

Sentence

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

Luke 7:16

Collect

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

Old Testament Lesson

1 Kings 17: 17 – 24

Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah, saying, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die."

Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth." She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

Psalm

146

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord O my soul: while I live I will praise the Lord
 While I have any being: I will sing praises to my God
 Put not your trust in princes: nor in flesh and blood, which cannot save.
 For when their breath goes from them, they return again to the earth: and on that day all their thoughts perish
 Blessed are those who help is the God of Jacob: whose hope is the Lord their God
 The God Who made heaven and earth: the sea and all that is in them
 Who keeps faith for ever: Who deals justice to those who are oppressed,
 The Lord gives food to the hungry: and sets the captives free
 The Lord gives sight to the blind: the Lord lifts up those that are bowed down
 The Lord loves the righteous: the Lord cares for the stranger in the land
 He upholds the widow and the fatherless: as for the way of the wicked, He turns it upside down
 The Lord shall be king for ever: your God, O Zion, shall reign through all generations. Praise the Lord

Epistle

Galatians 1: 11 – 24

I want you to know, brothers and sisters that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.

GOSPEL

Luke 7: 11 – 17

Soon afterwards Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favourably on his people!" This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

Sadly, one has to report that not a lot of people are aware of Biblical text sufficiently to catch sight of some very important issues. One of those issues is the extreme antipathy Jewish people had about those of other races and cultures, and vice versa. You will recall that famine had struck the land, and Elijah was provided with an 'out' to survive the lack of food. It all looks so simple in a way, and yet miraculous in another. However, the real point is that when people care enough to share, then threats are reduced. It is a passionate little cameo, but one to which Jesus drew attention in His preaching, and centuries after the event, drew the vitriol of his townsfolk to the experience of Elijah. It was enough to drive the people to try and kill Jesus there and then. (So much for evolution of the faith mentioned last week! Bigotry manages to hold on long after the event!)

The real point at issue here is that even in those days of yore, Elijah had to do with people of non-Jewish life and faith, the uncircumcised, the outcast and unclean, and did so quite happily, for both parties to the occasion. The promise of God, from Abraham on, was **always** to the whole world. And that is something we moderns forget so terribly easily.

Psalm

Why ever is it that some of the old Psalmists both catch sight of, talk about and enjoy a faith and a God Whose vision is for all humans, and the rest of us forget it all so easily? This ancient worthy was totally aware of the real needs of life and living then, for fairness and justice, and just as aware of the rarity of those values in the world of which he was part.

Epistle

Oddly, we now encounter another passage which may well be unfamiliar or even unknown to many readers. In this passage Paul had to defend himself against those who considered him no apostle at all, which is a difficult enough process for anyone. But in relating his story to those gainsayers meant that we have some information about Paul that otherwise we would not.

For anyone who still holds to the dramatic and instantaneous conversion of Paul, then please look again harder at this passage. '*But I went away at once to Arabia ...*' for like anyone who has to face an almost total rearrangement of life and thought, Paul needed to drop off the world for a while. Thanks heaven that he did, for otherwise his teaching and writing may well have carried a lot more unnecessary baggage. One needs time to ponder and absorb many new things when a change of direction so radical is faced. Sadly, there are not too many modern people who see the need for such re-arrangement and re-assessment – and they tend to suffer for it as well.

All this goes to show how great is the challenge of repentance, which is no shallow business, but a matter of seeing that such change goes to the very roots of one's being.

GOSPEL

Perhaps it is familiarity, or perhaps we tend to focus on the unusual, and see just miracle. It is always important to ponder such questions as **why** Jesus did the sorts of things attributed to Him. It is worth stopping to see how compassionate and human a thing it was for Jesus to stop when confronted by such deep sadness and even desperation. That poor widow would have lost all hope for any future when she lost her only son. It is at once very human and very compassionate, as Jesus stepped 'into the moccasins' of that lady.

When the text reads 'fear' it may help to offer 'awe,' for that is what it was. Something so totally unexpected yet universally needed in that situation made people sit up and take notice. Israel had long expected 'a great prophet to arise,' and although in the event that was true, it would be quite a time before any such real recognition of Jesus would emerge. As with the changes in Paul, so in this sort of situation, it would take the passage of considerable amounts of time – *and thought* – before results would show up in people's lives and thinking.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

‘Think and do’ that old Collect mentioned, and I remember bouncing off those words in a service in Oodnadatta Hall well over 45 years ago. The reason for that was twofold: it was a mixed indigenous and white congregation, and very noisy with all the kids and dogs around. It needed to be clear and straightforward, and that is where the phrase took us.

