

Sentence

Return to the Lord your God, Who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Joel 2:13

Collect

Almighty God, You hate nothing that You have made, and You forgive the sins of all who are penitent: create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of You, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Joel 2:1-2 & 12-17

PSALM

51:1-17

EPISTLE

2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10

GOSPEL

Matthew 6:1-6

Notes on the Readings

Old Testament

The Old Testament prophet used to be hounded with bad press. Old-time preachers would thunder and rant and rave as they assumed the prophets did, but they never seemed to have the content or the impact of those ancient worthies, for they never seemed to have thought much about what they preached.

Israel, at the time under review, suffered from what remains a common problem for Churches and Christians. They went through the motions, trying to appear genuine and ‘spiritual,’ but being nothing of the sort. Joel was attempting to bring Israel, or at least part of it, back to genuineness is both faith practice and life practice. Inconsistency between these factors was not acceptable. SO it was genuineness that the prophet called for, and that is precisely the challenge that is presented to us, year by year, in the Season of Lent.

In what may be a surprise for some modern readers, the prophets were constantly calling for the exercise of justice and integrity in dealings with each other, considering that failure in those directions would bring the nemesis of collapse of nationhood.

Psalm

I am left wondering the extent to which the Biblical emphasis on sin gets lost in the modern context – it is seen these days as a personal and internal failing. While that is certainly the case, the real issue for the Psalmist and his ilk is the damage that human sinfulness causes in the community and nation. We have turned something significant into something so internalised that it misses so much of the point. These days, ‘my sin’ keeps me from heaven **rather than seeing the damage it causes to you and to others.**

Once I see the point of all that, I am more likely to be **significantly** repentant, and less concerned on its impact on me. In fact that very self-centred emphasis is as much sinful as is the other.

Epistle

This may also be a sign of my advanced age, but today’s Epistle comes as a strong challenge to much of today’s mores. Please notice two things:

The emphasis on **reconciliation**; and

The extent to which the Apostle submerged selfish cares and concerns in order all the better to meet his responsibilities as Apostle and Christian.

In today’s view of life, self-assertion is regarded as one of the goals of existence, and that brings with it a growing divide between individuals and communities. I am right; you are wrong: and if you disagree with me I will find ways of ensuring that you follow my pattern. I may even kill you to make sure that others submit *to me*.

Contrast that with the longing Paul has for the divides between humans being overcome by love and forgiveness. It is a costly path, but it is the only way to healthy community.

Gospel

When I was young, this tirade against spiritual hypocrisy was so self-evident that we young people could not begin to understand why Pharisees could possibly be so stupid and self-centred. How could anyone possibly think that other (lesser?) mortals would consider them superior when they acted in that way?

Not only has much of Western society – non-religious at that! – followed such a foolish pattern, but quite some of modern Christianity indulges in similar posing. In the world, you are nothing unless you wear the correct brand names or live in unnecessary luxury; and in parts of the Church, you are nothing unless you wave your religious flag and even pray in an almost required and rigid style. Phariseeism is not confined to the times of Jesus, nor even religious practice. It is all part of that human and selfish streak which is expressed in that most ancient of telic tales, the Story of the Fall. Genesis 3.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It would seem to be *de rigueur* in many religions for there to be times set aside for the faithful to endure and go through strict and self-searching experiences. The era of hair shirts and self-flagellation may be long past, but there are still those who like to show their commitment by means of rather odd practices.

I remember quite some years ago poking gentle fun at a Lutheran pastor who made it a severe practice in the season of Lent to give up smoking. Twenty or more years ago, that seemed like a severe and significant resolve. On the surface. But with all due respect said Pastor was not a noted smoker, going through perhaps three or four cigarettes **a week**. Not only was their small difficulty in his self-set challenge, my real difficulty was the fact that the whole exercise was remarkably self-focussed. ‘Look what I have done!’ And that took him in precisely the wrong direction for the Season.

When I see that the story of Jesus Temptations¹ is the focus for next Sunday, Lent I, the real issue about Lent falls in place as far as I am concerned. That period in Jesus’ life and ministry had our Lord pondering and deciding quite what should be the nature of His ministry and leadership. If that is a fair assessment, it has long struck me that the real point of celebrating Lent is to spend time looking for and responding to the really important issues in life and faith. Even the old business of deep penitence and contrition would seem to me to focus on ‘me and my standing before God’ when the real issues are how can we best make God known to people around about us?

