

Sentence

Those who find their life will lose it; and those who lose their life for Jesus' sake will find it.

Matthew 10:39

Collect

O God, the light of the minds that know You, the life of the souls that love You and the strength of the thoughtful ones who seek You; help us so to know You that we may truly love You, and so to love You that we may truly serve You, Whose service is perfect freedom, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

2 Kings 2: 1- 14

Psalm

77:1 – 2 & 11 – 20

EPISTLE

Galatians 5: 1, and 13 - 25

GOSPEL

Luke 9: 51 – 62

NOTES ON THE READINGS

When one reads the early Old Testament, one needs to recognize that here is not the 'law of the Medes and Persians which never can be changed,' but rather to see it as a record of the growth and development (evolution if you dare!) of people's understanding and experience of God. One also needs to catch sight of the way in which Hebrews expressed their faith and history. We moderns tend to understand things as literal, but Hebrews were far imaginative and freer in their expression of realities.

Old Testament Lesson

This is a well-known and interesting tale of the transfer of 'power' from Elijah to Elisha. It is a lovely tale but it does need to be received with a pinch of salt, as one says. Here is the junior member having to assume the mantle¹ of the elder-statesman, whilst being aware, quite painfully, of the enormous leap that lay in front of him.

The real issue for us is to recognize the need, very often, of a very steep learning curve as the next generation takes leadership moves. While Elisha was aware of the call, he was also aware of the need of rather greater understanding and loyalty. These are issues that tend to be lost in today's world where rights and prerogatives are seen as far more important than responsibilities.

Psalm

The modern reader could be forgiven for thinking that this Psalmist was off with the fairies! Where does reality emerge from these dramatic verses? The answer is that one needs to be aware of the way in which Hebrews seem to have expressed things. It was not a matter of 'whiz bang' as it appears, but has rather more depth than that.

You are well aware of the Exodus rescue, and it may well have been dramatic to have been part of that. However, the point is that it is ever God Who rescues His people, **and He always does it through the agency of faithful humans**. It is also important to note how –after the passage of time – such events become formative for Israel, and become almost 'mythologized.'

What does that mean? Notice the constant reference to the sea or to waters. Both the Red Sea (and other waters) became symbols of the evil from which the Divine-led escape occurred. In other words, whenever God's 'great deeds' occur, it is evil that trembles. And never forget that – in Biblical terms – evil always has a human face and source.

Epistle

It always surprises me that more people cannot see or understand that to be disciples of Christ is to choose that freedom of which Paul speaks. Mind you, 'freedom' in the Biblical sense is not license to do anything. It is far more significant than that, as is obvious from this passage.

¹ And this is where that turn of phrase comes from!

There is, as we have said before, a clear and distinct difference between the *modus operandi* for the faithful ones and for the unbelievers (for the sake of a better word.) There are but two prototypes for us humans, and one is 'Adam' and the other is 'Christ.' The former is self-seeking, self-serving and destructive. The latter is the opposite. In the former pattern, any sort of community is difficult and stressing; in the latter, community can thrive.

One huge mistake that some Christians have made is that Paul is concerned about our personal 'holiness.' If that is our motive, then so you perceive how evil has worked its way on that which is good. Dogooders can be singularly unattractive and ineffective people. If my concern is how I come across to you, then I have failed. If, however, what I manage to do makes sense and appeals to you, then you have caught sight of Christ.

GOSPEL

One of the great dangers facing the Infant Church – and people ever since, - has been to misunderstand the Gospel, and to see it in terms of 'who is right and who is wrong, and should not those in the right belt the living daylights out of those who are wrong.

Notice how different is our Lord's approach, even as He faces the ascent towards Jerusalem and the crisis of the Cross. The Twelve, like Elisha if you have a good memory, wanted to take punitive action against those who refused food and shelter to Jesus. However, our Lord then and still, is quite aware of the capacity of people to refuse to respond even to that which would be of huge benefit to them. And there was no forcing of people's hands.