One of the things that lots of people don’t recognize is that the way that you think and feel as a human being will almost dictate both what you do and how you do it. Spend a moment or two thinking that lot through! How I act and re-act will depend on how I think and feel about you, about other people, about situations that arise and need immediate responses. Without thought, the outcome could be disastrous.

Now take time to ponder each of the situations portrayed in today’s readings.

Elijah had been under great stress, and after his encounter with Jezebel on Mount Carmel, has seriously considered ending it all. Threatened on all sides is how he felt, nor did he feel capable of coping with that. So he fled – back to Sinai to his spiritual roots. Was that why he could be both a drain and a support for that widow of Zarephath? I suspect he could because he had lived through the threat of execution, as she had long lived through threat of starvation. An empathy had developed, and he could ‘walk in her moccasins’ at great support to the lady and her son. Here is an illustration of the reality that when you think of yourself only, all seems doom and gloom. But share what little you have, and a future however dim will emerge. It is a fascinating illustration of what Jesus would have to say more than a millennium later. So Elijah ‘thought’ and ‘did.’

If you would like further expansion of the idea, then take a look at Paul, in his early life as a Christian. He was deeply aware of the extent to which all his early training and teaching militated against those who followed Christ. His was a determined and rigid way of behaviour, and he would have had to shield his sensitive side against the murder and mayhem in front of him. So he would have silenced his conscience – and that is a hard thing to resile from. So he needed time and space, away from other people, to regain his sense of direction, his perspectives in life, and to look once again and rather harder at the sort of thing that Jesus was teaching and encouraging and doing. Paul would have known all about ‘thinking and doing’ – and singularly aware of the enormous changes to his priorities.

Jesus did it, in today’s Gospel, without a lot of thought, because that self-giving thing was very much part of Him anyhow. If you saw someone in need, then you did what you could to alleviate that need. Compassion and care. Here was no hand-out mentality, but an awareness of what pressures needed to be relieved to enable some sort of response of that pair to life as it then was.

Enough of Biblical illustration; may we revert to the present? If there is one thing that disturbs me deeply about today’s people, young ones in particular, (and this is generalisation certainly) is that there is little thought or even interest in the other person. Knee-jerk reaction is the order of the day with no other person coming into purview. What is good for me, what is in it for me? Such an insular and self-obsessive approach to life is a particularly dangerous path to travel, because it leads rather rapidly to dysfunction and destruction of society. So when the Faith points to a different way to operate, it is not calling on people to be nice. It is calling on people to be aware that individuals are not the centre of the universe. We are in this together, and it is only together and caring about others that will offer anything of a future. The choice is, finally, wipe-out, or a future.

So Jesus (and the Biblical Faith) are not silly, are they?

Sunday 13th June, 2010

Third Sunday after Pentecost

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 loved me and gave Himself up for me.

Galatians 2:20

Collect

Christ Jesus, Whose glory was poured out like perfume and Who chose for our sake to take the form of a slave; may we also pour out our love with holy extravagance that our lives may be fragrant with You.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

1 King 21: 1 – 10 &15 – 21a

Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. And Ahab said to Naboth, "Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money." But Naboth said to Ahab, "The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance." Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, "I will not give you my ancestral inheritance." He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.

His wife Jezebel came to him and said, "Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?" He said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, 'Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard for it'; but he answered, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" His wife Jezebel said to him, "Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite." So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city. She wrote in the letters, "Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, 'You have cursed God and the king.' Then take him out, and stone him to death."

As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, "Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead." As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. You shall say to him, "Thus says the LORD: Have you killed, and also taken possession?" You shall say to him, "Thus says the LORD: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood." Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" He answered, "I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, I will bring disaster on you."

Psalm

5: 1 – 7

Hear my words, O Lord, give heed to my groaning: listen to my cry, You that are my King and my God
In the morning when I pray to You, surely You will hear my voice: at daybreak I lay my prayers before You and look up

For You are not a God Who takes pleasure in wickedness: nor can any evil dwell in Your sight

The boastful cannot stand in Your sight: You hate all those who work mischief

Those who speak lies You destroy: You abhor the treacherous, O Lord, and those that are stained with blood

But because of Your great goodness I will come into Your house: I will bow down toward Your holy temple in awe and fear of You.