Today’s Readings seem to me to offer a springboard in that direction. Perhaps you can see that factor already.

First the OT Reading points out and underlines the necessity of being quite serious in terms of our own discipleship. For OT readers, the ‘Day of the Lord’ was looked forward to as a time when Israel would be proved right, and would take its place as a leader among nations. It was the expectation of importance. And that is why Joel pricked that particular bubble. ‘It is a day of darkness and gloom’ he said, for whenever it occurred, Israel would find itself at the wrong end of the stick.

The Psalm is a reminder to me, every time that I read it, that I, too, have contributed to the sum total of human evil, and that I need – for everyone’s sake – to change direction, rethink my actions and attitudes, and regain some real balance in life and values.

Then the Epistle points me to that most significant parts of both Faith and Gospel: that God has always been concerned, not only to reconcile people to Himself, but in the same way and through the same process, ***reconcile people to each other. And who would dare to dispute that even the slightest move in such a direction will have repercussions so enormous and life-changing.***

The Gospel then comes as no surprise whatever. If the People of God find themselves unwilling or unable to be fair dinkum and to see beyond their own selfish goals, what hope is there for the rest of the world.

¹ *Testing* I would prefer to describe it!

With that sort of challenge before us, it seems to me that we simply need a little time to be quiet, take it all in, and respond seriously.

Sentence

The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.

Mark 1:15

Collect

God of the new and eternal Covenant, as the forty days of the great flood swept away the world's corruption, and watered the new beginnings of righteousness and life; grant to us who are washed clean and born again in the saving flood of baptism, that Your gift of new life may flourish again; through Jesus Christ our redeemer, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. **Amen**

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Genesis 9: 8 – 17

PSALM

25:1-10

EPISTLE

1 Peter 3:18-22

GOSPEL

Mark 1: 9 – 15

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

The Story of the Flood evokes all sorts of responses from all sorts of people, but the Biblical reality tends to be outside the traditional view. Here we have what amounts to the last part of Genesis' philosophy of history, if you are game to put it that way. The Creation Stories are designed to offer people a view of life and existence that takes into account all the ups and downs and variables of life, and that provides a significant way to respond. It is not history, it is a case of taking old stories and building a theology on to it.

The real issue of this Saga is that whereas one might expect, from a human perspective, that God would always be One to interrupt and punish evildoers, He tends to operate on a different wave-length. There is always that aspect of God that prefers compassion and fresh opportunities to sudden and violent ends. So different is this from the 'normal' human approach to opponents that is really is enough to take one's breath away. 'Never again will I destroy creation

Psalm

Here the psalmist is taking a long hard look at himself, and while it seems that 'sin' is often a focus especially when it is other people who are the problem, the psalmist is very aware of his own contribution to the sum total of human evil and folly. If the appearance of that word 'meek' is a bother to you, may I suggest that meekness is not a matter of being some sort of subservient slave, but rather is a matter of being someone who has the honesty to see their own involvement in failure and sin. Meekness has to do with **honesty** and has nothing at all to do with grovelling.

Epistle

The Epistles of Peter have long presented many people with a sense of confusion, while others seem to take delight in the almost violence of the views expressed. Here, however, a rather gentler and wider vision is offered. Not too many Christians seem aware of the extent to which in Biblical 'salvation history,' it is always through human agency that God works, even and especially in Jesus. The cause of the malaise is human (Gen 3.) and the repair of the situation has to come through human involvement. This is a stunning truth, and should leave us ever so aware of our own contribution both to evil and evil's defeat.

One wonders who so much debate and difficulty has arisen from various views on baptism: it would seem to be clear enough here. As I often ask people to see, baptism is never a matter of me accepting Christ, but rather of His acceptance of me. It is initiation into the covenant relationship, and a start from which one grows. And that start and that growth is towards maturity and wholeness (and that is what salvation means.)

Gospel

It may seem a little strange that Mark does not provide much in the way of what we may feel to be essential detail of the Temptations of Jesus. He simply reports on Jesus' assurance at His baptism that He was Who He was increasingly aware of Who He was, and then mentions the time of solitariness in the scrub to ponder the direction He needed to take in His life and ministry.

