

Sentence

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases: His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning.
Great is Your faithfulness. *Lamentations 3:22*

Collect

O Christ, for Whom we search, our help when other help has failed: give us courage to expose our need and ask to be made whole, that, being touched by You, we may be raised to new life, in the power of Your Name.
Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

2 Samuel 1:1 & 17 – 27

PSALM

130

EPISTLE

2 Corinthians 8: 7 – 15

GOSPEL

Mark 5: 21 – 43

NOTES ON THE READINGS

OLD TESTAMENT

How are the mighty fallen! It is perhaps measure of how people no longer know Biblical quotes, but this is an old favourite quotation of my mother's. In fact there are several quotes she used from this (AV) passage. Sadly, modern views of David's relationship with Jonathan detract from the reality. Lots of men are or have been great mates of other men, without the slightest sexual connotation. What a lousy time we live in.

It is a passionate cry from the heart, this one, indicative of the ambivalent situation in which David and Jonathan lived. The latter was the son of King Saul, and David's friend from childhood. The former was seen as a huge threat to the King, a threat only made real by the King's own stupidity and insecurity. (Have you been there?) The real point to make is the reality of this terribly human situation, and the capacity of the people concerned to face and cope with the tragedy. No counsellors were available then, and people needed to work their own (and effective) way through tragedy. It is a leaf we need to take out of the ancients' book! Surely a clearer understanding of the Faith and life would be of rather greater help to people undergoing horrors.

PSALM

Here, following that first lesson is a singularly interesting example of how the ancients dealt with disaster. This may be a brief psalm indeed, but it points to the nature of the relationship people had with God, however imperfect that relationship may have been. It is the clear and simple recognition that the only way to cope with life's ups and downs was to do so in the light of a God Who loves.

EPISTLE

If there is one thing that seems to catch out everyone, believer or unbeliever, it is the hip pocket nerve. This matter of money. In our culture there is nothing that can be done without it, and that is so even with the Church. Lots of things can be done by generosity of people, but it still takes cold hard cash.

This passage is well worth a close and attentive look. Note both the spirit and the guidelines that Paul suggests, each of which tend to be lacking these days. Generosity is not something one can expect nowadays, although it still shines through often in most remarkable ways. We are in this together, and that is the way we need to operate. Life is not a competition but a gift.

GOSPEL

Mark had a capacity offering what may be described as 'sandwich incidents.' And this is one of them. Two incidents remarkably similar and yet also quite contrasting.

The first 'patient' could have expected preferential treatment, being the child of an important synagogue official. The second person could have been consigned to outer darkness if Jewish Law was heeded, for she was a nobody and an outcast because of her ailment.

So notice the sequence of events. When the call came from Jairus, Jesus attended to it. A twelve-year-old girl, on the point of reaching maturity then, was dying. And yet the hold-up came from a woman who had been suffering menstrual problems of enormous scope, for the same period that the young lass had been alive. This woman was outcast because of those woes, being disqualified from synagogue and from society generally. This points up the reason that she attempted to find her answers in secret. While she knew Jesus had substantial answers for her, she would have wondered whether He would have followed the 'party line' and disqualified her.

Jesus' action in removing the secrecy was not some sort of attempt to unmask the interloper. Not at all. In fact, Jesus knew that the only chance she had for rehabilitation back into society was for everyone to know that her disability had been overcome. It was yet another measure of the sensitivity our Lord had for people in lousy circumstances. This poses the challenge for modern Christians to be as sensitive and aware in contact with people, especially those disadvantaged.

Only after the disqualified person has been assisted does the qualified person gain attention. Rather too late for some, and the lass had died. This created no hassle for Jesus, and maybe – in contrast to the first situation – made the synagogue president feel something of the pain the haemorrhaging lady. There is always truth behind the image of the 'wounded healer.' One who has suffered nothing much is small help to someone who has suffered a lot.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

You may well feel that I tend to pick holes in things and in people, but the reality is that I long for us all to look at life and situations with a lot more compassion, relevance and support. It has been surprising how, over the past few weeks and months, situations have come to my attention where people of different Churches have responded with unnecessary force against people of their congregations who have come under fire. It happens for all sorts of reasons, and it does untold damage.