Led me, Lord, in Your righteousness for my enemies lay in wait: make straight Your way before me

Epistle

Galatians 2: 15 – 21

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will the works of the law. But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin?

Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

GOSPEL

Luke 7: 38 – 8: 3

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man was a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him--that she is a sinner." Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak."

"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

'Life is brutish and short' someone once wrote, but while we feel that comment may not describe our own time, I suspect there will be others quite ready to disagree. Neither Ahab nor Jezebel, nor most of the other characters who populated much of the early Old Testament story would have been the nicest of neighbours to have had around your place. It is appalling to stop and consider the extent to which people in high places, even big fish in very little ponds, decided that their needs were far more important than anyone else around. So you can see that, even in our own culture, not a lot has changed over 5,000 years of Biblical and Christian history.

Add to that the fact that even the prophet Elijah could see little further than the 'eye for an eye' response to Ahab's murderous actions. (Don't blame it on God: people's understanding of God had not evolved far, even though Elijah lived well before King David's time. Modern history has lots of examples, from people of other faiths as well as our own, who see no further than revenge. That, in spite of the major faiths not seeing that as an option! We humans have one hell of a long way to go, do we not?)

Psalm

On the other hand, there were people, even quite early on, whose perception of God, *and of what God needed to be!* – were rather more advanced than others. This psalm is a fascinating example of a clear insight into what was needed even way back then. Is this the start of Israel's slow but clear climb from the vengeful expectation from God, for if so, it is an interesting and quite challenging beginning.

Epistle

Although rather too many people see the Christian Gospel as the escape from the consequences of their sin, it is rather more powerful and challenging than that, and this is what Paul was presenting. If I repent out of fear of consequences of my sin, then I have progressed rather little along the path of understanding God. Even the Psalmist saw the need to respond positively to his ugly opponents, as much for their sake as for his own. If I am in Christ,

then I have chosen to align myself with the resistance to self-obsession and to follow the service and care of fellow humans. Self-giving is the direction the gospel points, even when that runs quite contrary to the spirit of the age.

GOSPEL

Familiarity with the story probably robs us of the sharp edge in what Jesus so often did. His breaking down of taboos, of barriers, and of sheer human ugly divisions is absolutely remarkable. For a nation and religion that fed so much on appearances and superiorities, Jesus must have been utterly shattering. When a society is built so totally on status, on superiority and on rule-keeping, it is small wonder that our Lord survived as long as He did. (One of the aspects of Australian life that still gets me cross is that which is based on wealth or position. 'Pretty people,' in my rather long experience, are something of a contradiction in terms. And the situation that faced Jesus in today's Gospel must have had Him fuming underneath.

This Lord of ours does not simply break down barriers. He provides clear reasons for so doing, and that includes taking the whole range of the given circumstances into account. One of the great delights of this God of ours lies precisely there: **all factors concerning that woman were taken up, so that she was seen for exactly who and what she was.** There is no better or clearer path to justice and peace than this.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It was something of a delight for me, just today.¹ On the radio there was someone talking about his move from being a trenchant lawyer for civil liberties towards having a wider view of life, people and situations. He had realized that one of the huge issues for today's society has been its move towards and worship of the individual over the community. He saw clearly the greater evil that such a move promotes, and the outcome of the breakdown of a society or community. There was no standing in harsh judgement. There was a simple and profound recognition of the facts of life.

In recent days, there has been a war of words between 'religionists' and 'atheists,' much of which has been reduced to futility (as far as I am concerned) because each side has been firing shots from their deep bunkers. Most of the shots are fizzers because each side – Christians included! – have produced parodies of their opponents, parodies very easy to shoot down and demolish. However, part of the real issue is the claim by atheists that Christians are far more concerned about the next life to take issue with unjust matters in the here and now. Whilst it may be said that there are such airy fairy Christians who hold such views, the real faith is rather more virile and immediate than that!

This may sound a little harsh, but please ponder the thought. If we focus on the epistle it is rather sadly easy to go off on that otherworldly: 'I have been crucified with Christ' was always presented as a devotional concept when I was young, and not a lot of use in the real world. But bounce off the other readings to get the solid earth under your feet.