The second paragraph looks at the issues from a slightly different perspective. Here are people considering discipleship, but apparently expecting a somewhat easy passage. The first offeror is put off by the possible discomfort, and turns back. The second seemed prepared to follow, but only after the old man had died. Jesus neither offered comfort nor would he allow deferment. Our Lord was, even then, painfully aware of the fact that the Faith is never likely to be a popular option, because (as the Epistle makes clear) people choose, quite deliberately, to be Adamic instead.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I have commented as follows before, several times I suspect: it is a strange and somewhat wonderful thing being a priest, especially over a long period of time. I have observed people who make their 'decision for Christ' with great joy and jubilation, and their persistence lasts for a remarkably short period of time. I have encountered clergy and others who have been remarkably vocal in their faith Who then disappear into the ether so to speak, for all manner of reasons and none.

One of my best tales concerns a young man, schoolteacher at our town, whose young wife was wanting to be prepared for Confirmation. He was quite loving really, but he insisted that the only way that could happen was if the classes were to be at his place, so he could be sure to save his wife from this iniquitous superstition. Quite a group of us acceded to that request, and in fact the curriculum for the preparation was largely determined by his agenda. It was hard work for most of the group, but they certainly explored areas that otherwise they would not. It must have been about six months into the programme that I met the young bloke down the street, one Saturday, shopping. He dragged me on one side and made a request of me. 'Is it possible for me the change sides?' he asked, and so we went on with another person added to the group and he was confirmed alongside his wife.

That was not the end of the story. We moved and they moved and it was not until about 25 years later that, in another parish very distant from the first, visitors one Sunday wished to convey a message from the couple. The message was that they were continuing in their pilgrimage as Christians and taking real and responsible part in the life of their parish. That latter part of the message was more encouraging than the first.

It strikes me – on this Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, - that the issue being raised for our attention is precisely that matter of discipleship, commitment and continuing. I would not mind five dollars for every person I have encountered who *talked* about becoming Christian disciples, but who dropped off in fairly rapid time, for all sorts of excuses, reasons and nothings.

That lovely old tale about the transfer of responsibility from Elijah to Elisha is well worth pondering, even if it means looking through or past the Hebrew mythological way of telling stories. The hard reality behind the tale is that the work of God has to go on, and that God always works through human intermediaries, and that those humans need, utterly, to put their hands to the plough and never look back. Elijah had left huge shoes to be filled, and it would be no use if the successor was some sort of wimp or half-hearted so-and-so. Lots of people want to be leaders, want to be followers, but if they are looking for kudos and gain, then they will disappoint themselves and those around them rather swiftly and very sadly. That Elisha hung in there, travelling all over the countryside, and determined to follow his leader is a symbol of the commitment that showed forth from the rest of his activities.

However, it seems to me that the greatest impact in our thoughts on the subject stem from that uncompromising cameo in today's Gospel. Jesus never minced words when reality had to be faced, and we may well feel that He was a little too harsh in His response to those two candidates for discipleship. To the first, Jesus presented the very likely hardships along the way; to the second, Jesus refused to accept a procrastinator. It is important to note that the second bloke was putting off the decision until his father passed away, and that could have been years or decades away. It could be said that this fellow was trying to follow the Jewish pattern of responsibility to the olds, but it would seem he was actually using that as an excuse to put off the question. Jesus' reaction to the man seems to suggest that it was a matter of the second!

Now all this points up, for me at least, that the question of our own commitment to discipleship is to be re-examined. OK, most of us can probably point to a long history of church attendance, and that is great. But the question is one of discipleship, and that emphasises rather more than going to Church. If I am disciple, I am learner, I am explorer, I am one who is content to reach out to others and I am content to respond to others' questions and challenges about faith and life. It is a challenging role, and demanding, and sometimes embarrassing. And – from my experience at least – the most effective way to learn is to teach.

I would be bold enough to suggest that one of the less-strong aspects of our Church and its life has been our relative incapacity to reach out and interface with the community. We have tended to operate on the basis that if someone wants to find out about the Faith, they come to Church! When that does not happen – and there is no good reason why it should – we have no other way of responding. That is much of the reason why we are where we are as a Church. Whilst we may have huge difficulty with the concept of going door-to-door, we fail to see that there are myriads of opportunities to comment or discuss in many family, social and employment situations. I well recall a young Catholic priest, playing footy as a full forward, responding to a 'Jesus-bloody-Christ' reaction to his opponent, with a simple and direct 'Don't talk about a friend of mine like that, please!' and turned around and kicked a goal. It was a quiet but remarkable response that took the breath away from said opponent.