Some years ago, the pastor of a congregation was discarded by his folk, because he and his wife were having difficulties – and parted. Because of that, he was considered to be ineligible to pastor any more because of that breakdown. The whole experience was traumatic for the man, and also his wife I imagine. But 'rules is rules' in that denomination, and the man had to go. *My own experience rather more years ago, when I asked a Parish Council to be aware of similar problems we were having, was that those people did not want to know. 'None of our business,' they said, all of them, and that was as supportive (!!!!) as the first example.*

Another situation was drawn to my attention only a few days ago, when a social care manager for our Church raised Cain when one of her team dared to do something for a patient when the said manager belonged to another Church that regarded the patient in this instance as sinful and beyond the pale.

Or I could go back decades, and into the Outback, to when I asked the minister of another Church if they would give Easter communion to our remote congregation. I was unable, through illness, to be there myself, and so I posed the request. The answer was appalling. Yes, the three nurses at the Outback hospital could receive Easter Communion, ***if they changed their allegiance to that minister's Church.***

Part of the problem – seems to me – is that there is very great ease in turning one's allegiance to the Faith into some sort of huge competition, in order to prove one's superiority over another's. It all shows up in manifold ways, all of them divisive, and none of them bearing the slightest connection to the sort of attitude and practice of our Lord.

I doubt if there is any need to provide any further illustration. The sad thing is that such processes are far too common, and still happen today. Small wonder that the Christian Church tends to be derided somewhat. It has to be classified as self-inflicted wounds, does it not?

On the more positive note, it is well worthwhile pondering those incidents in the Gospel and the clear and unhindered capacity of our Lord to operate with as much compassion as He did with firmness. Here was no Johnny-come-lately wanting to prove Himself popular and 'nice' to everyone. Jesus was not trying to curry favour with anyone and everyone around Him. He was operating from clearly definable attitudes of

care and thoughtful concern for people, aware (as we need to be) that doing the right thing the wrong way can be devastating to the person concerned. Far too often, in our cases, we tend to be more aware of the 'important part we play,' rather than see that the truly important thing is for the person concerned to be empowered to move on from there, un beholden.

So please go over that Gospel story again, and see just how Jesus dealt with the situations. Each one shows immense care and thoughtfulness, seeing beyond the immediate situation to the next step and beyond. (Note how He even asked the parents of that young lass to give her something to eat! How practical and down-to-earth can you get?

There may be some who might like to be given, at this point, a list of suggested 'dos and donts' when it comes to relating to people. I may be a nuisance, but I have never found such approaches to be anything else than what someone once called 'techniqueing.' All that process does, seems to me, is to reduce people and their problems down to some sort of 1-2-3 approach, which dehumanises both the giver and the receiver. I recall with horror the way we were encouraged, many years ago, to preach the A-B-C of the Gospel, which, in my experience at least, was as useful as well, you imagine.

If David had been alive these days, and suffered his loss of Jonathan, no doubt there would have been all sorts of do-gooders ready to rush in with what is euphemistically called 'counselling.' Fortunately, even in those distant days, David was aware enough of God and His characteristics, to be able to respond to life's realities and hurts without such assistance. The Faith is not about following and swallowing a whole set of rules. Nor has it to do with being given all sorts of panaceas to cope with disappointments. It is a matter of responding to life, to people and to God with realism, imagination and, most of all, compassion. Let's face it, the world could do with a lot more of that regardless, could it not?

Sentence

‘What is this wisdom that has been given to Him? What deeds of power are done by His hands?’

Mark 6:2

Collect

O God, You have prepared for those who love You such good things as pass our understanding. Pour into our hearts such love towards You that, loving You above all things, we may obtain Your promises which exceed all that we can desire or deserve, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

2 Samuel 5:1-5 & 9 –10

PSALM

48

EPISTLE

2 Corinthians 12: 2 – 10

GOSPEL

Mark 6:1 – 13

NOTES ON THE READINGS

There are times when I am somewhat bemused by the selection of the readings; other times when the connection is subtle but powerful. I must confess that today is one of the times when I am utterly confused both by the readings and the disconnection of them.

Old Testament Lesson

Prior to David’s ascension to the throne, he was one of the little people, a shepherd. Like Saul before him, David tended to become less modest and more demanding. His own son was far worse. Still, here at the start, there was great enthusiasm. How ridiculously easy does it become for someone from uncomplicated and lowly background to become self-obsessed and demanding. There is an object lesson in here for all of us I suspect.