As one who had been brought up with the horror of the Old Testament reading and that foul action of Ahab and his envy of Naboth's vineyard, it was a simple and straight-forward matter of equating what one's actions (as a human let alone a Christian!) should be. There was simply no argument; it was a case of QED, as they tried to teach me in maths. It is only in fairly recent times in my life that there had been any argument at all, until around now when what's yours is mine, and what's mine is mine also, to get well and truly lost (or worse.)

As that person on the radio enunciated, today's selfish and demanding attitudes need to touch base with the reality of being human today, part of the society and community. To fail to learn that lesson and to move in that direction is –as sure as eggs is eggs – to discover what chaos means. And chaos is always singularly ugly. Ask anyone involved in warfare and its aftermath.

So this, all of the above, is what is encapsulated in 'I am crucified with Christ.' It is a matter of operating in a Christ-like way in relationship with those around me. And if anyone thinks that this is, of necessity, a soft and loving path, then one needs to face the reality of the Gospel at work at the ordinary level.

Going the extra mile is an aspect that shows up when it comes to that cameo in today's Gospel. We Christians, even we 'religionists,' have a sad and hugely regretful history of standing in judgement on people who do not fit the 'sausage skin.' I remember to my utter regret, the challenge of my sister, many years ago. She had married in the early fifties, and her first child came along. Although I have no memory of it at all, she told me years later how hurt she was that I apparently had words to say about her daughter being conceived before their marriage.

¹ April, 2010

I must have been a most unpleasant and pious twit of the first order. It was only a few short years later than my sister died early in her mid-fifties, but I am grateful that I had the chance to apologize for being so judgemental.

Contrast that with the story in today's Gospel. Those Pharisees of that day were as savage as I was apparently with my sister. Thank heaven that Jesus was not. His response to that woman – a human being like the rest of us, - was accepting, both of her the person and of the enormous gift that she bestowed on Jesus. In fact, as the story unfolded, the problem person was the religious devotee, not the woman. All this was not just a matter of Jesus being nice and lovey-dovey; it was a matter of our Lord taking all the aspects (good and otherwise) of the situation into account, in spite of the contrary pressure of the 'holy one.' If ever you have been in such a situation, you will not that such is not an easy path to travel.

So it would seem that, in today's selfish and demanding times, it is not easy to go against the tide. It is a path rather less travelled, but it is still one that needs to be returned to, for religious or non-religious alike. So very much of the Christian Faith operates at the same level. The Faith is about the redemption of the world **HERE AND NOW**. It is about moving against the tide. It always has been; and it always will be. And so it will ever be the challenge to the *status quo* in any day and age.

And, as I have stated elsewhere, if my discipleship of Christ is because of the promise of some future benefit, then my discipleship **must** be suspect, because it, too, is a rather less than refined form of selfishness. To be in the Kingdom is to turn one's back on such things: I am crucified with Christ.

Sunday 20th June, 2010

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Sentence

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

Collect

Pour out upon us, O God, the power and wisdom of Your Spirit, so that we, who have been baptized into Christ and made Your children through faith, may know Your Son's power to heal and, being made one in Him, may overcome all the barriers that divide us; through our Lord Jesus Christ, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. **Amen**

Old Testament Lesson

1 Kings 19: 1 –15

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.

Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram."

PSALM

42: 1 -7

As the deer longs for the running brooks: so longs my soul for You O God
My soul is thirsty for God, thirsty for the living God: when shall I come and see His face?
My tears have been my food day and night: while they ask me all the day long, "Where is your God?"
As I pour out my soul by myself, I remember this: how I went into the temple of the Mighty One, into the temple of God
To the shouts and songs of thanksgiving: a multitude keeping high festival
Why are you so full of heaviness, my soul: and why so unquiet within me?
O put your trust in God: for I will praise Him yet, Who is my deliverer and my God

Epistle

Galatians 3: 10 – 14 & 23 – 29

All who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law." Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for "The one who is righteous will live by faith." But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary,

"Whoever does the works of the law will live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us--for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"-- in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian² until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

GOSPEL

Luke 8: 26 – 39

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"-- for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.)

Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country.

Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

So many of the stories from the Old Testament made such great Sunday School stories, but sadly much of the impact of the tales were lost on us kids, for the teachers did not really ponder them at all. Elijah was one of the first of the line of (real) prophets but he does not show up all that well in this tale. Fresh from the slaughter of the prophets of Ba'al on Mount Carmel, he had fled for his life to Sinai, his equivalent of a sacred spot. There he contemplated death or even suicide. His fear stemmed from the furious wife of Ahab who was a nastier piece of work than even her husband, the King.

However, this act of considerable cowardice became for the prophet a huge learning curve, an enormous encouragement, and the recognition of all that is important. As we learnt as kids, there is always the 'still small voice.' Shut up and listen to the Lord Who speaks even when you are down and out. Elijah went on to be a worthy first real prophet, though he seemed to have an anger management problem. But I bet he never forgot that *still small voice*.

Psalm

Here is a fascinating if sensitive exploration of the difficulty of someone trusting God in situations where it seems not to be at all easy. Pressure from outside – or even *in* - can be enough to create problems. However, the past experience of this person still indicates clearly that the wise and productive way to go is to continue in faith – because it is based on experience. Never be surprised if you hover between joy and strain.

Epistle

There seems to have been a long and arduous tension between 'salvation by faith' and 'salvation by works' especially amongst more evangelical Christians. I suspect that part of the problem lies in understanding what the

² Greek 'teacher,' paidegogos.

terms really mean. The Epistle of James has some significant things to say on the subject, to balance out the realities. Sadly, 'faith' seems to be misunderstood rather too often, for it has been presented without solid background, in my experience.

Certainly, Paul was at pains to draw the clear distinction between those of his own previous conviction that a good Jew was shown by his adherence to the Mosaic Law, together with all the Rabbinic and others addenda *ad nauseum*. In other words, acting under that process, I would be in a strong position to hold myself quite apart at considerable distance from the mere *hoi polloi* because I was a far better person than *them!* And that superiority was rendered totally false because the Great Commandments were obviated. I cannot love God and my neighbour if I think that you are rubbish!

So Paul underlined the reality that yours and my acceptance by God in Christ stems not from any superiority we may or may not have, but by the grace of God.

GOSPEL

I suggest that you set aside some time to ponder all this, for the ramifications of this fascinating tale is enormous. **Factor one** is that this incident occurred outside Israel in Gentile territory. It is worthwhile taking time to add up the number of times Jesus exercised His ministry in non-Jewish areas, **and with non-Jewish people**. That was no accident, but an attempt, if you will, to get his disciples to think outside the somewhat bigotted view that God was interested only in the people of Israel. *Have you ever stopped to see how many times a subject had to be raised for you, before you came to terms with the change that was called for?*

Another factor is to wonder quite what this 'demon-possession' was really all about. A lot of nonsense has been written and said about the subject. The Biblical reality is worth pursuing especially in the light of medical and psychological advances in recent decades. Also one needs to see past 'miracle' to catch sight of what is really being said.

So, are you game to continue?

Here is the story of a tragic of the first order, whose insanity stemmed not from anything demonic, unless you understand that to have a human source. He was isolated and isolated himself, full of guilt and anger, certain that what he had done was his own fault and deserved the penalty of death, really. It may well have been that the approach of Jesus, as human to human, was the first time in many years that anyone had treated him as human. That is both shocking and therapeutic at the same time.

In spite of the gentle approach, the poor man was still certain that he lived under harsh judgement, and expected it to come, specifically, from Someone he understood to have connection with the Divine. Please stop and see how Jesus' continuing response to this poor wreck of a human was in terms that would have made quite some sense to the demoniac. Exorcism in visible terms would have assured the poor man that Jesus' healing of him would be permanent. With the death of the pigs (at some huge expense to the locals) would have shown the certainty and the finality of the man's problems.

'Seated at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.' What a stunning contrast for the locals to see this man in a way most had never seen before. Small wonder that they were fearful, and wanted to see the back of Jesus. Do not think that their fear stemmed from what Jesus might do to them! It was because of what at least some of them now knew that they would **have** to face.

If you have had anything to do with victims of sexual abuse, you would know from what sort of 'demons' this man suffered. His isolation, self-mutilation and the sense of enormous guilt speak for themselves. And whilst sexual abuse may not have been a factor in Jewish culture, it certainly was in that somewhat isolated village. And even those who may have been aware of the predator(s) would also be aware of what was likely to happen to them if they interfered. It must have been a vastly tense community in which to live.