There would have been no vacuum on the subject in the mind of Jesus. As any good Jew would have done, Jesus grew up with an increasing knowledge and awareness of the Biblical revelation, especially in terms of Israel's expectation of Messiah. Other streams of perception remains available to this day in the Old Testament prophets, including the stunning series of Servant Songs in (Second) Isaiah – from Chapters 40 – 66. It is rather interesting to me to note that whilst Jesus did see Himself as Messiah, it was a far different perception from the traditional Jewish one, and it was interwoven with other strands of Biblical perception as well. Son of Man, Servant of the Lord, and other perceptions all coincided in the person and ministry of esus.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

You may well have heard me on this before, but it strikes me as sufficiently significant to reiterate it, First Sunday in Lent after First Sunday in Lent. If that worries you, then I tell the story of a young mother some years ago, who had sat through similar sermons for seven years, and at the end of that time, after hearing again what follows, asked why was it that in all her years she had never heard the story told that way. She was shocked when I told her that she had, but that this was the first time it had struck her. For each of us there seems to be 'times and seasons' when things break over us and we see life in a fresh light.

Even as a Sunday School kid, I was in trouble. Those temptations seemed rather – well, pathetic – if it was to put Jesus to the test. Turning stones into bread seemed such a petty thing, and only a very short-term solution to hunger. And jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple struck me as the height of stupidity. I was addressed in severe terms and expelled from the class. And all because no one else dared think outside the square. If you dare to think about it, it does sound ridiculous, until you ponder the matter more deeply. What was rally going on in the head of Jesus for those six long and hungry weeks in the bush? And why?

Jesus had just undergone baptism at the hands of John (the Baptist) and had a reassuring experience with those echoes from the Psalms *you are My Son, my beloved*. But what did that entail?

One of the great disappointments of my life occurred at the time of my Ordination. I do not know quite what I expected, but felt sure it would include a clear indication of how to 'priest,' and what it entailed. Nothing of the sort happened, and the 'charge' that I somehow expected came only in dribbles as the years rolled by. Jesus did not have the luxury of either 'charge' or long-term discovery, and that is why He did what we ought to have done then, and that is to go on retreat. How does one operate as Son of God, as Messiah, as Servant of the Lord? The usual and normal modes for leadership, we humans assume, is to be Boss of the Yard. Order people around. Delegate and then sit back.

The three different sorts of questions or tests that faced Jesus revolved around the nature of His ministry and leadership. How should *He priest?* How to gain a following, how to get the message across, how to win disciples?

That turning of stones into bread was a figurative way of operating. The Romans ruled, s it is said, by mans of bread and circuses. Devise ways of getting people's attentions by diverting them from the real issues. Spin is what we call it these days, though I have a fondness for the two-syllable Aussir expression that really expresses it vividly. Jesus knew that if He filled people's bellies, some would follow Him. Bit He also knew that as soon as the freebies ran out, so did the loyalty – or whatever passed for it. Obviously, this was not a valid direction to head.

Jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple is just as daft. Mind you, in our day and age, those who amuse and entertain us are lionised, grossly overpaid, and followed by a rather mindless multitude. Shoot me down if you like, but what has any singer, or dancer or ever sportsman **really** done for you and others? Jesus was not stupid, and knew that if He started out that way, it may begin with the pinnacle, but would have to expand into ever more stupid and risky procedures. And in what way does that process ever get anyone to think or love their neighbour.

The last temptation is the one that gets a lot of people. What really does it mean to fall down and worship Satan? It is not a matter of magic or mumbo jumbo. It is not even a case of the occult. It is far more simple and tempting than that. It is in fact something I suspect you do often. It is a matter of watering down the truth, of making it all palatable and lovey-dovey, it is spin. **It is the temptation to turn the truth into a lie and the lie into the truth. Or at least, make it look that way.**

This is the way of humans, of politicians, and of all who would lead the gullible up the proverbial garden path. And it is remarkably easy to do, for whenever you **know** you should be clear and direct and honest with others, Need I say more. Fortunately, we have a Lord with rather more integrity than that.

It would have been terribly easy for Jesus to have made a mess of things, simply surrendering to the normal human patterns. Thank God He did not. And here comes a huge sting in the tail.