Psalm

Am I forgiven if I make the comment that this psalm appears to be the ninth century BC example of propaganda or spin. Compared to the rest of Israel, Jerusalem may well have seemed marvellous, but if other cultures such as the Egyptian was considered, little old Jerusalem would be a mere shadow. Still, I imagine it bucked up the natives somewhat. *(I prefer greater reality in most situations, don’t you?!*

Epistle

Lots of people in the time of my youth would have preferred not to have this passage in the New Testament. It was rather too mystic for those folk. And perhaps it is still. But notice why Paul refers to what is obviously his own experience. While such a thing could easily have him ‘off with the fairies’ or considering himself very much his contemporaries’ superior, there was that factor that kept him humble.

All manner of things have been put forward as that ‘thorn in the flesh.’ Some have projected an eye affliction, but that seems hardly powerful enough to be a huge problem. Others have wondered whether Paul was gay, but that may be unlikely. Whatever his thorn was it was nuisance enough and strong enough to keep his feet well and truly in touch with the ground. That is the real issue, and thank God for that.

What really does stick out like the proverbial organ stops,¹ is that final comment. ‘When I am weak, then I am strong.’ This is not some refined form of Irish colloquialism but is a fascinating truth. Most Christians (and possibly a lot of others, too,) find that when they are most vulnerable, then they are also most effective in relating to people in need of care and compassion. Superiority has no place *whatever* in pastoral ministry. It has no place in real and ordinary life, either.

Gospel

¹ You may need to be old enough to have encountered pipe organs in your Church or Town Hall to know about this. These days organs have tabs to alter tone; then it was a case of pulling out a ‘stop’ or projecting knob to make similar alterations to tone and sound.

If ever anyone has suffered from the misapprehension that all was sweetness and light for Jesus in His ministry, a touch of reality offers the best path to recovery. There is never any great ease in sticking out one's neck and trying to get people to think past, live past or move past their present comfort zone. And the older people get, the harder that process becomes. Innovators are often seen as threatening, and so are rejected.

Oddly enough, one of the requirements for Jewish people to respond seriously to any person was that they knew or knew of their antecedents. Here, in typical human bloodmindedness, the locals of Nazareth reversed the normal standards of acceptance in order to justify their rejection of Him. Jesus' *bon mot* in response to that rejection is both well known and basically true in many situations.

This incident is a damning illustration of human devilry, this failure even to check out the truth of something before rejecting it. And it was that very negative and bitter reaction to Him that led to the comment about lack of faith. The real lack was of truthfulness, honesty, and integrity. And that lack puts a stop to any growth in any direction except backwards. So pity the poor Twelve as Jesus sent them out, two by two. It was really a case of 'dropping them in at the deep end.' Mind you, most of us have found that the best way to learn anything is to have to teach it.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

One of the fascinating aspects of life that struck me as a young person was the adulation (if that is not too strong a word) for the young clergy of the day. Other young people seemed to hang off their words, ready to go to whatever lengths necessary to prove their allegiance. In that youth of my time, particular adulation was given to the young priests who were assigned to what used to be called 'youth work.'

When I dared to assume that the same thing would happen to me, I was hugely disappointed. Not that I was disliked (as far as I can tell,) but there was no idolising. Oddly enough, as time has gone by, the attention seems to have passed from young clergy to sports and other stars. (And I cannot say that I am all that sad about it.) But it does raise the question as to what does a person need in order to be accepted and responded to, especially when it comes to Christian ministry?

Young King David seems to have had a honeymoon period, but then I guess kings often did that. Even some modern politicians seem to have similar experiences. St. Paul might have managed a good following with that apparently stunning 'out of this world' experience of his. But where would that take people? Titillation would seem to be the limit of the value of that.

So it would seem that you can mould some people into lap-dog sorts of folk, for lots of people seem to like the buzz it offers. But if that had been the limit of Jesus' expectation, I suspect that the Faith might have lasted for five minutes, or a little longer.

What marked Jesus out as rather different from other peripatetic preachers of His day and before, was that He was tied wholeheartedly to the truth. It is not the most popular of paths to follow, and it is harder to get other people to jump off the rather shallower bandwagon. So many people will choose to head in the direction that the majority head, without much of a thought about outcomes or priorities. Lemming-like, one may say with some accuracy.

