

Sentence

Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? The Lord created me at the beginning of His work, the first of His works, long ago.

Proverbs 8:22

Collect

Father, we praise You that through Your Word and Holy Spirit You created all things; You reveal Your salvation in all the world, through Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit, You give us a share in Your life and love. Fill us with such a vision of Your glory that we may always serve and praise You, one God for ever and ever. **Amen**

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Proverbs 8:1 – 7 & 22-31

PSALM

8

EPISTLE

Romans 5:1 – 5

GOSPEL

John 16: 12 – 15

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Trinity Sunday and all that refers to it still does constitute some problem for some folk. While there is no easy way out of the apparent impasse, it is worth making quite some effort to understand the reason behind the focus. For anyone still concerned because the word itself does not appear in Scripture, this is because, like several other issues, it has been an attempt to express in one word that which otherwise would take a complete paragraph. Call it shorthand, the attempt to convey experience in one word.

The real reason behind this particular word and this particular Sunday lies in yet another attempt – to remind ourselves that God is far, far wider than our limited view or explanation of Him. The proper appreciation of this Day and theme puts us in our proper place and perspective. It is not a bad thing to occur in this day and age when we tend to think and operate in the opposite direction!

Old Testament Lesson

The first thing that hits me whenever this readings recurs in our Three-Year cycle is the perception by the ancient author that first of all, God is a God Who delights in sense and logic and interconnection of everything. This is a perception not always available to other faiths and isms, and while this is not an attempt to prove superiority, it is one of the gems of the Hebrew perception and vision of God and life.

So important to the Hebrew understanding of God is this aspect that there is the picture given of a Creator Who, before anything else, starts out with (so to speak) delight in sense and order. Like love, this is one of the most primal necessities if we are to make sense of life and experience. Our mere human sense of need of this is both a statement of the vast superiority of God, as well as the intimate connection we all have, if we dare, with Him.

Psalm

I have always considered this one of the most fascinating and honest of the Psalms, as it ponders God and then looks at us. There is a delightful balance of awe and wonder, first at God and the creation, and then that God gives the freedom to His humans. It is one hell of a risky position for God to have taken, for the possibilities, good and evil, are enormous. One could well ponder this Psalm for a very long time and not reach the depth of it.

Epistle

There still may be those unaware of an alternative reading to this often-read passage. In place of the ‘we have been justified,’ and ‘we have peace’ are the alternative readings of ‘let us have peace.’

One reason for this passage to have been included in Trinity Sunday readings -of course- lies in the references to all three Persons of the Trinity. However it also refers to some of the critical points of our relationship with God-in-Christ. As an overall benefit, do not lose sight of the powerful if underlying factor that, with God as God, no circumstance surrounding us can drop us into any sense of pointlessness.

Gospel

In the light of all we have looked at above, here too in John's Gospel is the clear and stated connection between what we may call the Three Persons. It seems to me that the priority in all this lies in the repeated reference to 'truth.' We humans may like to muck around with what we regard as truth, but even in that mucking around with it, we tend to be quite aware, deep down, as to whether we are responding to it truly. It is no falsehood or fantasy that we follow.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I am often surprised, even these days, that people still have some difficulty in dealing with issues like the Trinity. My surprise stems not so much from the concept as from the apparent unwillingness or inability to tackle issues in another way.

Many many moons ago, a new family began attending our Church, and the man, just on retirement, had begun like in a family of Jehovah's Witnesses. As this couple did the rounds of the local Churches trying to work out where they would settle, I was asked to try and overcome the JW problems with the Trinity. It seemed to me, then and now, that the best approach was twofold. To begin with, one needed not so much to justify the use of a word not used in Scripture, but to attempt to understand why the term is used. And the first thing to realize is that here is a sort of attempt at a short-hand explanation to express what we experience when it comes to knowing and understanding God. My other suggestion was to allow the man time to ponder the nature of the way in which God makes Himself known to us, and then to discuss the issue again. That time never came, for the simple reason that once the person was free to question and ponder and discover, (and did not have some demand to shut up and believe,) then most of his problems resolved.

Two things, it seems to my small mind, get in the way of real spiritual growth as a Christian. The first problem that gets in the way is our potential to minimise God. Somehow we feel the need to reduce Him to manageable proportions, preferably so that we can consider Him as in our pocket. The second problem is that we humans tend to maximise ourselves, and see everything as revolving around us and our needs. Whoever heads off in such a direction will very soon either lose their way, or come up with remarkably idiotic views of life and other people.