What strikes me as most interesting in this whole scenario is the final outcome to the tale. On the one hand the healed man asked to be part of Jesus' retinue, following along as a disciple. It would have been a remarkable feather in Jesus' cap, so to speak. Jesus' refusal of his request may well seem rather harsh in the first instance, until you ponder what, really, 'salvation' is all about. Jesus' requirement that the man stay where he was to 'declare how much God has done for you' was a telling – *stunning!* – challenge.

When that man was restored to the ordinary life of that village, **both the perpetrators and the victims had to come to terms with what had caused the vast problem in the first place**. So everyone in that village had to face **who** had done the initial damage, and those whose silence meant the scourge remained also had to face their own demons, and the man who was prime victim had to be the centre of the healing. **No one in that village or area could ever be the same again**. And that is 'salvation' in the real Biblical sense.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

Back when I was a pup, it was somewhat fashionable in Christian circles to be somewhat superior when it came to stories about healing demon-possession. It was held to be OK for back then, but to modern humanity it was so passé as to be ignored. Mind you, there were still those who held a far more literal view, and found all sorts of ways to bring the past into the present, and have all sorts of exorcisms, religious and otherwise. Even some movies portrayed the sinister business, giving people the thrill along with the safety of distance from the action. Later still, there have been tragedies that initiated from attempts to ‘heal’ someone possessed.

On the other hand, there are those who have understood, seems to me, rather deeper into this business of ‘demons.’ They do not see them as some sinister and irresistible force, but rather as the outcome of a persistent interference from someone close to them. Trusted people like parents and relatives have been known to inflict all manner of evil and abuse – particularly on younger people, resulting in all manner of mental and other illness and disturbance. And the more the whole ugly business is repressed, by victim or perpetrator, the greater and more lasting the damage.

I remember, with great joy, having discovered that my early searching into this incident and its impact, to find that a Christian priest and psychologist produced an article in the theological magazine that diagnosed both the illness and the cure in this incident in Jesus’ ministry. My delight has always been to find that someone else has asked the hard questions that emerged for me, and came up with answers rather more specific and precise than I could offer. In the decades since, that picture has widened and deepened, especially in the light of the emergence of the enormous and horrible evidence of constant and vicious abuse of children in this State.

In my own ministry I have spoken to many people in similar situations, who have what they all seem to call their ‘demons’ – all of which manage to flourish because, unlike Jesus, most other people simply do not want to know. Those augers well for the perpetrators, who can remain hidden along with their nefarious activities. The outcome of that hiding is that it produces even more pressure on those victimised.³ So the baggage goes on, across generations sometimes.

Two strong pleas emerge from this saddest of all subjects. The first is to be aware of the facts, I find it interesting that Jesus appeared to be sufficiently proactive in the story in the Gospel to have moved right out of His normal territory. One wonders whether He had heard ‘on the grapevine’ of this situation and determined to face the people concerned to bring some peace and progress to that area. Thank heaven He did, but also we need to learn from His actions.

The second, surely, is to be rather better prepared to respond to those in such dire need. In this State, our Church and others have responded with considerable seriousness to the issue, and even at great cost. One is left wondering whether this pandemic is of relatively recent emergence or whether it goes back a long way. Whatever the case, it has to be said that the further we humans move from the ancient realities of life, and distant from God, the more these aberrations are uncovered. Whilst there remain those who are most antagonistic to the very idea of God, it has to be said that the faith once delivered has very serious things to say about the genuineness and caring in our relationships with our neighbour. That relationship as neighbour, as Jesus pointed out, extends to every other human on this planet.

³ Particularly sad and savage have been recent revelations both here and overseas of very long-term abuse, particularly of girls. Austria and America have exposed absolutely ugly examples, and one wonders about the sanity of the victims involved.

Sunday 27th June, 2010

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Sentence

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

Matt 10:39

Collect

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

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

2 Kings 2: 1 – 14

Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel.

The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent." Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent."⁴

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground. When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not."

As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

PSALM

77: 1 – 2 & 11 – 20

I call to my God, I cry out toward Him: I will call to my God and surely He will answer

In the day of my distress I seek the Lord, I stretch out my hands to Him by night: my soul is poured out without ceasing, it refuses all comfort.

I will declare the mighty acts of the Lord: I will call to mind Your wonders of old

I will think on all that You have done: and meditate upon Your works

Your way, O God, is holy: Who is so great a God as our God?

