

**Sentence**

Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ

*Phil 3:20*

**Collect**

God of our ancestors, Whose chosen servant Abraham was given faith to obey Your call and to go out into the unknown; endow Your Church with such faith, that we may follow You with courage for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Genesis 17: 1 – 7 & 15-16**

**PSALM**

**27**

**EPISTLE**

**Philippians 3: 17 – 4:1**

**GOSPEL**

**Luke 13: 1 – 9**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS .....**

**Old Testament Lesson**

If there is one thing that strikes me from this reading, especially in this Season of Lent, it is the factor that this God Who calls people is a God Who commits Himself completely. Certainly there were terms and conditions laid on Abraham, but as history unfolded, it became clear that even if Israel stumbled, God did not. Commitment is tending to become one of the present day's obscenities, is it not? And to the extent to which commitment is disregarded in any and all of human relationships, those relationships will be damaged, even to breaking point. Lent is a Season of serious issues.

**Psalm**

One of the things that I keep asking congregations to see and respond to, is not so much that God is some sort of refuge to 'protect me,' but is very much more One Who represents the only sensible, solid and substantial way to travel. Thank God for real and proper 'correctness,' because when one follows Him, then whatever our community does in terms of going to pieces, we still have the solid rock on which to stand. This is not for our benefit as much as for those around about.

**Epistle**

And isn't Paul expressing exactly the same views as we have just been thinking about? Hang in there, in spite of peer pressure to head in other directions. Follow sense; follow values; follow Christ.

**Gospel**

And it is not just contemporary 'wisdom' that can lead people up 'garden paths.' In a world where random events and accidents, and these days not-so-random deliberate destruction, occur, a person can wonder what is going on and how does one avoid all the flak and damage? Conventional wisdom used to (and still does occasionally) operate on the basis that if lousy things happen to good people, then they cannot be all that good. Mind you, I find it extraordinary that apparently normal people get themselves into very risky situations and then wonder why disaster occurs.

In Jesus' own day, there were, obviously, several major accidents that took toll on the local population. Popular opinion then seemed to have it that those who died were being punished for some sin or sins they had committed, whereas Jesus pointed in other directions. Life is a risk, He seems to be saying, and sometimes dreadful things happen that take lives. We need to look at realities, not theories. However it also needs to be said, Jesus seems to be saying, that we need to take responsibility for our choices, and be ready to wear the outcomes of our stupidity. However else do we learn that *life is real and life is earnest and the grave is not its goal.*

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

I have a mate of some years' standing now, with whom we have often debated issues that are serious to him and to most other people who stop and think about life and its realities. However, one of the aspects of life that I point to often in those arguments is that business of 'we are human; *ergo* we are responsible.' My mate, whose life has been a tragic series of one disaster after another, has quite some point when he reckons that he has had little chance because other people and groups of people have conspired to take away both his choice and his responsibility. However, it is a rather false shield behind which he hides, because he has used it – all of his life as far as I can see – as an escape valve or an excuse. As a consequence, he has tended to learn nothing, and had done little to change much. Like those who fail to learn the lessons of history, he tends to consign himself to constant failure. And that is tragedy beyond belief.

There may have been a time in my youth when I saw Christian Faith (or any other faith) as an escape from reality, but whenever that was a factor in my thinking, I could not reconcile Jesus' emphasis away from selfishness and the then contemporary religion which appeared to me to be a refined form of selfishness. If the role of the Gospel is to get me to heaven, then it only underlined that selfishness, as far as I could see.

We have a rather interesting set of readings for today, countering such a limited view of the Faith, and making us look at a much broader canvas, and a far more positive one. The Old Testament Lesson is a powerful starting point. In this passage, God's Covenant with Abraham is restated and reaffirmed, with the usual statement of responsibility for Abraham: 'live in My presence and be blameless.' There is no escape valve here. It is quite blunt. Whilst you may consider that the terms were impossible for Abraham to fulfil, the fact remains that, in this one-sided Covenant<sup>1</sup> there were always responsibilities to attend to. Abraham was to be a blessing to all nations, which meant that the whole business of the faith had its ramifications to reach out to others, **all others!** Not much room for selfishness there.