In other years (A & B) the Old Testament reading focusses on prophet's experience and understanding of God. This year we have the ponderings of whoever wrote the Book of Proverbs. That attempt to reduce sense and wisdom to writing is – in spite of the enormity of the attempt – remarkably wise. And part of that wisdom has the effect of making us see God-as-He-really is, or at least as far as we are able to conceive.

I find this passage from Proverbs both very remarkable, and stunningly challenging. It is exactly that process that tends to offer a significant rationale for following the lead that – if you are wanting to understand life, and even ourself as little, - it is important to start from the premise that everything is essentially **sensible**. '**Wisdom**' lies at the heart of everything.

Wisdom. It is as well that we understand what Hebrews meant by wisdom. For Greeks, around that time, wisdom was better known as 'sense, knowledge, logic, reason.' Rather abstruse technical stuff. Romans called it scientum – which is where we get our word 'science' from. The point of mentioning all this as – then as now – this all tended to be the property of the wise ones, somewhat hidden from the naïve and even more hidden from the stupid.

Back to the Hebrews. It is not too much of a stretch of the imagination to describe their view as rather more down-to-earth, practical, available to everyone. It is rather more what we may call 'nous' or common sense. (Sadly that latter is less and less obvious these days, where sense is lost sight of, and as far as it being common, it is rather rare.) So wisdom is what is available to everyone, not just the highly trained or learned.

However, most of this wisdom appeared, to the Hebrew mind, to be embedded in what they felt and saw and touched in ordinary life. Day and night, and the predictability of time and seasons. The way in which so much of life is made up of so many factors that work in together. Look at your body and see how so much of it works very nicely, thank you very much, without us even needing to think a lot about it all.

SO that took the author of Proverbs back to postulating a remarkably sensible, stunningly creative Whoever who brought this universe, this world and its population into existence. There is not a lot that is random, there is even less that is capricious, and the more we modern humans understand science (which is only that fancy name for

knowledge) the more we can cope with and deal with the problems that arise. I remember, very many years back, when whoever was teaching me history at the time, remarked on the fact that the reason science emerged from Western culture is because the perception was that, as there can only be one Creator of this universe, there has to be sense and logic behind all that happens in it.

In other words, we humans need to stop and see that we, individually or corporately, are NOT, and never will be, the centre of the universe. Even if and when we attempt to establish ourselves thus in spite of the facts, we will fall over on our faces, sooner or later. We are not God. We put none of this universe into place, and never will be able to alter very much about it. In fact, we discover, when we face facts, that we are not all that able to control ourselves terribly well.

So Trinity Sunday is the time offered to us to restore our sense of balance. To see ourselves as we really are; and to see life as it really is; and to rediscover God as He really is.

If you like to put it this way, it is a reality check. A real one, not a TV distortion of one.

Sentence

A great prophet has arisen among us. God has visited His people.

Luke 4 7: 16

Collect

O Lord God, from Whom alone all good things come; grant that by Your holy inspiration, we may think those things that are good, and by Your merciful guiding, perform the same, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Old Testament Lesson

1 Kings 17: 8 – 16

Psalm

146

EPISTLE

Galatians 1: 11 – 24

GOSPEL

Luke 7: 11 – 17

NOTES ON THE READINGS.

If you are looking for some clear link to explain this choice of readings, I would have to ask you to tell me what it is! Certainly this second half of the year with its emphasis on Jesus' teaching offers a subtle change of direction, but I am unsure what that is, here. There may be the sense that with the Lord there is always a future and a hope.

Old Testament Lesson

This was a lovely story for Sunday School, way back to when I was a kid, but most of the point was overlooked in the excitement to tell us all about miracles. In fact, I suspect that the story, like many OT ones, was designed more to be a sharp reminder to insular Israel that God was interested in more than them. This is not about miracle but about focus in the right place.

That widow from Zarephath was Gentile, outsider, a nobody. Like the woman of Samaria much later in the Biblical story, here was someone who had managed to understand real issues rather better than most of those who should have known better. On top of that, her self-giving response to the prophet stands as a remarkable example of caring. From her point of view, the result was more than survival at a time when she expected not to see another day. This is the sort of difference that the Lord makes to people.