You are the God that works wonders: You made known Your power among the nations

By Your mighty arm You redeemed Your people: the children of Jacob and Joseph

The waters saw You O God the waters saw You and were afraid: the depths also were troubled

The clouds poured out water, the heavens spoke: and Your arrows darted forth

The voice of Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind: Your lightnings lit the world, the earth shuddered and quaked

Your way was in the sea, Your path in the great waters: and Your footsteps were not seen

You led Your people like sheep: by the hand of Moses and Aaron

EPISTLE

Galatians 5: 1 & 13 – 25

⁴ The section in italics is not included in the Lectionary reading

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

GOSPEL

Luke 9: 51 - 62

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

NOTES ON THE READINGS.....

Old Testament

It may come as some surprise just how many common expressions in English derived from the Scriptures. Today's passage about Elijah and Elisha have one such: about the passing on a mantle. It is a shorthand sort of way of having a significant role passed on to a successor. And here is the original.

One would be a little hard up to provide all the detail of this somewhat unusual tale of the departure of Elijah. However, it provided ancient Israel with quite something of a mythology about this first of the prophets. When someone is lifted from this life to the next, there is the opportunity both of presenting the importance of the person, and (like any good TV programme) a chance of resurrection so to speak. 'Before Messiah, Elijah must first come,' for instance.

On the other hand, it will bear repetition to underline that Elijah was the first in a hugely significant line of people who were the prophets in Israel. To my knowledge, there is no other religion that produced such a distinguished line of people who were both enormously aware of the real direction of the Hebrew Faith, and were exquisitely capable of pointing to where that truth led. In spite of the sad distortion by some of what those ancients worthies produced, their aim and direction were remarkably unanimous: and focussed on truth and justice, on the God Who was working in and through His people, however disobedient, and that all pointed to a salvation the like of which would be far more all-embracing than ever before.

Elijah's successor was painfully aware of his need for charisma to continue in his master's footsteps, which was why he chased the old prophet all over the countryside. And whilst Elisha continued along similar lines, it has to be said that he never quite equalled his predecessor.

It is rather naughty of me, but the final act in today's reading is not quite as remarkable as it may seem. Anyone who has seen photographs of the River Jordan will know that it equated some of the rivers in this State – the flow of the stream was neither wide nor very deep at all. A creek may well have a better flow.

Psalm

Before you get all thingy and turn your eyes from this Psalm because it sounds like a good old-fashioned whinge, do stop and see what was happening. In good old traditional Jewish manner, the author was certainly bemoaning his fate, but then read on. His answer to his problem was to look back and see all that God had done both in his life and in that of his nation. All Jewish understanding of God, all its theology, stemmed from watching God at work in their history almost before looking to nature. In other words, the fascinating thing about Hebrew theology was that it was (still is, I would venture to guess) tested in the fires of ordinary human life and existence. If it did not fit there, then it was no longer relevant. Not a bad way to go at all.

Epistle

There is a remarkable dichotomy in what Paul was writing about here, and it is a message that bears a good hard look in this post-modern day of ours. If there is one thing that seems to resonate with most people today it is *freedom*. And with that there can be little dispute. *However*,

Freedom today tends to leave everyone else out of the picture. My freedom tends really to mean my control over you. And that is never freedom but a refined form of slavery. Several times the Apostle returned to this particular subject. The added ingredient, which stops my freedom becoming your slavery is good old fashioned genuine love. And that love is agape, neither eros nor Philadelphia. Ponder that for a while, eh?

In this lovely passage Paul lists the fruits of the Spirit, **against which there is no law.**

Gospel

Do not be too harsh on the Samaritans, bastardized Jews as they were. For them, Jerusalem was as much a swear word as their own existence was to the Jews. Alienated, and yet aware that Jesus had something for them, did not want the centre of Judaism taking their new Master.

Mind you, the disciples had not come far in Gospel when they decided to belt the living daylights out of the so-and-sos. Small wonder they earned Jesus' rebuke. In his own inimitable way Jesus underlined how his own disciples would feel the sting of isolation as time went by.

The challenge offered to Jesus to that line of wannabes reflected the real position: it had to be all or nothing, and there could be no delay until the olds passed away, nor deflections as some sort of excuse in other directions. Either you were in or you were out. (Not a popular path to travel these days now is it!!!!)