There is nothing particularly new in all of this. As the Gospel indicates with transparent candour, the very people who ought to have flocked to Jesus' side because He was heading in the direction that the Faith was taking them, determined to apply the brakes with great lack of subtlety. It would seem that they were aware enough of the fact that He was heading in directions way outside of their comfort zone, so it showed them up as giving what the OT prophets used to call 'lip-service.' They were perfectly happy to 'talk the talk.' They were NOT prepared to 'walk the walk.' So, in modern parlance, they voted with their feet. Someone with a wiser head than mine once mentioned that *'as long as people did not understand what Jesus was on about, they followed in droves. However, when they began to hear and understand what He was saying, they deserted Him.'*

In our own day and age, the same resistance is evident. Church leaders have bemoaned, for decades, the decline of Church membership. There have been all manner of methods and plans offered to reverse the

trend. These have covered from ‘making the Faith fun’ as a recent applicant for a Chaplaincy reported, to ‘livening up worship,’ which tends to mean the use of boppy music and feel good talks. It all works for some people for a while, but like the seed on rocky ground, it tends to pall after some time. The reality is that we live in a society that finds all sorts of reasons and none to turn their back on God, preferring hedonistic alternatives. That is people’s choice, and they are perfectly free to make such choices, but sooner or later the shallowness of that choice reverberates in their heads and hearts. Small wonder we live in a period of high youth (and adult!) suicide. Such folk tend to be left with nothing to live for. And, if it is not too hard a thing to say, that factor is a proof of the validity of the Gospel, not of its failure.

Sentence

Who shall stand in the Lord's holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their hands to do what is false

Psalm 23:3

Collect

O Lord we beseech You mercifully to receive the prayers of Your people who call upon You, and grant that we may both perceive and know what things we ought to do, and also may have the grace and power faithfully to fulfil them, though Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

2 Samuel 6:1 – 5 & 12 – 19

PSALM

24

EPISTLE

Ephesians 1: 1 – 14

GOSPEL

Mark 6:14 – 29

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

In a way, this first lesson has little to commend it, and in my mind has small use for the modern Christian. Whilst the early Hebrews had high respect for any of the accoutrements associated with worship, there seems to have been quite some superstition about it. It seems that Michal was put out enormously seeing the King going somewhat charismatic, but there is not much in the text to see on whose side the author was.

Psalm

This is a well-known and well-used Psalm and carries quite a broad vision both of God and of life. In our day and age, it tends to be used on high and formal occasion. The ancient Hebrews never saw any disconnection between life, the world and God. In fact life is the arena in which the People of God express both their faith and their sense of community. Clearly, the author saw the necessity of honest relations to make life more valuable for everyone.

If the sense of joy rings strangely on modern ears, it is worth stopping to see that the Hebrew delight, in a world where extortion and dishonesty was rife and safety was limited, they knew that in God they had the certainty for the values they held and of their view of life. That should not sound strange to moderns, for it is precisely the *lack* of that perception that leaves many moderns without any confidence in very much at all.

Epistle

It is far too easy indeed to get carried away with Paul's florid language and so lose sight of what He is saying. Do not fall into the trap of trying to make this all 'spiritual and airy-fairy.' It is remarkably significant.

Start from the end of the first paragraph. *That everything might be brought to a unity in Christ.* That is the crux. If you wish to put it this way, what is Paul saying about the meaning of life? The answer: Jesus. But before you head off to the clouds, see what Paul means. Paul is making the extraordinary statement that, if you want to know who you are, why you are alive, and what is the point of existence, the answer is Jesus. Not your lovey-dovey narrow view of Jesus, but the clear and evident statement that when life is lived and relationships expressed in the terms that Jesus expressed in His own life and teaching, *then* life is being lived in the way that the Creator intended it to be lived. Anything less than that is damaging, a falling short. This is so, not just for believers, but for each and every human being. It is an extraordinary and powerful statement.

GOSPEL

This very depressing picture of life as it "used to was" is a remarkable counterpoint to the high ideals posited by Paul. Any close look at the history of the Herods shows a very ugly way of life and attitude even

to family. No one in that clan could ever have felt safe, as murder and intrigue seems to have been the order of the day. There would have been nothing unusual about the murder of the Baptist, and the extraordinary response of Herod to Salome's request was typical. Here was a man whose acceptance by other people held more sway with him than any sense of justice or morality.