Not only was it necessary for Jesus to have made His solid and strong decision in terms of His ministry and leadership, *it is also necessary for us. Not just clergy, but all the people of God. In fact all of the humans anyhow. Only when I come to close terms with the real and powerful lessons of Jesus' testing and learn to operate that way too, that my ministry, even my humanity has a chance to reach its potential, not for me but for others.*

Sentence

If you want to become a disciple of Jesus, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Him.

Mark 8: 34

Collect

God of all times and places, in Jesus Christ You opened for us the path to eternal life: grant that we being born of water and the Spirit, may joyfully serve You in newness of life, and faithfully walk in Your holy ways; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever
Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Genesis 17:1-7 and 15-16

PSALM

22: 24 - 32

EPISTLE

Romans 4: 13 – 25

GOSPEL

Mark 8:31

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

It is rather important to see a little beyond the details of the story to the point and purpose of it all. There are two issues that are worth attention.

The first is the repetition on the subject of the **covenant**. It is something that not many people take into account when they read Scripture. (In fact, it is a pity in a way that reference to the *sign of the covenant* has been excised from today's passage. There in the verses omitted is the divine command to undergo the initiation rite of circumcision. It may sound a little ugly to the modern mind – which tends to be rather too sensitive in the wrong directions! – but it was and is hugely important to Israel's sense of belonging.

The second – and more noticeable – issue has to do with the promise of a child for Sarai and Abram. Please see that the real issue is not so much a child, **but the promise and certainty of continuity**. God is not a God of ends but of constantly refreshing beginnings. Today's readings focus strongly on that.

Psalm

While many of us have quite some difficulty with these old songs of praise and penitence from Israel, there are often some points of view expressed that are worth pursuing. Just have a ponder of the opening few lines and verses, and see how the author has recognised in God One Who has thoughts for the 'little person.' Not too many leaders, (let alone Gods!) spare much thought for the ordinary man in the street. The big end of town tends to be the focus, but here things are different. It is an important value to notice, not just in relation to God but also in relation to each other of us humans!

Epistle

I really am glad that I was not around in the time of Paul. So much of his Pharisaic background emerges in so many of his arguments. It is all a bit too much like the traditional Jesuit, - which but for somewhat of an accident of birth, I did not become.

The real point that Paul argues here, and it needs to be seen, is that grace has always been the huge factor in God's dealings with humans. One does not earn grace; it is there pure and simple. One could say it is there for the taking, but there is more to it than that. If I accept this grace, then it is incumbent upon me to reflect it to others. Herewith is something rather any Christians forget.

The promise to Abraham was not for the man himself! It was for the world at large – and not even a narrow world of Israel! And one would have to say that whenever one experiences such grace from whatever source, life is adorned with a freshness.

Gospel

Over a number of years, I have taken issue with some less-than-thoughtful preachers who have loved to point out how free is the Gospel. It is there for you, they say, freely given, with forgiveness and the promise of heaven. And it is a short-sighted and false view of the Faith.

Certainly we have talked about grace above, and grace it is. But take on board the seriousness of this cameo of a passage, and wear what is being said.

Jesus' death was certain because no-one in any position of leadership or power wanted to be challenged to operate the way Jesus did. Power is power, and as a wiser person than me said, centuries ago, *power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely*. And one does not have to be boss of the universe to try and exercise control over someone else. You have had a crack at it, have you not?

To follow Jesus means far more than simple 'believing in Him.' It means to operate as servant, not master; it means to search for reconciliation not power. So, as with the other matters raised in today's Readings, the response cannot ever be taken light-heartedly or even self-centredly. Ponder the implications, please.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

Sentence

God spoke these words and said, 'I am the Lord your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt out of the house of bondage.'

Exodus 20:1

Collect

Lord our God, by Your Holy Spirit, write Your commandments upon our hearts and grant us the wisdom and power of the Cross so that, cleansed from greed and selfishness, we may become a living temple of Your love, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalm

19

Epistle

1 Corinthians 1:18 – 25

GOSPEL

John 2: 13 – 22

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

Someone is trying to tell us something, I fear! After some years of never having the Ten Commandments, we now have them twice in six months or so. Have we been sinning lately??????

Once again comes the reminder that life really does need values and direction, and without it, we are in a huge mess. Even in this day and age, when all things are held to be relative, it does not take a great deal of life-experience to show up the fallacy of much of what passes for modern thinking. I do not hold with the way that Government in our country is regressing into draconian legislation but one will have to notice that this is the only alternative to chaos unless one takes the Biblical balance .