NOTES FOR A SERMON

One of the recurrent themes that seems to emerge in discussion and debate about 'the way things are going' is the perceived need to act with strength and overpower the wrongdoer(s) and press them into submission, This is the path chosen by political leaders in response to international terrorism, or even to the road toll and the Gang of 49. In fact it is a path chosen increasingly often by ordinary people as they seek to resolve problems with neighbours or other people a little further from home.

Sadly, it looks like the best path to travel, provided one has the necessary superiority, with all the promise of resolution – with a chance of some peace. History itself shows fairly clearly that violence has never yet provided any peace, unless you call suppression of people a phantom of peace.

Sadder still, is the assumption that people used to make about God, Who (they stated unequivocally) had it in His almighty power to stop wars and other destructive things. Conversely, when such a force was not brought into being to deliver the required outcome, it became obvious to rather too many that either God is impotent – or perhaps does not exist at all. Q.E.D.

Pardon me for being a stirrer, but there is another path that can be travelled, - should be travelled! – if real resolution and reconciliation is hoped for. That path is far from easy, and rather longer and more exhausting than some we have used, but it is likely to be less fatal for a rather wider number of people.

If you think that I am talking through my hat, then I offer a down-to-earth situation that is capable – at a small level – of bringing some sort of resolution. And the illustration stems from quite a number of years as Prison Chaplain. If there is one thing that loomed large when any discussion either of the Gospel or of the process undertaken by most Correctional Services, it is the vast distance between what may be called the Mission Statement

of such Departments, and the actual process that is involved. Chalk and cheese hardly describes the difference. Said Mission Statement, or at least the one printed in the Guard House where I was working, for all to see, talked about restorative justice and preparing inmates to be absorbed back into the community. The reality of that process was (and may well still be) a thousand miles from there. While it is not from the hands of all warders and staff, the harsh, punitive, 'shut up and do what you are told' regime is the one that holds sway. Violence is the first resort, by word or action, and don't tell me it doesn't happen for it has been tried on me as well.

Once prisoners experience that sort of force (and I have to say that for quite some of them, it is the only language they understand **because it is the only language they have ever come across,**) there may be no other starting point. But I have to add that – in my experience – acting in fairness and honesty with such men does often result in a refreshingly different outcome. I could point to quite some numbers of prisoners who have matured greatly under a regime of fairness, discussion of issues and problems and the start of resolution of those problems. It does not happen overnight, as the saying goes, *but it does happen*.

Perhaps you may well have some experience similar yourself. If there is a matter for argument at home, and your spouse or your children respond with truth and fairness, the issue is capable of solution very rapidly, however serious the problem. I find myself that, in an argument, if I am **listened to**, the first thing I find is that anger evaporates simply because I am being heard. *And understood*. I guess it does not take a degree in science to see the reality of this.

Now pardon me for now bringing an edge to this subject that is already thousands of years old. Yes, it is Jesus, and yes it is the Gospel, but the process predates our Lord. Many of the Old Testament prophets held to very similar views and theologies, Isaiah in particular drawing the clear conclusion that when the Servant of the Lord appeared, his whole *modus operandum* would circulate around the gentle, persuasive approach. 'A bruised reed he will not break, a smouldering wick he will not quench.' And although this approach will result in the death of that Servant, the process of restoration will begin and endure. And in Isaiah's view, those who follow the Servant will continue to work towards such reconciliation.

One needs look more than a little closely at the life and ministry of Jesus, to see how He responded to life and to people with that same patience, love and compassion. While it did not work for and with everyone, it did offer the rest of the world a means of regaining a lost equilibrium. It is almost bitterly ironic that large numbers of professed followers did not and do not see any trace of the path He puts in front of us.

And Jesus followed that path because that is the way His Father operated and operates. Sure, in the early pages of the Old Testament you will find constant references to a harsh and retributive God, but that is only because those ancients, in their own evolution in understanding God, still had the somewhat pagan baggage that could only think in terms of overwhelming power. It took many centuries, a millennium or two, for those old saints to realize that this God of theirs was operating on a very different wave-length.

Neither time nor space will enable an exhaustive look at this wide-ranging but hugely important aspect of life and of faith. Dare I say it may take time for some readers to kiss goodbye to some of the old baggage that they carry. Fear not; Rome was never built in a day, and the journey is a fascinating and rewarding one.