Psalm

So perhaps this Psalm does have something to add to the picture given by the OT reading. That 'put not your trust in princes' has greater impact than we may well have sighted before. A look at a map shows quite readily that Israel lay athwart the King's Highway, the ancient and active trade route from Egypt to all points north and east, and ultimately, west. Whoever controlled Israel controlled the trade, so much of Israel's 'foreign policy' had to do with placating more powerful neighbours and kingdoms. One needs to think little further than Chamberlain's attempt to appease Hitler to realize the rather risky policy of operating that way. Even the ancient Psalmist was aware of that trap.

So if princes are no protection in times of strife, then who is? No prizes for guessing the answer – or coming up with contemporary reactions.

Epistle

Take a moment to see beyond the simple tale of the conversion of St. Paul, to see a rather more strategic position. Imagine, for a moment, the New Testament without St. Paul. More than half of the New Testament would never have been written. And his singular mind would not have been in evidence as the Church grew and expanded.

So I guess one can continue to see this focus on a God Who provides a future for His people, even when they are rather unaware of His working. Just at the right time, Paul is converted, not by anyone else preaching at him, but simply on the basis of the evidence that he has pondered since the martyrdom of Stephen. Here is more evidence indeed that the Holy Spirit is ever at work even in people whom one may well consider to be enemy of the Gospel.

Some aspects of this passage may be news to some modern readers. Paul spent three years in Arabia after his conversion, and for jolly good reason. When a person makes so great a *volte face*, an about face, there are enormous implications to be worked through. While quite some of Paul's theological and tertiary education – even his life experience – became of huge value in his ministry, but he needed time to get everything straight in his mind and heart. Not to have done so would have emasculated and damaged much of his (then future) ministry.

Gospel

Had you been the widow in this story, you would have been distraught by the death of your son. There was no pension, no social welfare in that day, so like the widow in the OT Lesson, you face almost certain and slow death. So do you see that the reason for this take is not so much the miracle of the son being raised, as the point that, with Jesus, one always has a future and a hope.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

Surely it must be me. Perhaps it is a case of me being too old or something. All the talk about the drought and it has never been so bad makes me look back to times in my own brief(or so it seems to me!) life, and recall lots of times when it has been dry for a long time, hot for a long time, and things have been tough. Is it a case of younger people not having so many decades to look back over, and see how we have all survived a whole range of crises and catastrophes. Perhaps people are not as tough as once they were, or just have poor memories. I would have to comment that, from where I sit, the baby boomers and generations X and Y are far better off than any generation before them – at least for a very long time indeed.

It may simply be a matter of being in a place where the future of a parish and Church seems to be in doubt, but the more I think about it, the more it comes to me that these readings have a rather remarkable intention for where we are here.

Over recent years and so, one has pondered and watched and wondered. Those older than me will relate how their Churches used to be full every time there was a service, with mobs of kids, and people of all ages. So why is it, with population increasing (in urban areas at least) there are less and less people in Church?

I offer a couple of insights, if I may call them such. The first is, that in the district where I live, the rural population has been disappearing at an alarming rate, in a similar ratio to the extent to which farms and stations have been extending their borders. When once 100 or so acres sufficed, two or three thousand is far too small and economically unviable.

The second is more significant. While it has to be said that dear old Mother Church was not all that effective in either expressing the Faith meaningfully, nor in spreading it to the local community, there is also the rather more powerful movement on the part of society to turn its back on issues altruistic, and look for and demand bigger and fatter slices of the economic cake, and 'be damned to anyone who gets in my way!' *The fact is that this and similar 'movements' have occurred over the centuries – millennia in fact! – does not register on anyone's Richter Scale, so the assumption is(a) that God is dead, and (b) the Faith is nonsense.*

Read any history, or look back over the rise and fall of cultures, countries, empires and civilisations, and see that the trends of today have been echoed constantly over human history. It is also interesting to note that both assumptions referred to above were on those people's lips as well. As a wiser head than mine once remarked, 'the only lesson we learn from history is that we do not learn the lessons of history.' You would need to be more than 40 perhaps to remember the Stock Market Crash of 1987 or thereabouts. The reasons for that crash were almost identical, so evidence I have read tells me, to a similar significant 'correction' almost exactly one hundred years before in this country. Inflated real estate prices were one of the critical factors even way back then.