Psalm

As today's Readings seem to require us to look long and hard at our own value system here and now, it is salutary to go back to the old Psalmist's approach. One thing I ask you to note particularly, *there is no dogmatic demands laid on the reader here – just the wisdom and humility to take a look around and see what makes the most sense.* Is this not so?

Epistle

Quite clearly, according to Paul, it all depends where you are starting from: and it would appear that both Greeks and Jews tended to start from dogmatic or ideological positions. *Jews demand signs a Greeks seek wisdom.* And while it all sounds terribly laudable, the reality is rather less than that. Like a lot of people who consider themselves erudite, the old Greeks loved to debate and discuss philosophy. However, they did so on the basis that the more you debate the less you have to arrive at an answer. As long as that vague position was held, no one had to do much but continue debate. (Sound like Parliament?)

The dear old Jews were not much better, it would seem. Their demand for signs (for proofs that someone has the authority) was just another ploy to avoid facing issues. Notice the extent to which Jesus was required to provide signs to establish His authority; notice also the extent to which Jesus would prick that pompous bubble, showing it up to be just another means of solving problems by avoiding them. Both groups are illustrative of modern humanity's great capacity to smokescreen important issues.

Gospel

In Biblical terms, today's Gospel points up an incident that vividly displays the extent to which right and proper matters can be turned into a means not only of avoiding the real issues but also turn them into a means of making a quid and exploiting those least able to step around the crassness.

This is a well known tale, but before we get too excited about it, I point up something that lots of people miss. In the Synoptic Gospels² this incident is placed at the end of the day when Jesus made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This was a matter of four or five days before the Crucifixion. However, John – who never did take

² That is, Matthew, Mark and Luke

too much notice of chronology – places it at the beginning of his writing. This it would seem was a means of stating, right at the start, Jesus’ view of how Judaism operated, especially at the power base. It is not a pretty sight.

The impact of Jesus’ words about the Temple has all sorts of implications if you take time to ponder. Apart from anything else, He removed the emphasis from ritual and formality to the very much more life-giving stuff of personal commitment and involvement. Far better to have a hug than to have someone declare from a safe distance that they care about you.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I am writing these notes somewhat in advance, and reference to an article in today’s Advertiser³ may now seem a little obtuse. However, the article was written for the morning on which Singapore executed an Australian for drug-related crimes.

The leading article⁴ drew attention to the very human capacity for what he called ‘little white lies,’ in our dealings with each other, and in the first case, sided with Michelle Leslie for ‘engaging in deceit, allegedly, in trying to reduce her time in jail. Bagaric applauded Leslie, and suggested that it was a fair thing to do in the light of the draconian laws against drugs in Indonesia.

“Lying is, (*in effect,*) morally permissible in some circumstances”, he asserted, focussing on our propensity for self-defence whenever challenged by others. And I would have to comment that, if this is what the legal profession upholds, it is small wonder that the legal system is in considerable disrepute.

I had the hide the email a Letter to the Editor, wishing to pose the reality that such a direction in life and relationships is a recipe for precisely the sort of chaos we endure in today’s society. Everything is relative; nothing is positive. So if I can pull the wool over your eyes, all is OK. But what about the damage, to people, to relationships, and from all the spin-doctoring that passes for government and advertising these days. Even commerce is shot through with the failure to be honest, - and if you do not believe me, ask me of some of the stories I can tell and experiences I have had. Mind you, I am glad not to be in business myself, for customers and patrons are just as capable of dishonesty and lack of integrity too.

It was only earlier this week that the guys at local Prison Bible Study group asked me to pontificate on what is sinful and what is not. My response was simple: I am not as concerned about whatever is sinful as I (and Scripture too, pardon me!) am far more concerned about what is damaging and destructive and what is not.

Which brings me right to the First Lesson this morning, and that stunning old set of standards that have stood the test of time. Certainly, it can be summed up in the *Shema Israel*, about loving God and loving one’s neighbour. And it does not take a lot of knowledge of history to know that the much-maligned British heritage – for all its faults and failings – has been the attempt to build in the Biblical values into society. As that value system becomes ignored increasingly, so does the disruption and disintegration of life and society.

