

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

**GOSPEL**

**Mark 1: 14 – 20**

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea-- for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

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## NOTES ON THE READINGS

Actually, if you look at today's readings you may be forgiven for wondering quite why this particular selection has been chosen. It is a remarkably disparate choice, so we will have to make the best of it – mind you, you may well be rather more imaginative than me.

### Old Testament

For donkey's years now (over 60 actually) this strange little tale has brought me quite some joy as I observe the author's attempts to get old Israel to look right past its hang-ups and bigotry. This is not history, as the author makes quite clear as the story unfolds. It is not presented as a miracle, that business of the fish, but a tale of how far people will go to avoid what they know to be true but cannot bear it.

Lecturers in College had us see that this, in commentators terms, is an anti-separatist tract, getting Israel to see that their determination to keep Gentiles out of the picture was *not* a requirement from God, but rather a determination of their own lack of vision. Jonah is sent to the pagan city of Nineveh to preach to the inhabitants, and does a most unJewish thing when he heads to sea instead. (Jews and vast bodies of water never seem to have mixed, as water of that size tends to be the image and icon of evil.)

Here the blinking Ninevites repent, which got up Jonah's nose, which parallels the Pharisaic response to Jesus' ministry. Please see this odd little tale as a challenge to anyone who holds tightly to bigotry of any sort, particularly religious bigotry. The Kingdom is *not, REPEAT NOT* made of these.

### Psalms

It has to be said that sometimes, psalms are notoriously difficult to follow and understand. However, I suspect that if you have lived under extreme pressure from evil people or corrupt government, you may be better able to enter into the writer's dilemma. How does one stand up straight when all the pressure is otherwise.

Under such circumstances, God Himself tends to be the only bulwark – and awareness of the support of the Life-giving Almighty is enormously encouraging to keep going regardless.

### Epistle

Pardon me being naughty, but I have absolutely no idea why this snippet is included in readings. If it is designed to show that Paul was not always at his wisest, then OK. If it is meant to get people to check what they read against wider reality, OK.

From my knowledge of the Apostle, he had to be (a) 30, (b) married and (c) a Pharisee to be part of the Sanhedrin, all of which occurred before his conversion. One suspects that said marriage was far from contented and did not last. Quite a number of commentators have decided that Paul was misogynist, but the reality is that he certainly would have been very hard to live with. Most perfectionists are like that.

As I have mentioned elsewhere, also, Paul – like most of the Infant Church – expected the Parousia, the Return of our Lord – to occur within a fairly brief period of time, as Paul's early writings seem to indicate. The passage of time in that first century tended to widen that view, so that John's Revelation expresses the view that any such Parousia is a long way off. A thousand years! Not a literal amount, but when 10 is a lot, 10 x 10 is a hell of a lot, and 10 x 10 x 10 is an excruciatingly large amount, then you get the picture.

## GOSPEL

Perhaps it is a helpful thing to look at this 'Kingdom.' If one has wondered what it is all about, the easiest and clearest way is to compare human kingdoms (or nations or empires etc.) with what is unfolded in the Gospels. Almost exclusively, ordinary human kingdoms are built on the egos of strong people, usually men but not always. And the power generated is designed to force or cajole *hoi polloi* into conforming to whatever pattern the 'king' desires. Try living through Hitler's Germany, or Idi Amin's Uganda. Mind you, it has to be said that even democracy (not a divine institution I may gently remind readers; it is Greek!) bears many of the hallmarks of those regimes described above. Force, even if only emotional, is the usual means of conformity.

The Kingdom of God<sup>1</sup> operates on a very different level, a level to which all followers are called to illustrate in life, decision making and experience. Here love is the only 'compulsion,' and truth, integrity, justice and compassion the guiding lights and principles. It does not take a great deal of imagination to see that while outcomes of the Kingdom of God will be very different, the process will take a lot longer than if/when people are forced to conform. It is not hard to see, either, the 'power' tends to be the aphrodisiac for humans, even though it

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<sup>1</sup> Kingdom of Heaven, you will note in Matthew's Gospel, written for a Jewish audience initially, and any reference to the Divinity needed to be a periphrasis. Hence 'heaven.'

will almost invariably destroy them given time. Read about Australia's leadership struggles over recent years. We humans are not a bright lot, now are we?

## **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

It was many years ago now, at a Bible Study Group in the parish where I was then working, and the question was about the Kingdom of God. (Heaven if you are reading Matthew's Gospel.) I had asked where/ what a person would find this Kingdom, and it was my father who replied that it would not be until one died that the Kingdom would be found. It came as a great surprise to him and others that evening that the Kingdom was and is far more immediate. The Kingdom is present whenever the will of God is being carried out, when a person or people are responding to God in their actions and reactions to others.