Now, you say, this is supposed to be sermon, not an economics lecture. Well it is – both, in fact. One of the stunning discoveries I made in College, almost 50 years ago, was the extent to which the prophets, minor and major, had loud and long things to say about the increasing injustice of the increasing gap between the haves and the have nots. *This is one of the things that will blow up in our faces before too long. The environmental crisis is simply one factor, part of the cause, of this ugly issue.* Read Amos, for instance, or Micah. They assured their contemporaries that unless they changed their ways, social and national collapse would ensue. History proved them right. In the interim, all those opposed to the prophets determined to shut them up, regardless of the immorality of that process.

And yet, behind it all, was God at work, the guarantor of all that is true and just, of all that is fair and compassionate, ensuring that even during and after those collapses, there was always a handful of people who had

remained true to the ancient verities, and to God Himself. And these were the seed of regeneration. The fact that the prophets called them 'the remnant,' a sort of nicer word than 'rump, was indicative of the fact that the faithful ones, *hoi hagioi*, would have a rough go of it, in spite of being God's instruments.

My point in all this? Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's pleasure to give you the Kingdom. Or put more contemporaneously, you are it, boyo, and the task is in front of you, and you have the Father right there cheering you on. This is not the coming of the night, nor the end of the world. It is just yet another cycle, if you like. History tends not to be linear. It tends to be cyclic, simply because we do not learn the lessons of history.

I will take you further.

When I was called to the priesthood at the delicate age of about 17 (mind you, I thought I knew it all then!) I fought that calling on the grounds that all I could see ahead of that call was a wasteland of excruciating boredom. Who wants to spend for ever in Church, for heaven's sake? Certainly not me. However, in the ensuing years, I have to confess having had not one moment of boredom that I can recall, but have seen the Church 'fall' from being a powerful instrument of society, to being something of that rump referred to above. And that is probably the best thing that could ever have happened. Over the intervening years, we Christians have HAD to rethink, rediscover, reshape our perception of God, of life, of theology, and even to rediscover what the Gospel is all about, and why. And if that is not an enormous leap forward, then I do not know what is.

Sentence

It is no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, Who loves me and gave up His life for me. *Galatians 2:20*

Collect

Almighty God, without You we are not able to please You; mercifully grant that Your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Old Testament Lesson

1 Kings 21: 1 – 10 & 15 –21

PSALM

5:1 – 7

EPISTLE

Galatians 2: 15 – 21

GOSPEL

Luke 7: 36 – 8: 3

NOTES ON THE READINGS

If you find it difficult to make any connection between the readings for today, I wonder if I can offer some help. It strikes me that, on this Sunday soon after Pentecost, the emphasis is on the business of living in integrity and justice. That story of Ahab could be repeated often in this day and age, where the demand for more wealth puts honesty on the very back burner. Once you have this sort of commencement, maybe the rest will drop into linea little.

Old Testament Lesson

Much of the history that shows up in the books of Kings, Chronicles and Samuel have to do with some very dirty deeds, and their outcomes. Ahab was not a pretty sight anyhow, but having married Jezebel (not a Jew but a Canaanite with very different gods and attitudes) he became a very distinct disadvantage to Israel. Not only so but the story points up a petulant and childish sod of a person, who tend to be the cause of their own downfalls anyhow.

If you consider this tale to be rather bloodthirsty for Scripture, please stop and realize that while the Faith itself was way ahead of most people, then as now, God has to wait for people to mature and understand things more truly. Faith is a pilgrimage, not a static position.

Psalm

As I often report, please do stop and see how often God is seen, responded to and worshipped as the epitome of truth, justice and fairness. That may seem old hat for you, but when you are in that (Hebrew) minority, it was something special, something to be held on to, and something to reflect in your own and individual life.

Epistle

It may come as surprise to some that Paul is not going off on to some pious and religious tangent here. It is worth remembering that, had we lived in the time of the Empire, we may well consider today's 'morality' as most advanced. Life then, really, was brutish and short. One can imagine how hard it was, even in Israel, to carry through the valuable morality of the Torah in a very pagan world.

Gospel

There is a series of stunning observations in this passage, if we can get past our sheer familiarity with the tale. This series of readings today do seem to emphasise the factor of honesty an integrity in life, and this remarkable cameo takes us way past the normal and usual to the profoundly moving.

Few of us old ones could ever really come to terms with the activities of prostitutes, male or female, even though sexual promiscuity is almost a fact of life these days. One the things that has to be said, though, is that there had always been the potential for males to look down on female prostitutes, in spite of the fact that it was males

who were using them. Sexual looseness has, in my experience, always had an aura of being far worse than lots of other things.