Much more could perhaps be said and written here. However, the question is raised, simply and forcefully, for us all to examine the extent and value of our real and actual discipleship.

Sentence

The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few: ask therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest.
 Luke 10:2

Collect

God of the Covenant, in our baptism You called us to proclaim the coming of Your kingdom; give us courage as You gave it to the Apostles, that we may faithfully witness to Your love and peace in every circumstance of life, in the Name of Jesus Christ our Redeemer, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit one God, for ever and ever.
Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

2 Kings 5: 1 – 14

PSALM

30

EPISTLE

Galatians 6: 7 – 18

GOSPEL

Luke 10: 1 – 24

The Lectionary excludes verses 13 – 16 but they are included here

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

The story of Naaman was always good Sunday School stuff, as it relates the effect on a far ‘superior’ person that the quiet witness of a little nobody can often have. As the story unfolds, the picture of Naaman with his nose in the air reminds me of the sort of person who considers any sort of faith let alone Christian, is beneath their dignity. Remember, everyone is perfectly free to choose sense or nonsense – and the Lord will not get in their way. The real issue here is of the quiet offering of something better by a young lass or lady who knew which way was up. No fuss, no bother, no tirade.

Psalm

Here is a simple, strong profession of faith in the God Who works with His people right through adversities. If that sounds all a little trite or even naïve, please do stop and see that Israel’s experience of God was really quite different to the expectations of other religions and cultures. Whereas others tended to see the gods as being there to be manipulated, Israel understood God as One to be responded to, regardless of the circumstances of life which they enjoyed or endured. God was to be found in the real world, and that required His people to respond to life and others with integrity and justice. That may well mean that those people would encounter considerable resistance. However, that is the way things are. And that required courage and persistence from His people..

Epistle

Although this passage may look as if Paul wanders off into highly spiritual’ territory, he was actually keeping his (and his readers’) feet on the ground. The Apostle was making it quite clear that we humans are and remain responsible for our actions, even though the repercussions of them may well have negative effects on others around us. Do you catch sight of how Paul underlines strongly the necessity of acting with integrity so profound that it stems from the bottom of our hearts and minds.

All that business about circumcision can be translated into more modern idiom by noting how there are always those people who will appear to be doing the right thing, whilst the reality is that they are simply going through the motions. Christian discipleship never attains anything like its goal if it is a matter of shallow display and not solid reality.

Gospel

Here, if ever there is an example. Is a Gospel passage of no nonsense. Up is up and down is down, and a person chooses – and carries the responsibility for that choice. It is a choice between good and evil ultimately, even if there is an element of ‘lesser of two evils.’ And do not be fooled by that reference to Satan. Satan is always the personification of human evil, my capacity and probability of stuffing up, - and in that ministry they were given, the Seventy encountered both the recognition and overthrow of evil, as well as evil’s triumphs.

When we read and perceive this passage as the challenge for us to recognize the demand to decide where our deep and solid loyalties lie, then we are beginning to move towards the ministry and goal that Jesus puts in front of each and all of us.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It must be a trait of old age or something, but I am getting quite impatient with the ‘call of the wild’ from so many of my contemporaries, who love to tear strips off those who continue to be faithful. All manner of criticism of the faith hits the airwaves, and whilst some of the argument has more than a tinge of truth sometimes, it is mostly a somewhat tirade against I don’t think they know quite what. Please – never let it be thought that I feel that Christians never make mistakes, or occasional monumental boo-boos; however, it seems to me that today’s Gospel expresses quite something of that which concerns me.

You will have encountered, or even expressed yourself sometimes, that determined mindless bigotry that will not listen for a moment to whatever is true, but goes on to downplay and discard anyone or anything that runs contrary to that person’s particular viewpoint. I read a newspaper article recently, by someone who was disparaging anyone who dares to retain even a modicum of faith, and the author was so carried away with his argument that he tripped himself up in much of what he wrote. I felt that there was little point in responding to the writer, but apart from anything else, the caricature of Christianity he set up to destroy bore very little likeness to the reality. And it is the reality that needs expression, not the folly or caricature.