That this passage has been selected in the same breath as that passage from Ephesians certainly brings us back down to earth with a thump. *And that is the point. It is essential that Christians recognize the act that they are living in the real world, and by their very attitude and action, run contrary to the general direction of the majority of people.* You are a colony of heaven, and should never be surprised at the antagonism to the Faith.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

In the course of the past few days, I have heard several complaints about why God did not intervene in recent events in human history. One of these was the reporting of the present Pope's visit to Auschwitz and the gas chambers of the Holocaust. Why did God not do something about it? All manner of people involved in the fighting of the first and second World Wars has similar complaints also. For them it seems either that God is impotent, or simply does not exist except as a figment of people's imaginations. Rather sadly, this expectation of God stems from a great, even gross misunderstanding of the Biblical accounts. (Someone recently commented that the Bible is fiction, when arguing the matter of the Da Vinci codes.)

May I make a few comments about today's Gospel reading? There are links with the series of recent readings about David also.

From my earliest days, I was deeply affected by this story of the execution of John the Baptist for the simple reason that it seemed most unjust to me that such a servant of God should have come to such an ignominious end. If John the Baptist was called to that role, it seemed tally unjust that his death should be the outcome of what almost certainly was a drunken celebration, and a rather sensuous one at that. When I questioned my elders and betters, none could come up with any other answer than 'it was God's will' which is the most appalling escape valve ever. There has to be a better reason than that.

Then I encountered the stories of a number of the OT prophets, who lived similarly risky lives, and sometimes paid the ultimate sacrifice. Then I was confronted with a rather awful but interesting and challenging reality. And there is nothing of the escape valve in it.

The *faith once delivered* is nothing if it is not harsh reality. And the harsh reality is that this Faith is designed precisely to be a realistic and sound response to a world run amok. There is no escape from reality. There is the facing of it, and the provision of a viable alternative. On top of that, there is always the challenge to each and every one of us to choose: to be part of the problem, or part of the remedy. To be part of the remedy is to be swimming against the tide, but to be a human so swimming. No whiz bangs, no great miracles, no great escapes. There is not even some sort of overt judicial system than points up the faithful ones. Each other person has to make up their own minds as to the validity or otherwise of the life and actions of someone like John the Baptist. Or like Jesus.

For God to do otherwise, would be to make utter mockery of our humanity. I wonder if you can follow what I am trying to convey? When it comes to the Holocaust, the responsibility for the horror and violence –and occasional Schindler's List sort of reaction – lies at the door of each and every human involved, or who turned a blind eye. But this is a far from popular perception of the disaster.

Recent newspaper reports² have been telling the story of people scaling Mount Everest passing one of their number who was allowed to die high up on the peak, because to do anything else was to risk their own lives. One letter to the Advertiser Editor asked whether people had forgotten the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

² May, 2006

It is not a matter of God setting people up to choose between good and evil. It is a matter of fact that that is the way life is, and some of us are confronted by remarkably challenging situations. And the way in which we respond or refuse to respond simply indicates right out in the open what sort of people we are. Selfish, or compassionate. And when there is little in the way of recognition or advantage, it is clear that altruism is the way to go.

I find it rather pathetic the way in which honours tend to be handed out to all sort of people for doing all sorts of things. Very often indeed, the people so recognized tend to have done far less than a large number of others who have never been recognized. The Pope referred to above makes a lot of noise about the move to declare his predecessor as a Saint. There would be millions of people better qualified, I suspect, for such an honour.

So ponder the Biblical reality. You, like John the Baptist, are called to be one of God's People, in a world that does not want to know, and God will not protect you with cotton wool from the harsh realities. Like your Lord, you live a real life in the real world, and you will cop all the same crap that your Lord faced. That is not a matter of God being impotent, but on the other hand, God is not some sort of pathetic smotherer either.

Sentence

Jesus saw a great crowd, and He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things. *Mark 6:34*

Collect

O God, You alone can order the unruly wills and affections of sinful people; teach us to love what You command and to desire what You promise, so that, among the changes and chances of this world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Old Testament Lesson

2 Samuel 7:1 – 14a

Psalm

89: 21 – 38

EPISTLE

Ephesians 2: 11 – 22

GOSPEL

Mark 6: 30 – 34 & 53 – 56

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

If you have a good memory, you will recall that this passage occurred in Advent, and here we have it again. It strikes *me* as odd that we have it again as quickly, but spend a moment or two to wonder why. As the comment was made previously, it may well have been something other than altruism that led David to wonder about building a Temple. As with most large building, old and new, there is more than a little egotism in their erection. In fact, many modern towers are regarded as phallic symbols. It has more to do, these days, with who can build the tallest (best, most remarkable) building and be lionised.