Our Lord, on the other hand, did the God-like thing, and took all the factors of the situation into account. Certainly this woman had a lurid past, - or was it part of a search for love? Clearly, she had turned her back on that past and was grateful to Jesus for being able to break away. (Now stop a moment: what else could this lady do to earn a living, now?)

Notice a series of special aspects here:

1. Jesus was quite prepared to cope with the jaundiced view of those around Him, as He provided a warm response to the woman's actions.
2. He underlined the greater integrity of that woman who was regarded as beneath the dignity of the Pharisees around Him. (Few people then would have dared to gainsay anything that those Pharisees would have claimed.
3. Jesus also underlined to the very people who claimed superior morality to anyone else that they had a long way to go to 'catch up.' So embedded were they in their sense of superiority that that failed to see that there in itself was an impenetrable wall that prevented them seeing their deep-seated hypocrisy.

So, in spite of wondering at the start of this week's reading about the direction and emphasis of them, they have brought us quite a distance in understanding where honesty and integrity really take us. In fact it all takes us way past the do-gooder track to an approach far more appealing because it is far more genuine, and that leaves the wowsy factor right out in the cold where it should be.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

You will have your own clear and vivid example and illustration of what I try to expose, so there is nothing at all new about what follows.

Whenever you have a serious argument with spouse, friend or just another human being, you will have noticed how often your opponent will omit to mention those factors in the argument that uphold your case; and you will be doing the same with them. You may go on to wonder why nothing is resolved properly, and the answer is because so many of the important factors have been left out of the equation. I still have quite a lot to do with one of the local Correctional Institutions, where this sort of bloodmindedness seems to operate at a rather more depressing level. Far too many inmates have their position so downgraded by their guards that no amount of true and just evidence is accepted, and the battle continues on apace. Sometimes I suspect that the guards (or some of them at least) actually so maltreat the inmates simply in order to get them to react with violence. (It proves their point, they would say.) Actually, it does little more than raise tensions and temperatures. I would have to report, also, that whenever the subject of morality or ethics hits airspace for discussion, the almost certain direction that the conversation will take is that 'when someone relates to me in that way, I will think about doing the same.' Mostly however, it is a case of their determination to get on top of whoever has had, is having, or will have a go at them. As for sexual matters, it is simply a case of when opportunity knocks.' Mind you, most of these blokes come from second- and third-generation experience of that!

In other words, there is morality and there is morality. So if and when you use (your) morality to speak from what people like to call 'the moral high ground,' then you are probably guilty of the abuse referred to above. In my experience, 'moral high ground' is little more than a smokescreen that attempts to avoid closer inspection.

It is probably worth reminding ourselves that, even from the Exodus beginning, Israel was remarkably alone in its view that religious faith had so much to do with the integrity of human relationships. Even today, there are those who would see no connection between their (private) religion, and how they respond and react even to family. Anyhow, from the earliest beginning, there was a clear sense of duty to neighbour, from the Ten Commandments onwards.

I found it so fascinating to discover, when study of the prophets of the Old Testament was required as part of my training, that those ancient worthies not only saw the clear and present connection between faith and faithfulness to one's neighbours, but they also understood quite clearly that to sidestep or otherwise avoid those critical issues would result not only in the downfall of a person or family, but of the very culture and nation itself. There is nothing comparable in other contemporary religions in OT times. In fact, there is a remarkable lack of it.

One of the things that Christians manage to hang on to is their perception that sin has to be punished, and the greater the sin, the greater the punishment. It stems, I suspect, from that widely held but very suspect view of the Atonement, that Jesus 'took our punishment on Himself.' But when you read widely in Scripture and begin to understand the Biblical way of expressing things, two parallel concepts emerge.

The first is that sin is "hamartia." ἁμαρτία – which speaks about 'falling short.' Nothing pejorative, but very descriptive. The second thing to note is the extent to which Scripture sees 'sin' as very destructive and damaging. This damage is as likely to affect the one sinned against, as the one sinning. Damage. Breakdown of relationships. Even the old Genesis 3 shows the man and the woman, after the 'sin,' as isolating themselves from each other, and isolating themselves from God. First the fig leaves, and then the hiding in the garden.