Mind you, there has always been that terribly human capacity to refuse respond to the realities of life, as today’s Gospel illustrates. In a powerful and pointed comment to people of His own time, Jesus emphasised the tragic capacity of people, of whatever culture, community or ‘religion’² to fail or refuse to listen, think and then respond to whatever truth it is that faces them, avoiding issues large and small, and so failing to move forward in any sensible and constructive way. One can almost translate this into whatever mode one likes, so in a way I had to agree with that author referred to above, when it comes to the ‘skill’ of religious people to sidestep truth, reality – and growth as people. Modern parlance refers to that as one’s ‘comfort zone.’ Had everyone stayed there, we would still be living in caves and wearing animal skins, I am sure.

Our Lord was quite intensely aware of the fact that what He had to offer was not something soothing, something immediately acceptable, and totally non-demanding. And it was not some obscure religious attitude or action that He laid out in front of His disciples. It was the remarkably unwelcome and challenging business of living in truth, justice and compassion with each other, and so removing that most devastating of human evils which demands that you cower before my power, or wisdom or wealth. Whenever Jesus referred to ‘Satan,’ it was not to some monstrous power outside human control, but to that insidious distortion of reality that we *ourselves* manage to use to overcome whatever gets in our way.

² I confess to an increasing dislike of the use of this word – I feel certain that it points to something quite distorted in the human mind!

Sentence

Do to others as you would have them do to you. Love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return.

Luke 6:31

Collect

Eternal God, You have taught us through Christ that love is the fulfillment of the law; help us to love you with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our strength, and our neighbour as ourself, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Amos 7: 7 – 17

PSALM

82

EPISTLE

Colossians 1: 1 – 14

GOSPEL

Luke 10: 25 – 37

NOTES ON THE READINGS

And a note to begin:

*Whoever would aspire to be a prophet (or priest or even Apostle?) One of the rather difficult parts of the roles of any of the above is that so much of the Faith one represents tends to go against the tide of current views and attitudes. Amos encountered that sort of resistance exactly, even though he was talking to God's People about God issues. And notice that these were not essentially 'religious' issues, but ordinary matters of justice and integrity. As far as I am aware, Israel was the first people of 'religion' who even began to see the essential business of living with what we may call ethical issues to the fore. (Does this begin to say anything to you, here and now, about the **real** nature and emphasis of the Faith?)*

Old Testament Lesson

This is a hugely formative and informative passage, enlightening our understanding and perception of the nature of prophecy and faith, even so early in Hebrew history and development. At a time when most views of religion of whatever sort were all about getting to gods to do your own bidding³ here is clear evidence of a far more developed faith emerging.

Poor Amos. Called by God to preach to the Northern Kingdom whilst himself coming from the south. The reason? In the north, the emergence of an affluent and increasingly selfish class led- as ever it will – to a rapid growth in injustice leading to poverty led by an over-bearing upper and controlling class. Ideally, Hebrew societal rules rendered it impossible for such imbalance to emerge, so that when it did it was seen as a matter of Israel's failure to be true to God.

So Israel was being measured, tested, so show up its distance from the truth. And as much then as now, those in charge are not all that keen on being put under the microscope – and shown up for what they are. On the other hand, Amos – almost certainly somewhat naïve and honest – would have been taken by some surprise at the power of the resistance thrown up at him. (Notice if you dare, that Jesus encountered exactly the same sort of odium from authorities.)

The challenge thrown up by Amos was not so much a matter of Divine punishment, as it is the clear statement that – in any society or culture – **to live without justice is to risk the sudden and complete downfall** of that society and culture. *This is precisely what happened to the northern kingdom.*

Psalm

And is not this Psalm expressing exactly the same view and theology? And is it not about time that – in our present day and age – those in positions of power took note of the fact that, regardless of religion or lack of it, or even time in history, this same over-riding aspect of life continues to apply. God is not mocked!

³ Note how much of New Age and similar contemporary stuff is self-focussed, and not other-focussed!