Turn to the Psalm and see that this ancient author saw quite clearly that his task as a follower of JHWH was to reflect the Lord's characteristics even in the face of a world and culture that operated on a different wavelength. The Psalmist saw that God was, if you like, a guarantor or the old verities of justice, truth and compassion, and that he, Psalmist, needed to reflect those values even in a situation where they were devalued or held in contempt. This was not for his own sake, but for the community in which he lived.

Tie those two readings together, go back further to Abram's call, and see that right from the beginning, the Hebrew Faith as designed to be world-changing, and not to be introverted or narrow. Why is it that we humans love to reduce something to our own size, into our own comfort zone, and then fight against anyone who dares to interfere with our blinkers?

Now it does not take any great leap into the dark to see the immediate connection with the Epistle and Gospel. Yes, there are questions that arise, as the Gospel makes clear, but there are ever answers to such questions, even if they take us in directions we prefer not to travel.

Now I am going to be quite naughty. Above is a start for exploration: now it is your business to uncover where that takes us

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<sup>1</sup> Notice always that in Greek the Covenants, Old and New, were *διαθήκη* – unilateral. Our only choice is to accept or reject.

**Sentence**

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts,' says the Lord  
*Isaiah 55:9*

**Collect**

Lord our God, by Your Holy Spirit write Your commandments on 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**

**Isaiah 55: 1 – 11**

**Psalm**

**63: 1 – 9**

**Epistle**

**1 Corinthians 10: 1 – 13**

**GOSPEL**

**Luke 11: 31 – 35**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

**Old Testament**

Isn't this a passionate and apposite passage and picture that the prophet presents. We moderns tend to take it somewhat personally and individually, although it is not meant to be so understood. It is a word to Israel, to the community and country, and is designed to get Israel thinking about and pursuing goals that lead to fuller life. It is not about riches, but about those less obvious qualities that make life so much more valuable and real. And it costs nothing.

Mind you, one is left with a sneaky suspicion that the prophet still had quite something of a yearning to see Israel at the top of the heap. However, it needs to be seen that the real and lasting attraction of Israel – and the Church come to that – needs to be those deeper attributes of love and compassion and support, that seem to flow as freely as indicated when life is full of justice and truth and integrity.

*One comment that seems necessary, though I hope it is not, for you.*

*My thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways your ways. I have often heard it preached and said that God's thoughts are so far above ours that they are unreachable for us mere humans. **That is not the case.** It is a matter of God's thoughts and ways are so **different**, and caring, and forgiving and encouraging – so we need to do quite something of a volte face in order to head in a direction similar to the Father.*

**Psalm**

I remember, as a young chorister singing these old psalms on a Sunday morning, how *anybody* could get at all excited about God, or anything to do with Him. Obviously my life experience then was remarkably limited, even if it was during the years of World War II. However, as I watch life and history now, and the enormous screw-up that faces so many people for so much of the time, I become acutely of the vast difference that the Faith offers us mere human beings. It is not a matter of being religious. It is a matter of seeing and understanding what is important in life and what is not, and embracing those important things. This is no escape from real life; it is a matter of embracing those factors, free and chooseable, that set a person free from all that pulls a person down.

**Epistle**

All this business about cloud and sea may sound remarkably 'old hat' and passé to the modern reader. Little could be further from the truth. Paul was pointing his readers to that most formative of experiences for Israel, the Exodus. Also he was making it quite clear that not all those who were part of that experience and trek even cared about the business of what it was all about. On the one hand, God was at work amongst His people in a remarkable and salutary way – from slavery to freedom. On the other hand, quite a lot of those people involved could hardly have cared less. Why is it that some people think and see further than others? I suspect that this question tends to answer itself. It is another example of the only lesson we learn from history is that we do not learn the lessons of history.

**GOSPEL**

Light and darkness, if you think about it, and here it is. On the one hand, twin examples of groups of people who – so the story goes – should have had no idea of which way is up and what is important, still being

open and honest enough to see and respond to things that are obviously true. However – as is often the case – people who do not **want** to see and respond to the truth, whatever it happens to be, manage to find all sorts of reasons and excuses to avoid the issues.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

Over quite a period of time recently, I have encountered a whole series of rather fascinating although annoying responses from people, some of whom I had thought to be friends. In what appears to be the imitation of political spin and fact-avoidance, those people have taken decisions that produce the outcome they want, in complete disregard either of the facts or of the views of the people over whom they have decided. In one case, it was a matter – so I was told – of being nice rather than blunt (for ‘blunt’ read ‘true’) but it meant that the issue was irresolvable unless and until the reality was expressed and faced. In the meantime, damage to individuals involved has been huge, and even more damaging to other people on the periphery. We humans can be so nasty in the nicest possible way!