No longer is it fashionable to care a stuff. But sooner or later, our society will have to choose between utter chaos, or a return to those tried and tested values.

One is left pondering, seems to me, that this capacity of humans to sidestep important realities, needs to be reinforced in our thinking. There is nothing new about it, for that attitude is as old as humanity itself. It seems, as someone once remarked to me, that the only lessons we learn from history is that we do not learn the lessons of history.

As Paul was painfully aware as he wrote that passage in Corinthians, we humans are almost hell-bent on proving that we know better than generations before us. It is like we are all pre-pubescent and that our parents do not have a clue! The very approach to life that has the most potential to enhance life and humanity is discarded on the basis that ‘I know better.’ *What fools we mortals be.*

And as the Gospel underlines, it is so tragically easy to turn something valuable and important in something quite crass and destructive. The reason for the stalls selling potential sacrifices was – in the then current situation – an aid to worshippers. It allowed urban Jews to purchase their doves or whatever; and it saved people from afar having to bring their lamb or goat all the way there. But what was a good idea to begin with became a

³ 2nd December, 2005

⁴ Talk – with Mirko Bagaric, Head of Deakin Law School

means of extortion. Someone somewhere managed to find yet another way to make a drachma. *What is new, pussycat?*

So where does all this get us?

In this day and age, and with the generally accepted social mores, it is considered to be a no-no for anyone to say no! no! to anyone or anything! To operate any differently is to be considered a troglodyte. Or worse. A wowser. No one seems to take notice or even care much about the damage that this *modus* creates, although people do bemoan the collateral damage. 'Where will it all end, Ron?'

So the old verities re dismissed or ignored, and the carnage goes on. All I can say is that it is part of the role of the people of God to bear witness by life and word to the fact that the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater. Or, to put it another way, the king has no clothes.

And Christians are supposed to be the idiots!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Sentence

The Son of Man must be lifted up, so that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.

John 3:14

Collect

Everlasting God, in Whom we live and move and have our being, You have made us for Yourself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in You. Give us purity of heart and strength of purpose so that no selfish passion will hinder us from knowing and following Your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Numbers 21: 4 – 9

Psalm

107:1-3 & 17 – 22

Epistle

Ephesians 2: 1 – 10

GOSPEL

John 3: 14 – 21

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

This is a rather strange little cameo, fairly obviously a later or perhaps even earlier version of what you can read in Exodus. Certainly, the picture one is given is of a very punitive God, rather different to the vision of the manna and quail. Here, though, we also have that rather strange picture of people being healed almost, as it were of, by ‘the hair of the dog that bit them.’ The question is what lesson is being taught here?

It is a bit late in the day to ask the author of the tale. But, in the light of the use of this incident made in John’s Gospel, I take the liberty of making a somewhat educated guess. Is it not true that one sometimes only learns of possible dangers from things by going through the agony? If this is the case here, perhaps the reminder of the source of the damage may be enough to convince people to stay away from the danger. A sort of reverse psychology.

Psalm

The dating of this Psalm is, obviously, far later in Jewish history than the Book of Numbers. Given that there would have been quite some development of theology over that time, we could be looking at a similar problem with a similar yet different outcome.

Here the overarching attitude to sinfulness is not some sort of punitive approach but rather a therapeutic one. It really does take a great deal to move people from the concept of ‘illness being a direct result of sin’ to something rather more positive.

Epistle

It is rather too easy, I consider, to lose contact with the sort of things that the Apostle was writing about, simply because we do not see the necessity of translating across a cultural divide. We no longer talk or think about ‘spiritual powers of the air,’ and probably feel at something of a loss to understand what Paul is talking about. Some people, still, demonise things, and assume something satanic in all that is being said here.

On the other hand, we have little difficulty in talking about and understanding cultural mores, or even ‘community standards’ which is today’s theme song. In other words there is a great need, for Christians in particular, or anyone else who has concerns at the rapid slipping of standards, to realize that these are the issues that Paul was concerned to uncover – and get people to think about.