Epistle

It is a pity in a way that Paul was so effusive and verbose when it came to writing his letters. Rather too many modern Christians (in my view at least) emulate Paul's style in the attempt, seems to me, to establish their own spiritual superiority! That was NOT what Paul was doing.

In order to underline the emphasis that Paul was stressing, it is perhaps important to see that when the Apostle wrote about 'domain of darkness' he was not talking about 'sin' in the generally perceived sense, but rather in terms of the inequity of which Amos was painfully aware. The problem of sin is not so much its 'naughtiness' as the damage it causes to relationships, people and communities. When I live self-centredly, you are very much outside of my vision, and I am outside of yours. Have a go at re-reading this passage in that sort of light.

GOSPEL

Now it may become rather more obvious that this most familiar of parables comes with a rather more powerful punch into our egos. Here, in front of Jesus, was a man who may well have considered himself most religious indeed. He knew the rules, so to speak, but he had never taken his blinkers off, and certainly had not explored anything of the repercussions of being a true-blue Jew.

Jesus had not such inhibitions, and in His inimical way, blew the bloke out of the water. No rudeness; just a tale to make him think and to face the real issues. And the tale comes with a crunch so powerful to a self-centred Jew. Note in the story that it was a hated Samaritan that did what was necessary for the poor wounded traveller. And he took all manner of risks, physical and religious, in that rescue mission. Here is a clear case of putting himself where his mouth was so to speak – and the reaction for listening Jews would have been a rapidly rising anger and angst.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

There really is not great mountain to climb or wisdom to possess for a person to embrace this 'faith once delivered.' It is not as if you are expected to claim to believe some impossible creed, or to climb some impossible divide. It is, as the Eucharist had made clear at the start of this service, we are on about loving God and loving your neighbour. I don't know about you, but I find that the second clause is by far the harder of the two. Easy to say that I love God; far harder to respond in love to a fellow-human especially when that person is something of an idiot – or I am! Mind you, we tend to think that this love is something that we must feel. In reality it is a path we need to choose, regardless of the difficulties along the way. Just look at that Parable

Parables were never meant to be little stories or cameos that were easily absorbed. They were meant to be hand-grenades that are dropped into our laps, that ignite long after the tale has sunk in. Only as one explores the implications do they become almost threatening. Let's go back to the Good Samaritan. Familiar enough, but has the bomb dropped yet?

Samaritan eh? There is your first red rag to a bull. Samaritans and Jews were about as cordial with each other as present-day Palestinians and Jews. Sure there will be some of those folk who co-habit quite happily – and I have met some of them. And others who have been hurt 50 or 60 years ago still bear the pain of it all. Hatred is the best description of the relationship (or lack of it) between the two. Murderous, pathological. And it has been that way for around 4,000 years. Halve that for Jesus' day and age.

The story as it unfolds would have had heads nodding in agreement. That back road from Jerusalem to Jericho was almost suicidal, and probably still is. No cover or escape from brigands then, and you took your life in your hands travelling that way. So heads would nod. No self-respecting priest or Levite would even consider stopping, even for a Jew. They had work to do, and no one with any sense would have run the risk of being mugged themselves. Stiff luck for the poor sod who got hit. But let's not add to the list of wounded or dead. At least not on our side! No hand-grenade yet.

But it was not long coming: Samaritan. The only good Samaritan was a dead one. And for the central character, the only good Jew was a dead one. Hatred, hatred, hatred. But – inexplicably, this particular one stopped, cast aside his religious and political prejudices, cast aside all the long history of animus, and ran the risk of becoming another victim himself. Not only so, but forked out some cold hard cash for that bloke. He saved his life, in spite of his view of Jews, expressed something like this: the only good Jew is a flat Jew.

That would have been when the grenade went off. Who is my neighbour? And the answer from Jesus was stark and immediate – even your most hated enemy is your neighbour. There lies the rub.

Here is the simple and straightforward statement that the following of Christ is lifted from the realm of pious sweet-nothings to a very proactive business of making of friends by the resolution of issues, however large. Like with Amos and his reading today, we are way out of the realm of the 'spiritual,' to the hands-on business of the day-to-day. Most of all it is the challenging of the status quo, the search beyond that which divides people from each other, and the moving towards real caring. It is scary stuff, and part of the reason that people today reject 'religion' – I suspect – is that they may well see rather more clearly, that to follow Christ calls for a life-style and attitude change that catches their breath with its challenge.