You will have encountered similar sorts of baloney from Governments, from Government departments and public servants (if ever there was a misnomer, there is one, is it not! Servant? Like hell!) Advertisers offer the same baloney. Often so do friends. And as the stress level rises, so the truth barometer drops, and the trust possibility reduces accordingly. It is not hard to imagine that outcomes in such directions can be compared to aridity, deserts, lack of water. *Do you get my drift?*

So when the prophet Isaiah talks about important aspects of life that are ‘without price,’ he was not talking about useless, valueless things, but about aspects of relationships that are priceless. Here is no reference to some vague or unclear spiritual experience, but rather the matter of being totally open and truthful, of being able to give one’s word without reserve or cant, and being able to accept the other’s word in the same way.

Here is a fascinating and really quite immediate subject for consideration in the Season of Lent. This is a Season of re-examining the important issue of life, faith and relationships, with God and with each other. And if you are unable to build a significant sermon from the bases indicated above, I will be very surprised indeed.

**Sentence**

God has reconciled us to Himself in Christ, and given us the ministry of reconciliation

*2 Cor. 5:18*

**Collect**

Almighty God, in Christ You make all things new: transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of Your grace, and in the renewal of our lives, make known Your heavenly glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

*(Alternative Reading)*

**Genesis 22:1 – 14**

**Psalm**

**32**

**EPISTLE**

**2 Corinthians 5: 16 – 21**

**GOSPEL**

**Luke 15: 11 – 32**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

**Old Testament**

*This reading is in place of one from Judges which tells of the circumcision of the Israelite males – not the most edifying of readings .....*

It has always made a great Sunday School lesson – for those who can remember back that far. But it is also a salutary lesson both of obedience, and of how to leave one’s cultural garbage behind!

If that sounds harsh, please stop a moment. Abraham’s religious and cultural background may well have included the sacrifice of children to appease the gods. So this whole episode may well have stemmed from Abraham thinking that this is what God was calling him to do. Now be honest: how often have you been convinced that God was calling you to something, when later consideration made it clear that there may not have been a lot of God in it. Whatever the situation, here was Abraham confronted with the challenge to sacrifice Isaac – a harsh enough proposition anyway, without the added blank wall of slaying the only possible way for the line to continue. It is a measure of the total commitment of Abraham that he went ahead with the project, in spite of enormous reservations he must have had within himself.

The Divine provision of an alternative in the form of the ram caught in a thicket has all manner of ramifications in terms of Israel’s increasing understanding of forgiveness and atonement.

**Psalm**

It is no surprise of course, to have a psalm that emphasises both the necessity of confession of sin (the acknowledgement of responsibility) and the relief that forgiveness brings. Mind you, quite a number of times I have encountered people who are quite certain that God’s forgiveness is a blanket thing, involving no response or responsibility from us humans. It is certainly not the simplistic thing that they seem to assume, which results in some rather difficult or even ghastly outcomes. *More on that anon*

**Epistle**

The Gospel we have been given is a most wonderful and effective instrument, but there are those who see it only in what I may call ‘vertical’ terms. God has forgiven us in Christ. Here Paul is at some pains to make clear that the person who has been made a new creation by the ‘vertical’<sup>2</sup> is now called to be an illustration and instrument of change in the horizontal arena. The real and vivid name of the Gospel has to do with *reconciliation*, and there could hardly be a matter more urgent, immediate and relevant across this entire world now, than that.

Just as Jesus ‘wore’ a lot of flak, hatred and even execution in His ministry of reconciliation, it behoves us to be ready to cop some of the same ourselves.

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<sup>2</sup> By vertical, I mean the relationship between us and God. By the horizontal, I refer to the human to human relationship, and to the here and now!