To the extent that such is the case, please stop and realise that God would have been pointing David in less dramatic and self-obsessive directions. The whole Biblical picture presents God, not as the whiz-bang Person Who stands tall in front of everyone, but rather as the ‘still small voice’ Who simply looks for and longs for people to respond *honestly*.

Psalm

There is quite something of a dichotomy that is presented in the Psalm. On the one hand, we have the picture of the usual human political propaganda that ‘our King is the greatest’ – in a situation where God seems to be low-keying everything. On the other hand, if one looks at the bigger picture there is also the sense that God honoured His promise to David, in spite of all the vicissitudes of life and history. However, the fulfillment of that promise is still as low-key as the OT readings underline.

Epistle

Dare you follow me yet again as we look through this passage? Once again we have the power struggle between ‘the circumcision’ and ‘the uncircumcision.’ What is implied is that you are really someone and something if you are circumcised, and you are zilch if you are not. That apparently was the view of Judaism of the time. Like some Christians still, you are ‘it and a bit’ if you fit the sausage skin, and on the outer if you do not.

And that has nothing to do with the Faith, Jewish or Christian. In fact it is utterly contrary. It leads us back into the Adamic path, back into what the NT calls death.

The real faith is (and always has been from the Abrahamic beginnings,) about reconciliation, forgiveness and peace. It is about the ‘breaking down the barrier of enmity,’ and that is not between God and us, but between us and each other. And, as with the Cross, this barrier can be dealt with, not by some *beau geste* but by quiet down-to-earth negotiation and confession and forgiveness.

The truth of this is underlined by the remarkably stupid opposite that tends to be the human way to solve problems. When will be EVER stop and see that violence offers no resolution. It only escalates the problems.

GOSPEL

For those readers who are alert, they will be aware that the section omitted from this reading contains one of the feeding miracles.³ If that is a bother, please see what is left, and then realize why. All that is underlines in this passage, seems to me, is the care and concern Jesus had, for people generally and for those who were already apostles.⁴

And it is the care and concern that is the focus. There is not a lot that is newsworthy these days unless it is dramatic and possibly dangerous. And that is a blight on our attitudes. The important aspects of life are not there to big-note people, or to provide a stage to show off to the world. Just as in the aspects of the faith referred to above, the real work of the real world goes on, low-key, unobserved but utterly essential.

NOTES ON THE READINGS.

I must have long been the despair of my elders and now my youngers, one way and another. There was always the awkward question to ask, or the odd issue to raise – and there still is. I do not think it pigheaded of me, but rather an attempt to remain true to the Faith and the Lord. That attempt has not won a lot of hearts particularly amongst those who may be described as the hierarchy.

The Rector of the Parish had appointed a mate and me to the Parish Council, which was then regarded as quite something of a mark of trust. We were both 18, part of the Church, of course, but perhaps a little naïve. An agenda item had to do with a planned giving campaign, which was presented (as often it was back then, 50 odd years ago) as the panacea for the Church. Both my mate and I (as well as my father, also a member) spoke against the proposal, and we were railed against. Even the Rector took us aside, mate and I, and tore strips off us for what he regarded as disloyalty. He had appointed us in order to ensure his ideas were adhered to. Without question. ‘Father knows best!’

It was, I think, at the Ordination of my son-in-law where the preacher had some fascinating observations to make about being Church in this day and age, and prognosticated, amongst other things, that this 21st Century was shaping up to be the century of the dictator. As time passes, I suspect that he had and has a point. One of the things that bothers me about life is the plethora of people who (a) are sure that they know better than anyone else and (b) demand and require unthinking and unquestioning obedience. It is not only politicians who operate thus, but increasing numbers of clergy, who are certain that if their particular path is not followed, then there is no future for the Church. Almost invariably, the path being advertised is one of not so subtle control, and is an attempt somehow to big note the Church. I suspect that underneath lies the attempt to big note themselves.

In this process being proffered, there is no room for caring about people, no room for consideration of other points of view, no possibility of suggesting any gentler path. And it is about as valuable and as honest, seem so me, as the George W. approach to Iraq. If you consider me to be out of court, say so.

As I consider the Scriptures, I can do little other than head in a different direction. As I look at life itself, it is that different direction that seems underlined to me. And that particular direction is expressed in almost all of today’s readings, if one has the patience to ponder.

In today’s world, there is great tension between what should be and what is. There are large numbers of people who are prepared to express their (totally uncontroversial???) view that there is just one way to deal with this issue and that. Almost invariably, that one way is nothing other than the arrogating of power to

³ ‘Signs’ John calls them, which indicates a request for us to think about what was happening rather than be carried away with the wonder of it all.