Where does all this get us, moderns of the 21st Century, and living in a world of minimal morals and even less integrity? Traditionally we have had the situation presented to us that we are to be without sin, or as close as possible to that, partly in order to ensure that we do not fall from grace. The reality is that we are called to be 'a kingdom of priests,' people who have seen the profound value of honest relating and living, and whose lives are there simply to bear witness to the sheer human value of the Faith. Do-gooders we are not; wowsers we should never be. But simply people on whom others can rely to deal fairly, openly and honestly with those around about us, even sometimes when we do NOT receive the same in return. Do not expect a rush of converts; it will only be seen of value to someone who is looking for something rather better than they have already. And for heaven's sake, do not put down a person who has their foot on the first rung of the ladder. Like Jesus, we need to respond to them with the compassionate and loving honesty that He did.

That is a steep enough cliff to climb!!!!!!!!!!

Sunday 24th June 2007

**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Birth of John the Baptist**

Sentence

You will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people, by the forgiveness of their sins.

Luke 1:76 – 77

Collect

Almighty God, by Whose providence John the Baptist was wonderfully born, and sent to prepare the way for Your Son our Saviour; make us to follow his teaching and holy life, and, following his example, may constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and suffer patiently for truth's sake, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Isaiah 49: 1 – 6

PSALM

139: 1 - 6

FOR THE EPISTLE

Acts 13: 22 - 26

GOSPEL

Luke 1: 57 – 66

NOTES ON THE READINGS

There are a couple of issues that we moderns tend to overlook, as we elevate some of the ancient worthies to Saint status. The first is that we forget that the Biblical record makes it quite clear that here are very humble and ordinary folk. There was nothing fancy about John or his parents; there was nothing fancy about Mary, for heaven's sake. And the second thing – and I can relate to this well – they were neither sinless, nor faultless in their theology. In fact, John was quite disappointed in his Cousin, for he expected a quite savage and unrelenting Gospel. My point is simply, whilst we need to get our theology as straight as we can, God is not in the business of chopping off our fingers if we make a mistake or three.

OT Lesson

Here is yet another of Isaiah's Servant Songs, part of the prophet's search to understand what God was doing in the world through Israel. Notice two apparently opposing facets of this song.

The first is the great responsibility God places on (all) His people. We are here with a job to do, and it involves all the population and culture around us. The second thing to note is this: please do not consider yourself a failure if you feel that you have borne witness to Christ and His Gospel, and seems to have precious little to show for it.

Just as, under Moses, Israel was called to be that 'kingdom of priests,' so under Isaiah, Israel was called to be a 'light to the nations.' Although this had always been the case, it is fascinating to notice that, in spite of the down-hearted and defeated situation then of the People of God, it is then and precisely then that their horizons of faith and call were lifted way beyond their expectations. There is not a great deal that God does other than at the hands of His people and servants.

Psalm

Interesting. Just as we look at John and his ministry, we find ourselves put on a par with him. Just as God knew the Baptist inside out, so he does YOU! And if we do not quite know where we are heading, rest assured that God does.

FOR THE EPISTLE

Although this quotation comes from long after John's rather ghastly demise, the Infant Church remained very aware of the enormous contribution made by the Baptist. One of the most fascinating aspects of John the Baptist was his awareness of his role, and that he never looked to gain centre stage. 'He must increase, and I must decrease' shows oh! so clearly that ego never got in the way of John's ministry. If only that could be said of many, many more.

GOSPEL

Although the story has to be quite familiar, it is important to read this as if for the first time. Then we begin to see that when it came to Elizabeth and Zechariah, they really were the sort of people you would overlook, probably, as being so terribly normal. Almost invisible. And that is the point.

Sadly, we tend to elevate these normal people to some sort of insular sainthood, whereas the point is God works through people just like you and me. Look back over Scripture and see how true that is. Abraham came out of nowhere (or left field if you like.) You only have Moses because of a simple peasant woman who defied the Egyptian powers. David was a nobody, and so on. I have more than a sneaky suspicion that God works through what I call 'little people' because they tend not to get 'above their station.' They tend to be aware of their weaknesses more than their strengths. And that keeps their feet on the ground.

As John's life unfolded, (or as much of that as we can offer some insights,) it seems that he was orphaned fairly young, and became attached to the Qmran Community, the Essenes, perhaps better known as the Dead Sea (Scrolls) Sect. While that might be seen as a pity, because it seemed to shape him in a slightly oddball direction, it would also have given him quite some of the oomph that made him who he became. He would have been a dour, doughty sort of a guy.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

If there is one of the ways in which Christians (of our denomination at least) have been led astray, it is in the matter of how one reflects the Faith. We tend to have been brought up on the proposition that faith was a private and personal affair, and none of your damn business. Hence here we are at a point where the Faith once delivered is almost completely unknown to people around us, and even our kids and grandkids.