## Gospel

Now in this well-known parable, we have all the elements of sin and reconciliation spread out in a manner so easily absorbed, that we still tend to miss or lose sight of the hugely important elements. For the sake of clarity, I will attempt to address some of them. The nature of the sin that the son of the story indulged in was something that, in most circumstances – an certainly Jewish ones – would have alienated himself for ever. To put it quite bluntly, he wanted his father dead, in order to get what he thought was coming to him. It was an appalling thing to do. One might have expected the father in the story to respond tit for tat, to find some way of punishing the young brat. (Most people still see God as punitive Judge, and consequently miss most of the NT evidence to the contrary. When you read ‘*wrath of God*’ for heaven’s sake do not imagine punishment and certainly not eternal punishment! Hell is Gehenna, the rubbish tip not the gallows. God’s wrath is expressed by giving you the freedom to make stupid and sinful choices, in the hope and longing that you will learn from your mistakes and evil. ‘Judgement’ is κρίσις what you know as ‘crisis,’ a choice and a crossroads, where your choice illustrates your sense of values. Every ‘crisis’ poses the choice, and a person is free (and encouraged) to move away from stupid and sinful choices (repentance) and move back to where true life is to be found. So now watch what the father does:

He let the son go, even at huge cost to himself, hoping that the son would realize the utter folly of his ways.

He did not chase him; he did not bother him, he did not harass.

Then notice what the son does, though nothing happened until he ran out of money and friends. ***He came to himself***, and realized the selfish folly of his choices, and decided to return, with sufficient honesty to face his father with the recognition of what he had done. That, if you have never done it, takes a lot of guts and strength of honesty to do. Then and only then, was forgiveness a possibility. While the father forgave, the son HAD to repent, and repentance is far more than being sorry. Repentance (in Greek μετανοια) means change of mind. Mindset if you like – it means a complete and utter **change of direction**.

Meanwhile the father, as some commentator beautifully put it, had his hair go white as he waited for the son to return home. The point of reconciliation has been made complete, and the son restored. At great cost to both sides.

The tale of the son who remained home is a savage commentary on normal human response to such a tale. We want ***blood, we want the rotten so-and-so to pay for his misdemeanours***. And that is in total disregard of our calling as Christians who are challenged always to ‘reflect the nature of our Father.’

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

One of the saddest periods in Christian history, it seems from my perspective, was the long-drawn-out and highly ill-thought-out ‘battle’ between science and religion. It is not just because Charles Darwin happens to be a distant relative of my family, but it is because of the obvious fear Darwin raised when he asked some powerful but difficult questions. The response of the Church, generally, was remarkably short-sighted, and – dare I say it – foolish indeed. Not all the Church nor all Christians were led into the blind alley of ‘belief,’ and I was thrilled to find someone like Griffith Thomas, a century ago, asked people to see beyond their noses. While that period certainly forced thinking Christians into a wider perception of the Faith, the conservative element still tries to force antediluvian theology on a space age community.

I find it enormously tragic when, in asking people to see past their own eternal destiny in terms of the Christian Faith, I am confronted with all manner of anger, derision and myopia. The Biblical emphasis and focus of the Gospel has always been far wider than this myopic view, and from the almost earliest Biblical times, the faith has been offered to the world as a means to finding the reason for and then the remedy to the most basic of all human issues. How does one respond to that greatest of human dilemmas, the constant and powerful effect of evil, human evil in particular.

Today’s Sentence and Readings focus on this hugely significant factor of reconciliation – shown up especially in Epistle and Gospel. And this reconciliation emphasis has far less to do with getting you to heaven than it has to do with solving and resolving matters of dispute and war right here and now. How people can read and ponder Genesis 3 and 4 without catching sight of the immediate and present factors that those tales point to, is something that has escaped me ever since an Old Testament expositor opened my eyes to the powerful enormity of the subject taken on by those very ancient worthies.

If there is one thing that faces almost every human being, at least of adult age, it is the question and problem of anger, violence, hatred and bigotry. What is so hugely tragic is the extent to which the so-called

Christian super-power so ignores the Faith to indulge in violence of an extraordinary extent, all in the name, if not of Christ, then certainly of ‘freedom and democracy.’

Charge me with confusing politics and religion if you like. I have long discarded ‘religion’ as having nothing to do with the Gospel of Christ, but I do find, from the Old Testament prophets on, that the Judaism of the last 500 years or so before Christ had more to say about justice, truth, righteousness<sup>3</sup> and compassion than it has to say about anything else much. Small wonder then that Jesus Himself follows that up and underlines the issues so powerfully in all that He said, all that He did and in response to all that was done to Him!