⁴ It is after all only Chapter 6 of Mark’s Gospels, and he describes the Twelve as Apostles. This, of course, because they were already being ‘sent out’ – which is the task of such people.

themselves, and the denial of it to others. Small wonder than the TV news is full of bomb threats and facts, loss of life and limb, and increasing tensions.

Contrast all that with the ministry of Jesus, and the experience of God. In fact, God tends to have been consigned to the scrap books of history, because He seems to be totally inactive and apparently unconcerned about human folly. I recall time and again, hearing of returned men and women from World War II declaring their disbelief because what sort of God would allow that hideous stuff to continue. No further thought or understanding was undertaken.

Where is God in all this? Why no fan-fare and no forcing of issues? Why no demand that humans obey. And the answer is interesting. Recently, in this State of ours, huge concern has been expressed at the ghastly toll and the extent to which young people are involved. The response has been a sort of blame game, where Governments are castigated for refusal to fund road works enough, and Police are shot at for extending speed camera and drug- and alcohol-detection. On the other hand, people expect the road toll to be decreased *by others than themselves*. And there lies the bind. If legislation cannot fix it, what can? If punitive measures cannot fix it, what can? And the real answer is known to all of us, is it not?

The real answer is **'I am responsible, and so are you.'** It is a matter of listening to the still small voice that is there, for believers and unbelievers. There is not big bang to underline it. There is no propaganda campaign to underline the reality. It is a simple matter of stopping to face the realities, to value other people as much (or more than) as yourself. Without that honest and open approach, there will be no solution. None whatever.

We tend to have been led astray into believing that this programme or that is the solution to all our problems. One of the things that has struck me for decades now, is the extent to which people in the Church have offered all manner of techniques and programmes that will solve all the Church's problems. While there may well be some value in each of these programmes, none of them do anything more than touch the edges. What has to happen is what has always had to happen, and it is expressed rather nicely by the latest ecology advert that has been shown lately (Feb., 06) Talking about global warming, the advert ends with the screen

**THE PROBLEM IS GLOBAL
THE ANSWER IS LOCAL.**

It may show my age, but so be it. Echoing in my ears is a little song that we used to sing in Kindergarten Sunday School, and that would have to be 65 or so years ago.

*Jesus bids us shine with a pure clear light,
Like a little candle burning in the night
In this world of darkness s we must shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine.*

And I hate to think how long it is since I sang that.

Sentence

Jesus said “ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever, and the bread that I give for the life of the world is My flesh.”

John 6:51

Collect

O God, the protector of all who trust in You, without Whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: increase and multiply upon us Your mercy, that, with You as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal that we finally lose not the things eternal. Grant this, Heavenly Father, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

2 Samuel 11: 1 – 15

Psalm

14

Epistle

Ephesians 3:14 - 21

GOSPEL

John 6: 1 – 21

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

The story of David and Bathsheba is both very sad and quite unremarkable. How are the mighty fallen? This was part of the reading some week ago. But kings are human, though that excuses nothing. The behaviour of Uriah, Hittite and not Hebrew, left that of his king in tatters. What is even more human and turning ghastly was David’s determination to cover his sin by removing Uriah from the scene. When do we learn that trying to cover one failure results in the creation of a worse evil.

Psalm

This is one of the psalms that has long been fascinating to me, as the author ponders the extent to which people will go to justify their evil and/or selfish actions. Here is no expression of ‘fear of God’ as a barrier against wrongdoing. It is rather the recognition that there is sense and value behind the universe, not some sort of business of looking after Number One. If I respond to God from fear, even fear of hell, I offer a remarkably poor reason for that response. Surely my response must be always to truth, and not from fear. When it is from truth, then some sort of better outcome can be expected.

Epistle

And is this not exactly what Paul is getting at in this short passage from Ephesians? The Christian chooses to follow Christ, not from fear of any sort, for that is destructive. It is from the realisation that love and not hate is the driving force for life, and that anything less than that heads downwards at a rate of knots.

Gospel

It is almost impossible to offer brief comment on this most remarkable of passages. A lot of nonsense has been said about it, but that tends to be because the real point had been missed.