Gospel

Although John 3 is so crucial to the conservative view of the Gospel, the reality for this passage is rather more broad and inclusive than that. The picture that is being offered stems from the Exodus experience, and

underlines the fact that even then people had a serious life choice to make. One can choose folly and sin, or sense and life. And this is precisely the choice or option that Jesus provides for anyone who will think about things and take notice. One cannot blame others for choices they make; one of the great things about being human and alive is that I have the responsibility for my choices.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

As I write this, there has been for many days, an awful lot of soul-searching and just as much casuistry about death sentences and crimes and other great matters. It has been an interesting time for me, for the passionate issues have been expressed in so many ways. Much of the passion has been expression of concern for a mother whose son was the focus of the death penalty, and much rage has been expressed as scapegoats have been sought and fingered. I do not make light of the hideous situation, but I do find and express concern at what have to be seen as profoundly changing mores. The greatest concern – from where I sit – is the increasing refusal of people to accept responsibility for their deeds and misdeeds. It is almost a matter of finding someone, *anyone*, who will wave the magic wand and take reality out of the picture.

I may be considered something of a party pooper, and I guess I have thick enough skin to cope with that. But as I have lived my life for a while now, and particularly in the period since World War II, I have to comment that community values have sunk to such a low that I wonder if there is any room left to manoeuvre and recover. There has been – and continues to be – the sexual revolution that has reduced a most wonderful expression of intimacy to a scoreboard for self-gratification. There has been – and continues to be – a sinking of any vestige of honesty and integrity in almost any area of life and relationships. And the relatively new scourge of road rage is making life significantly unsafe in all sorts of areas.

Perhaps I do not need to go on for the picture is fairly clear to all of us. And I have more than a sneaky suspicion that the root of the problem is to be found in the rapidly increasing selfishness and self-assertion that appears to be the new goddess of today. To use an old Australianism, bugger you, Jack I am OK. Even young people are infected by it, and encouraged by School and State to stand on the toes of anyone who gets in their way or says them nay.

Now, like it or not, but people, humans, are free to make their own choices and follow their own dreams. Mind you, if they go what is seen as too far overboard, then there may be legal redresses to contain their follies. But they are free. Even the Scriptures make it clear that humans have what some theologians like to call ‘free will,’

But two things concern me:

The first is that far too many Christians absorb, often unthinkingly and uncritically, the mores of the day, and become just as selfish and as assertive as the best of the others.

The second thing is that far too few Christians are aware of the fact that the Faith once delivered is there to offer people an alternative to the grasping lifestyle, and proffers something far more creative, redemptive and conciliatory so that all humans can enjoy a far more fulfilling life.

I have to admit that there are often times when I am ashamed of being Australian as I watch men in particular make utter fools and nuisances of themselves especially when overseas. I am often just as ashamed to be Christian when I encounter some who name themselves likewise expressing views and expectations quite utterly contrary to the Gospel they are supposed to embrace. For instance, the current move of so-called born-again Christians attempting to get themselves into positions of power lead me to fear the return of a modern version of Cromwellism. Someone wiser than me posited not all that long ago that he feared that the 21st Century may well be the century of the tyrant. The move in that direction – even in this country – is far too rapid for my liking. (And if could happen in Germany in the ‘30s, it could happen here, I kid you not.)

Paul, writing to the Ephesians, was very painfully aware of the fact that those who were part of that Church in that period had a huge learning curve in front of them. For those who had come from Judaism, Paul knew the road because he had to travel it himself. It was a long and powerful struggle, but it had to be engaged, and to the end of his days, the learning curve had not finished. For those who came from what must have been a series of different pagan backgrounds, there were very many tight curves to engage and move from. Not least of those curves, for those pagans, was the need to move from a bedraggled view of the female of the species.

I would have to say, as a priest of lots of years now, that the hardest part of ministry – in my humble opinion, - is to help people to see past and move past their biases and hang-ups. Stuff people were taught in by-gone Sunday Schooldays – and their refusal to move past those views – is horrendously hard stuff to move.

So, here lies a plea: that each of us take a long hard look at our perceptions of the Faith, and to take a long hard look at the sorts of assumptions and perceptions of today's society. Then there is the difficult task of adjusting both our thinking and our actions in terms of the wider directions of the Gospel of Christ, for I have more than a sneaky suspicion that we are going to need a great deal more of that as the world become increasingly directionless.

There is nothing new about this. Dear old Augustine of Hippo saw and understood very much the same sort of thing as he watched the potential collapse of the Roman Empire. *And St. John the Divine had, even then, beaten him to the draw*