I guess the best place to start is the Gospel, simply on the basis that (a) it is well-known, and (b) it is simple enough to be oh! so very clear. It is that Parable of the Prodigal Son,--although should that not be the wonderfully prodigal father? If you do not understand that comment, then simply read on. Just at present, I am involved in an email correspondence with a wonderful friend of mine who is finding rather great difficulty coping with (fairly normally) self-centred kids. How does one understand, cope with, be a living parent to someone who is doing their absolute darnedest to bugger up anything and everything round them, including themselves?

SO here we have a father, with a son who has decided that he cannot wait for his Dad to die, so that he can get his hand on the family farm. Then as now, I imagine, farmers were asset-rich and cash poor, but big green eyes led that son to demand his inheritance before the time. Now there are not a lot of stupid Dads, - or I hope there are not – and this one was certainly not so. Such was the nature of that Dad’s love, so the tale goes, that he divided the farm, sold half of it,<sup>4</sup> and saw his son off. One could imagine that there had been a lot of discussion, debate and dispute preceded that point.

What do you do when faced with such a position? Rant and rave? Throw the kid out on his neck and disown him? It is a path more than a few Jewish families (and others for heaven’s sake) have travelled. But that father, so unlike us human ones and far more like our Heavenly Dad, was prepared to stick his neck out for a son he could only hope would later come to his senses. What an enormous risk!

As mentioned above, I read one commentator, years ago, who ‘reported’ that in the period between the young man leaving – and the years before he returned, - the father’s hair went grey then white. Loving someone is always a costly path to travel, loving hurts the loving one far more often than the loved one. But the old fella stuck it out, looking at the farm gate who knows how many times and oft.

The one and only redeeming feature about that prodigal and utterly selfish son, from where I sit, is that he had the gumption and the honesty to realise that he had been stupid, selfish, sinful beyond imaginings. ‘He came to himself,’ is it stated so aptly. His vastly impoverished circumstances and the depths to which he had sunk, bit him to his core. (Not a lot of people operate like that! How many do you know who, even in the face of similar drastic downfalls, refuse to accept any responsibility for their actions, blame others, and so fail to learn a damn thing along the way?)

Repentance is what the Scriptures call it. *Metanoia*. Change of mind, of heart, of direction and of emphasis. Here is no feeling sorry about it all, nor sorry for oneself; it is the recognition that ‘I have been wilful, stupid, damaging, and need to do a 180° – a complete about-face. There is neither chance nor opportunity of forgiveness coming from the other side unless and until the wilful one accepts responsibility for the evil they have done. *Never, never forget that.* This is the sort of response God looks for in the penitent, and nothing less than this will lead to Divine forgiveness. Fail to see that, and you are left with the most minimal – and most entirely useless –gospel one could ever imagine. Yet, this is how the faith is presented in far too many situations.

And the father? Just look at him! After all those years of waiting, of hoping against hope, there comes the bedraggled wayward stupid son down the track to the farm homestead. And all those years of waiting, hoping, loving have been rewarded. The son has come back, lesson learnt and never to be forgotten, and has come back as a son in spite of the chequered history in between-times.

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<sup>3</sup> As I have mentioned often, ‘righteousness’ is the translation from the Greek δικαιοσύνη – dikaiosune – which translates ‘justice.’ Mind you, this needs to be understood, not in hugely punitive terms as many moderns expect, but is justice that takes all the factors into account when deciding what response is called for. The only way to find peace is to take all the factors of the conflict, from both sides of the fence, into account. Only so is any sort of resolution possible.

<sup>4</sup> And remember, in those days, your farm was the future for your family **for generations to come**. Only in Jubilee year, 50 years down the track, was there any come-back, **if** the Jubilee thing was carried through!

That commentary on the son who stayed is just as potent: and portrays the way in which we can get all snotty-nosed and refuse the very reconciliation that the Gospel shows to be both necessary and possible. How many congregation members do you know who have managed to stuff up the gospel by their high-handed refusal to repent themselves!

Most of the reason that the Gospel of Christ either stinks in the nostrils of our contemporaries, or offers no possibility to them lies so simply in the fact that we manage to refuse to practice what we preach. Little is more damaging than that; little is further from the real Gospel than that. And it is we, so much of the time, that gets in the way of us being agents of reconciliation.

**Sentence**

Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves with them.