Here Jesus offers a quantum leap, in understanding the Faith, and God and life itself. Here is Jesus ‘doing a Moses’ in a way. Compare Moses’ feeding of Israel in the wilderness, with manna⁵ and quail, with this incident, recorded by each of the Evangelists, sometimes twice. With Moses, there is just enough food for people, and here there is abundance. So the point of the story is not as ‘miracle,’ but as John expresses it, a sign, σημειον, a pointer, something to consider, think about and respond to.

The fact that ‘bread’ is the focus is that it underlines something without which life cannot continue. While this can be understood literally, from which one draws some conclusions, it also points to the deeper things of life, without which living loses its ‘sting.’ What is most interesting in John’s Gospel is the way in which the Evangelist draws further conclusions still and turns the incident into a eucharistic explanation.

So here, you like, in this clutch of readings, is the contrast between what seems to have immediate value (David and Bathsheba) but cannot fulfil the promise it seems to offer, and that which is perhaps less tangible but is far more life-giving than may appear on the surface.

⁵ An interesting side issue: as the text indicates, the Hebrew word ‘manna’ means ‘what is it?’

NOTES FOR A SERMON

If ever the question is asked, 'what is the most important aspect of life, or the most valuable goal in living?' the response may well be very mixed indeed. What is the very thing without which one cannot really keep going?

The obvious and immediate answer is food and water, though in the rather-too-sophisticated West, there is more likely to be focus on cold hard cash. However a person cannot eat or drink money – nor solve many problems with it, when the crunch is on. With the most basic items, however, life can go on, and hopefully upward.

On the other hand, if one is to believe most of the magazines of the present day, the best things in life are to be found in a satisfying sex life, though I have more than a sneaky suspicion that the emphasis there is more in hope than in reality. Part of the reason for that this ancient would offer is that the emphasis tends to be on **getting**, rather than giving, from what I read when I can be bothered. And we may well turn full circle back to that observation as well.

King David must have been quite something in his day. 'Dirty old man' would have been the epithet when I was young. 'Bit of a stud' would be the comment now, I imagine. And the damage David caused was immense, and tended to continue. And there lies the rub. 'Go for it' might have been his byword. 'Cop it' was the result.

As I have commented before, the rather unpleasant thing about what Scripture calls 'sin,' is not so much that it makes some people feel guilty (and others try to ignore that unpleasantness), the reality is not so much of guilt as it is of damage. When I am selfish, it affects far more than just little old me. It impacts on you, too, and makes life a little more unpleasant for you. If I behave badly enough, the repercussions may well be devastating.

Which brings us back to the Feeding sign. Both this incident, and the Moses incident long centuries before, were meant to focus not just on the need for a feed, but on what really does make life go round. For the Israelites, no food meant no future. Bones in the desert. The picture is a stark one. The thought of those people having to head back home on an empty stomach can reverberate in our own experience, can it not?

It was not just bread rolls and fish that people needed, not just Macca's hamburgers, but that which enhances life and offers a much better reality. It is not really food, when you boil it all down, it has to do with a deeper hunger inside us. So the sign pointed to the deeper reality, for people then as it does for us now.

What is it that we really need, for life to be rather better than it is? There is far more to it than a good feed, or even a great one. It will last for a while but not for that long. Is it, as David thought, some sort of present and instant satisfaction? For all the baloney about better love lives, it has to be said that the immediate experience does not last all that long! There needs to be more to it than that.

When Jesus went on, as John records, to describe Himself as the bread from heaven, He was offering no simple and easy fix to solve it all. Jesus is no pill that one can pop, and all will be well thereafter. However, what Jesus was saying, underlining and going on to do, was to point out that – to put it at its most simple – life is to be found not in getting but in giving. All a bit out of kilter with today's Western mindset. All arse up with care, as my boss would have said half a century ago. Rather too 'Irish' for today's yuppies, Generation X and Generation Y. We seem to be blinded by the 'what's in it for me' syndrome, trying to find the failure of that approach in 'more of the same.' Lemmings we are! Why not stop and ponder?

The bread that I give for the world is My flesh. The focus of Christian worship still tends to be the Eucharist, and where it is not, that is a great pity. It may all sound a bit repetitive week after week, but there it is in front of us. Just as Jesus gave and gives Himself for us, so we need to operate on the same wavelength. If you think that is rather risky, then look at the risks Jesus took with His disciples then, let alone now. If you think you may miss out on something, stop and realize that Jesus had the Cross in front of Him. There, He gave His all, even knowing that those who executed Him did not give a tinker's cuss about what He was saying and doing. But some people got the picture.