Sentence:

In returning and rest you shall be save; in quietness and trust shall be your strength

Isaiah 30: 16

Collect

Eternal God You draw near to us in Christ and make Yourself our guest; amid the cares of our daily lives, make us attentive to Your Voice, and alter to Your presence, that we may treasure Your word above all else. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ Your Son.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Amos 8: 1 – 12

PSALM

52

EPISTLE

Colossians 1: 15 – 29

GOSPEL

Luke 10: 38 – 42

Notes on the Readings

Old Testament Lesson

I do not know if the tradition survives, that the Old testament prophets simply railed against people and their sins, with little or no relief from calls for repentance. However, closer examination will show a far more significant role played by those ancient worthies. So significant was that role, that the same powerful words need constant repetition in our own day and age.

It is fascinating to observe the evolution and development of ancient Hebrew theology. Up to the period of the Judges, God was seen – not unexpectedly if you ponder from whence they had come – as the punisher of the sinful, so watch out! As time passed and people pondered life’s realities, and a more wealthy class of people arose, the strong sense of unfairness and inequity brought out a significant change in the prophetic word. Today’s passage is a powerful example of that! Judaism had found its voice on matters of what we may call social conscience. And these same prophets were aware that, not only was the imbalance ‘sinful,’ it was also very destructive to any community or country.

If you are not sure what Amos was on about in that last verse or two of this passage, simply replace his references to god and goddesses to ‘Mammon,’ or more precisely, to today’s demand for more of the good life. Status and wealth are destructive from a range of directions, and even dear old Amos could see that!

Psalm

And it was not only Amos who could see the issues clearly. Here is a Psalmist – who may well have been active before Amos, - pointing up the sad and destructive pattern of human greed, folly and demand for precedence over anyone else in sight. As in many other issues, the first casualty is truth; and that hardly needs any illustrations to justify. Nor are Christians exempt from the temptation; in fact in some areas it is almost a goal to be wealthy, regarded as a sign that God has blessed. What rubbish! It is cargo cult stuff; a million miles away from the Biblical faith, either Hebrew or Christian.

Epistle

It may take a little more reading and re-reading this passage to take on board the enormity of what St. Paul was saying here. Please see that this is not just some sort of lovely encouraging words for believers, but is in fact a statement of the way things really are, for believers or non-believers. Stop and realize that Paul was saying that there is no mystery now as to what it means to be human, as to what life is all about, as to why you exist and your point and purpose. He is saying that to remove Christ from life and its meaning and direction is to choose the only alternative: vacuum, nothing, full stop.

If Paul is correct, then it is a statement beyond contradiction. Yet the stunning thing is that, if this is all so, then not even Jesus, not even the Father is going to shove it down your throat. You have to respond to this situation or you need to turn your back on it. (Stop and see that to choose the latter is to walk into the life-trap that Amos has just presented to us. Bears more than a moment to think about, eh?)

GOSPEL

My dear old Mum was a Martha, through and through, and found it impossible to cope with the Marys of her day and age. Escapists from reality, she seemed to think, and sometimes she was right. But what Jesus was underlining in this ever-so-brief cameo is the need for all of us to get our balance and perspectives right. And that is not always the easiest of activities to be involved in.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

Stop me if I have told you before of my huge difficulties, as a young teenage Christian. Scripture Union provided us all with daily readings, and comments on same to be of help. However, I always found it hugely difficult to find much in the way of sense in the OT prophets, probably because I did not persevere and certainly because I had no idea of when they were written nor of the social and political circumstances into which they were written. Theological College sorted out that little lot, after which the bombs kept going off in my head and in my life. What I had assumed to be so spiritual as to be above my head became so down-to-earth as to take my breath away. It has almost nothing to do with religion in the clinical sense: it has every thing to do with everyday life and actions and attitudes.