As we ponder the contribution of John the Baptist, to 'preparing the way before the Lord,' it is worthwhile going so far as to wander back in Biblical history to learn the lessons that sometimes we prefer to forget. Otherwise we assume that the Faith continues to grow and expand by some sort of osmosis. Unseen but effective. We need to remind ourselves that God has (or at least uses) no hands but our hands.

Abraham became progenitor of us all basically because the faith in which he had been brought up no longer held either interest or value. While I am guessing, I suspect it was a case of here is a bloke who started searching for something that made more sense, that fitted life and relationships far more significantly. And that is precisely the sort of person God taps on the shoulder and says, 'How about coming along with Me?' So faith becomes an exploration, a search, a pilgrimage. It is not so much something personal, as it is something that has to make sense and be valuable to all and any human being. If it is no use to an individual, then it can be no use to anyone else.

So the Biblical story is the record of that search, continuing through generations and through the various exigencies of life and of history. As long as Israel pilgrimmed, they grew and learnt. The moment they rested on their laurels, they went nowhere but backwards.

OK, so you find it a little difficult being a Christian at a time when it is not popular or profitable to be so. Never assume that this is something new in either ordinary or even Christian history. Far from it. We have been spoilt by the fact that we are emerging from a time when Church and Faith have been strong in our community and culture. We are back now as a minority group, and the experience – if Biblical history is any guide – will be well worth the angst and trauma. But we will need to be explorers, pilgrims, and far more open to listening to God, rather than our own hang-ups.

Not dear old John. He was son of a priest, and of a rather lovely if simple woman of faith. Being son of a priest can be a disadvantage, if you ask any one of a vast number of PKs.¹ But at the very least there would have been the realisation that such matters are important.

The main reason for going on an exploration in this area, has to do with removing some strange aura than tends to surround the apparently high and holy ones of Biblical history. My main point is that here is no remote 'high and holy one,' but rather yet another of God's little people, no different at all from YOU. He had no special

¹ For the uninitiated, PK stands for 'priest's kid' and most of them will let you know of the difficulties of being in that situation. Joys, too, of course, but rather too much weight has been landed, by others, on such PKs.

personality (in fact he could have been written off as some sort of religious weirdo!) He had no special training. And he was certainly not born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Cousin to Jesus, certainly, but neither Mary nor Joseph were anything special, or high-born, and remarkable.

The thing that gets to me about John is his very unspecialness, if that is not too hard a word to coin. On top of that, here was a man after my own heart: not at all afraid to tell it how it is. These days, as then, honesty was not popular, and was hidden behind what we call political correctness. (In fact there is a far better two-syllable Oz word that describes 'political correctness' far more accurately.) John told it like it is, or at least as he saw and understood it, and if you did not like it then tough. It landed him in prison, and cost him his life, but we remember John the Baptist far better than Salome or her mum. (I guess even I have to modify that, as lots of fellows have a pretty clear picture of the dance of the seven veils!! *N'est ce pas?*)

Now as I look on today's world and its apparent love of spin, propaganda and baloney – otherwise known as polliespeak, whether I am Christian or not, I look for and long for someone who knows what they ARE TALKING ABOUT to give us the good oil. Quite recently, (Dec 06) with the landslide in the US elections, it is refreshing to see the emergence of some sort of honesty concerning Iraq. The pity is that that honesty does not seem to be spreading to our own leadership (though by the time you read this, there may be a change. On the other hand, pigs might fly, too.)

Now where does all this get us?

Two stages along the road.

Stage One. It only takes a small number of people, and sometimes only an individual, to start people thinking. This is true of life generally, let alone the spreading of the Faith. Look at the history of the past couple of hundred years or so, to see the truth of that. John Wesley? William Wilberforce? Or even many of the inventors of things that we take so much for granted.

Stage Two. Bert Baccarach wrote a song some decades ago: 'What the world needs now is love, sweet love.' And he was and remains 'spot on.' What the world also needs is a large dose of honesty and integrity. Not just for Christians 'but for everyone.'

John the Baptist did it in his time.

Now it is your turn and mine.