You will recall some comments of Jesus, from time to time. He spoke of a rich man being 'close to the kingdom,' for his response to people and to life was genuine and helpful. But rather too often, a limited view of God at work has a rather narrow perception that tends to ignore the realities. Perhaps it is because this Gospel snippet for today includes that business of 'repenting' – which can be a block for some folk.

Come on a journey with me if you will – starting off with a comparison between ordinary kingdoms of Jesus' day, and the other one of which He spoke. Whenever one gets to the nitty-gritty of human kingdoms (or other forms of leadership or control or whatever) the sight is not a pretty one. Only this morning I read in the Saturday Advertiser insert<sup>2</sup> of the political assassination of Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister – and quite something of the treachery surrounding that vicious action. If there is one thing that kingdoms past and present illustrate so often, it is that the human ego tends to flourish right at the centre of it all. So often Presidents and other leaders reflect the same go-getting attitude and such people do not care very much whose toes they step on to get their own way. In some rather horrible cases, opponents' very lives are in danger and are often lost in the struggle. The motives may be about raw power, or perhaps wealth and control. One is hard-put to find, in the history of any kingdom, or empire or even country, to find much in the way of altruism or caring, sharing or concern. Usually, the longer the person or clique is in power, the more rugged is the treatment of the subjects, and the disregard of the realities.

When it comes to the Kingdom of God, the picture is radically different. The best and most significant picture of *that* Kingdom is found in the life and ministry of Jesus. There was a Person true to the Father, and just as true to people around Him. There was a Person quite unafraid to step over the boundaries of accepted practices, especially when those practices bound people within limits totally unacceptable. People operating under social or spiritual outcast situations seemed to be a magnet for our Lord, not to thumb the nose at the culture, but to ensure no ostracism remained against such folk. It was a matter of the ancient verities of truth, integrity and compassion being recognized and acted upon, regardless of the control enforced by the ruling leadership. This approach was such a different one, such a controversial one, that it all stood out like the proverbial sore thumb! And it was a total and complete reproach to the existing culture. Small wonder that Jesus was executed!

So where does repentance come into this? The answer is simple but stunning.

More often than not, whenever repentance is referred to these days, it has to do with the attempt to make someone feel guilty, and in need of redemption. Sin has so often been used as a threat to induce people to become Christian. Sadly so much of that approach misses the point entirely. My own experience, donkey's years ago now, was along those lines, for as a young teenager I knew I had all sorts of naughty thoughts about the fairer sex.

If you have followed the discussion so far, you may well see further into the direction any such repentance needs to take. It is not just naughty thoughts (or even actions!) that require attention: it is that rather nasty human tendency to set oneself over and against all the rest of humanity, or at least that part of it that gets in your way. It is not just governments and leaders who throw their weight around; we all do it. The real nature of the human dilemma is our capacity to demand that others fit my pattern of behaviour and do what I think they ought to do! It is the 'Adam' syndrome, which runs something like 'bugger you, Jack; I am all right!' As I have grown older and perhaps a little wiser, I have observed a vast increase in such violence in society, as even girls and young women become involved in violence against people, especially those who are older and more vulnerable.

If I am to belong to the Kingdom of God, then it is from self-determining activity that I need to repent, to reject and turn away from. And that requires considerable conviction and effort. It was easier to give up smoking than it is to turn away from such goals in life.

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<sup>2</sup> 30<sup>th</sup> October, 2010 would you believe?

**Sentence**

Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. *Matthew 9: 35*

**Collect**

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

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Deuteronomy 18: 15 – 20**

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die."

Then the LORD replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak--that prophet shall die."

**Psalm**

**111**

O praise the Lord. I will praise the Lord with my whole heart: in the company of the upright and among the congregation

The works of the Lord are great: and studied by all who take delight in them

His deeds are majestic and glorious: and His righteousness stands for ever.

His marvellous acts have won Him a name to be remembered: the Lord is gracious and merciful

He gives food to those who fear Him: He remembers His covenant for ever

He showed His people the power of His acts: in giving them the heritage of the heathen.

The works of His hands are faithful and just: and all His commandments are sure

They stand firm for ever and ever: they are done in faithfulness and in truth

He sent redemption to His people, He ordained His covenant for ever; Holy is His name and worthy to be feared.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and of good understanding are those who keep His commandments: His praise shall endure for ever.

**Epistle**

**1 Corinthians 8: 1 – 13**

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him. Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth--as in fact there are many gods and many lords-- yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. "Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.

But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

## GOSPEL

## Mark 1: 21 – 28

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching--with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### Old Testament

This book of Deuteronomy (*Lit Second Law*) is almost certainly a later edition or redaction of the earlier Torah, and tends to trace the story of Israel from Moses on. Here, too, Moses is the focus, and – perhaps a little oddly to us – is described as a prophet. What is to be noticed, surely, is the nature of the emphasis being placed upon any future prophet or attempted prophet to remain totally true to Israel's God in whatever he (or she) declares to be the Word God speaks. Obviously, there is no room for straying from the truth. The penalty for such - as described here – in extinction. One does not muck about with God in those Old Testament times – nor even now, come to that, but for different reasons.