I am too old to be a baby-boomer, and ancient beyond words for either of Generation X or Y. Perhaps being a child of the Depression of the '30s required my feet to stay on the ground. On top of that a call to priesthood meant – for a certainty – that I would not end up being a millionaire – not even a thousandaire! Perhaps more like a hundredaire. Mind you, that did not remove the sense of fairness and unfairness at all. I could never understand how an uncle, brother of my father, never had a thought of sharing his largesse with his brothers. Uncle was not rolling in it, at all, but Dad was struggling after all. (Dad would never have dreamed of asking his brother for help, mind.) Then one encountered our aboriginal folk who cannot understand NOT sharing! And dear old Amos had recognised the danger of the affluent society and its capacity to create division, and a sense of 'god-given' superiority to those who have.

Like Jesus, Amos was not necessarily against wealth. He was against its abuse and misuse; its use for providing the 'haves' with apparent grounds for acting out the proposition that they had the power and bugger the rest of you. Like today's utterly obscene remuneration of CEOs of companies, the only possible outcome is the down-treading of more and more people.

It is not the naughtiness of sin that got Amos going! It was the utterly destructive nature of the abuse of people as much as the abuse of wealth. And one needs only to have to do with those on the edges of life and society to know the profound and damaging hurt that it all causes.

Sentence

Ask and it shall be given you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

Luke 11:9

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, O Heavenly Father, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Hosea 1:2 – 10

PSALM

85

EPISTLE

Colossians 2: 6 – 17

GOSPEL

Luke 11 : 1 – 13

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

It really is something of a culture shock to read this most unexpected book. On the other hand, it is a well-known fact of life that the only person who can be of much help to another is someone who has ‘been there, done that.’ What a shock to realize that God called Hosea to marry a prostitute, and to go through the painful pangs of loving someone who is constantly unfaithful to you! But here it is in black and white, and this short but powerful book is an expose of how God feels about faithless Israel. A further word of explanation. This was in the time of the divided kingdom, Israel being the northern kingdom and Judah the southern. Israel was dispersed – and part of the remainder became the Samaritans, a sort of bastardised race of people as far as other Jews were concerned. Mind you, it is probably important to know quite some about the whole book, which is not as black as it may sound from this passage.

Psalm

It is a fascinating insight into psalmists (and others) view of a nation that was meant to be true and faithful and god-fearing, when the reality was far from that indeed. There *were* the faithful ones, but they ere even in the minority. And that faithful minority longed ever for a wider response to God, and a truer response to each other. This psalm is written in what some call the ‘language of hope,’ like much of Christian liturgy: it points to where things should be rather than where they are at present. More on this anon.

Epistle

Golly gosh! I would long for more people to take notice of Paul’s writing – to see what it is REALLY on about, and to take notice seriously and significantly. (I am constantly amazed at the sight of people wandering off into all sorts of dark and silly corners, and calling it ‘faith.’) So often it is sheer illusion, and patently so. One might expect it in the uneducated folk of Paul’s time, but not so in today’s climate.

Mind you, as you read this epistle (and you will find the same thing in Paul’s writing elsewhere,) the Apostle demolishes the then current ‘cosmic power’ thing not by laughing at it but by pointing to He Who is Lord over it. The result is to come to earth with realism about rules, regulations and rites. It is a wide-ranging passage this, and needs some clear and careful attention. *And ‘translation into modern idiom.’*

Gospel

There is almost too much to ponder in this passage for today’s Gospel. Jesus’ teaching on prayer is followed by a parable of persistence and another on total care and honesty. I guess, in a way, that sums up the passage rather nicely. On the other hand, it offers three directions to look and discover.

I have to say that part of me would like to spend time exploring this Lucan version of the Lord’s Prayer, - and to do so in the light of the fact that its very familiarity tends to leave us missing most of the impact. However, if one parallels this prayer with the Shema Israel (love God and love your neighbour), there is lots to think about.

In our world of change and movement and morass, it is so important to know what the ancient unvariables really are. The Faith has to do with the redemption of the world (here and now) and that can stem only from

returning to the basic truths of life. So much in today's world is artificial. Then one goes on to the basic necessities, represented by bread. (We have too much of it, and millions have so little, and that cannot remain so. And at bottom lies the desperate need of all humans for reconciliation, within oneself and with others. It is really a return to nitty-gritty, is it not?)

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It is a long-standing memory of mine, and one that came as a shock to me those very many years ago, when as a chorister in the Church I attended, I realized that, towards the end of General Thanksgiving, that I had recited the entire prayer without missing a word, but that I had done it so automatically that not a syllable actually passed through my mind, let alone my heart. That would have occurred something like 60 years ago, and the shock remains. Worship is no automatic response to life, is it!

One of the difficulties in being a priest, seems to me, lies in the business of becoming almost too familiar with the items and articles of the Faith. There is not a service I lead, Eucharistic or non, where the Lord's Prayer does not figure. In this post Christian age, this prayer is perhaps one remaining thing that is there in the minds of most people, and it may be there that we need to return to provide a huge glimpse of real life to our contemporaries.

On the other hand, I find that some of my younger colleagues look down somewhat on the very idea of teaching this prayer to youngsters. Repetition – they feel – is no way to learn anything, which offers some reason as to why today's education tends to be somewhat superficial. (That dates me, does it not!)

A long hard look at this prayer may well be a worthwhile experiment, for it has the capacity of getting our feet back on the ground, and/or keeping them there. And I find it a constant reminder that one of the major roles of the Faith is to bring something of heaven to this earth of ours. God knows that this earth needs it.

There is of course the hoary old question as to why, in recent years, the wording of this prayer had to change. 'If it was good enough for St. Paul,' one old parishioner had said to me 25 years ago, 'it should be good enough for us.' It did not pacify that man to learn that the New Testament was written in Greek, not Shakespearian English; and that the more recent translation is far closer to the original than that form in the Book of Common Prayer.

'Hallowed be Your Name ...' The opening phrases of the prayer constitute a singular reminder that when we mention God, we are reminding ourselves of those most basic and important aspects of life. God is guarantor of all that is true, all that is just, all that is honest and equitable, and that it is only as we reflect His characteristics that life and its relationships have any chance of being worthwhile. This prayer is a constant challenge for us right here and now. Your Kingdom come, underlined by the Matthean version by the addition of 'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' And if the kingdom is to come here, then I need to add my contribution to its coming. I need to act in all fairness and honesty with you, even if you do not reciprocate. The huge challenge of this prayer tends to be overlooked, forgotten or ignored. Prayer is not so much a request for God to do something about it. It is a solemn reminder that in this situation, God has no hands but mine and yours. In other words, to pray the Lord's Prayer, is to stick one's neck out well and truly.

Forgiveness, there is the rub. One person I have known for years poured out her heart one day, considering herself utterly disqualified from worship because she felt totally unable to forgive two people in her life. They had been instrumental in exercising a brutal affront to her and her children. Forgiveness is no easy path, and it deserves far closer attention than it will manage here. But as I said to her at the time, you are aware of the fact that this is the best direction to head, even if at present you are unable to head there. She was quite aware of the need for forgiveness, - and we need to be more aware of the need for repentance by the perpetrator too! – and I suggested that she need simply to keep that imperative in mind. She has long since passed her own barrier.

And do not put us to the test. One of the big issues whenever the Lord's Prayer arose in conversation, was the argument against 'lead us not into temptation.' 'What sort of a God is He?' people would argue, 'that would even consider tempting someone?' And when that old phraseology was left behind, other people bemoaned the change. 'What does this mean?' many would ask me. Had any of them lived in the First Century Church, they would have been very well aware. The test was the constant challenge that came up to turn their back on Christ and truth, and to surrender to power and appeal of 'the good life.' One needs to have a clear understanding of the different direction that the faith takes us in life and relationships, to be able to reject the pressures, from peers and from world, to join the mob. This is no self-saving measure: this is the difference between finding resolution of

issues and reconciliation of relationships, AND the going hell-for-leather at setting myself as the goal and purpose of life. It is the latter that is so destructive, and may well pull out high-flying civilisation down to collapse.

Yes, this Lord's Prayer is a strong and clear reminder of all that is vital and important, not only to the person of faith but also to 'all sorts and conditions of men.'⁴

⁴ As my old Mum would say, 'Ronald, of course the Bible and Prayer Book mean women as well! What's the problem?' And that was long before Women's Lib.