### Psalm

If you like to see it this way, here we have a view of the faith and if Israel's God from a slightly different angle. There is no imposition of fear of repercussions, but a celebration of what is regarded as obvious truth. The psalmist is celebrating the clear and obvious value of the divine revelation of commandments and statutes. The last verse of this psalm should be quite well known, and the value of it is obvious, surely.

### Epistle

As the new faith spread into what was clearly Gentile territory, adherents encountered all sorts of issues and problems far less likely in Israel. There the kosher food laws tended to be kept by everyone; but the food laws did not apply in Corinth. (In fact, it may have been hard to find *any* laws that were kept there. Corinth was – is! – a sea port and they are notorious places for law-breaking (or at least avoidance.)

If you were in a position to afford meat, the only place such an item was available was at the local (pagan) temples. That meant that the food had first been offered to idols! For many Christians that was an enormous no-no, and obviously the division between the sterner folk and those less affected was becoming hardened. Such matters easily become an issue of division between those truly faithful and those somewhat on the edges. And **that** was the real problem.

Notice how carefully and lovingly the Apostle helped people around the problem. Whilst this issue is a non-event these days, the process is one well worth attention and acting upon. There is often the need to activate this process in situations that arise these days.

## GOSPEL

Before we get anywhere, please notice something of interest. Would you not have described this incident as 'miracle?' Yet Mark mentions it as 'teaching.' It is important to see that miracles are not so much something to be believed, as they are to be learnt from, understood, and taken hold of. Here, in the synagogue (where he should not have been if the purists had had their way) was a man who because of his ailment was considered totally unclean and not worthy of anyone's attention. As far as I am aware, any ailment, disease or disability considered outside the range of current medicine was considered evil. By association, the sufferer was likewise evil. Ostracism was the only outcome.

That Jesus should have ignored such well-known prohibitions would have raised the ire of the authorities – which was only to be expected. But for our Lord, the plight of the poor man was something that cried out for attention and correction. That is the nature of the Lord Whom we serve.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

In our own day and age, illnesses are seen not as a result of people sinning, but rather as an outcome of viruses or other intrusions into the human body. As a result, there is far less likelihood of assumptions that people **deserve** the ailment or disease from which they suffer. Certainly it has to be said that certain courses of action are likely to provide self-inflicted illness. When my wife was nursing quite some decades ago, sunburn was regarded as self-inflicted, and sympathy was not likely to be offered by other Hospital staff.

But place yourself in the position of those to whom Jesus ministered, and you had not only a largely ineffective medical understanding of illness, but a profoundly moral (or should that be immoral?) outcome for the victim. As mentioned above, to top it all off, anything considered to be outside the range of normal medical intervention was classified as demon-possession, which would rate the sufferer as beyond the pale, and deserving of whatever difficulty can their way.

Two issues arise for me in all this: the first is that there remains a large number of Christians still convinced that illness is God's punishment on sin. The second is a wider issue, and that is the strange business of Christians being rather too unaware of the ramifications of their faith. The Kingdom is one of these issues.

About the first, may I ask you to come with me on an exploration of Scripture, starting not in the New Testament but the Old. I do not know at what time in Hebrew history that ancient Book of Job was written, but it has to be a very long way back. In fact the existence of the book is an early and powerful statement that the Hebrew Faith is the result of people looking at life issues and trying to find answers in order that the picture of God, of JHWH, may be truer and more complete.

The story of Job, it would seem, is only partially known and even less partially understood. But there – in a very long-drawn-out debate and discussion, - is the clear perception that the central person in the story came to the conclusion that illness and sin had no connection whatever. His so-called 'comforters' were terribly holy and convinced otherwise, but God their come-uppance from God Himself. So did Mrs. Job, - who tended to be part of the problem! Instead of trying to write a commentary on Job here and now, I suggest that you get a good Commentary (not easily done!) and study the book for yourself.

I have reported before the experience with my uncle, during my College years, of trying to find God's answer to his mouth cancer, which took his life not long after. It was a strained and searching business, and while there was no answer to 'why,' like Job in that book, we both came to the situation where before that, Uncle had 'heard of God by reputation, he now saw Him face to face **and was content.**' I could offer other tales of learning curves from that old book, so get in touch if you wish.

Not only is that clear statement in the Old Testament, there is of course also that stunning episode in John's Gospel Chapter 9. This particular issue was faced then with stunning directness by Jesus, Who refuted the then (and still!) current perception that ailments and illness was punishment for sin. Once again I suggest that this passage be read and pondered – and interestingly the real focus of this cameo has to do with responding to the truth .... about anything.

And that is another factor concerning which the Kingdom issue is highly significant.