*Psalm 126:6*

**Collect**

Lord Jesus, Your feet were caressed with perfume and a woman's hair, yet You humbly took a basin and towel and washed the feet of Your friends, in Your tenderness, wash us also, that we, freely embracing the service of You and each other, may accept no other bondage than that. We ask it in Your Name. **Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Isaiah 43: 16 – 21**

**Psalm**

**126**

**Epistle**

**Philippians 3: 3 - 14**

**GOSPEL**

**John 12: 1 - 8**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

**Old Testament Lesson**

It must have been an extraordinary thing to have been alive at the time of Isaiah and the Exile in Babylon. On the one hand there was the sense of hopelessness and depression for everything seems to have gone wrong and collapsed for Israel. On the other hand there was the prophet, who was convinced that God was about to do something new and remarkable. But who would you believe? All the evidence seemed to point towards doom and gloom.

However, part of the reason that Isaiah had come out with his expectation that the Exile was designed to be a learning curve, however severe, was that he looked back into Hebrew history to catch sight of the pattern of God at work. The Exodus, already the formative experience for Israel, was about to be reiterated in a new and more significant way. History, of course, showed Isaiah to be correct, - and a similar yet more profound reiteration is to be seen in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. God is ever a God Who rescues His people even when they seem to be past any hope at all.

**Psalm**

Clearly this Psalm comes from the period of the Exile, or not long after, as the psalmist rejoices in God Who brings life out of death and joy out of sorrow. Even here, long before there was anything much in the way of 'life after death,' the psalmist rejoices in the life out of death syndrome (if one may call it that) in the annual planting and reaping of crops. *Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it remains alone.*

**Epistle**

Whilst it may be rather difficult for anyone not Jewish to really grasp the argument that Paul offers here, its main impact is to reverse the (then) usual argument for the powerful. Those who had been and done all that Paul had been and done were considered to be the 'high and lofty ones,' leaving all others in their wake. Paul's reversal of the protocol was not because he was being nice, but because he was very aware that God is not on the side of the big battalions. The Lord's interest is ever in the little people, in those who are humble of heart and open to reality. And while we may well recognize that to be so, each of remain with the battle of keeping out equilibrium. *It isn't easy being humble.*

**Gospel**

So old Judas was getting his knickers in a knot, about the (mis)use of the costly spikenard! Actually I suspect the matter ran deeper for him than just that. It has become clear that Judas, amongst others, remained as part of the Twelve because they could see themselves in positions of some authority and show when 'Jesus came

into His kingdom.’ This rather lovely cameo of Mary and Jesus underlines the constant reference to reversal of priorities that seems to be marking today’s readings.

It was one thing for Jesus to have been so attended to by Mary. Do stop and realize that the perfume Mary offered to prodigiously may well have been her ‘superannuation’ for the time when she could no longer work and provide for her needs. She gave her future away. It is a remarkably risky path to travel, even in those days when poverty was endemic.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

In spite of growing up on the suburban edge of Sydney, our family (and others around us) had a fairly constant experience of bushfires. One local man was the firebug (and not quite completely ‘there’) so the large areas of tall timber and strong undergrowth was likely to fall victim. It was always Christmas Eve Day, or New Years Eve or Day. All the men were dragooned into fire-fighting, and the local ladies did their remarkable duty of providing refreshment. These days, fires are said to ‘destroy’ the land and flora, but there is rather more to it than that.

Quite some years later, my father retired and fulfilled his long-held dream. He who had grown up on the land was finally able to buy his own small farm. It was on the end of a dead-end road, the danger of which only showed up with yet another devastating fire. Again, flora and fauna suffered badly, house, sheds and truck destroyed. But all that was natural burst into new and vigorous life but a short time after the disaster.

Out of death comes life; and while we tend to see resurrection as abnormal and unnatural, the reality tends to be quite different. Out of loss comes gain; and even the fire presents some benefits that may come as surprise. In other words, it is not ALL doom and gloom.

One of the interesting ways in which thinking Israel coped with disasters and downers in life, was to look back over their history to look again at the way God works with His people, stepping in somewhat in some remarkable ways.

For those who see God in terms of protective cotton wool, a closer look is required. But on the other hand, there is clear vision of a God Who allowed Israel to make even stupid decisions, but left them with the consequences of their folly. It is the only way any child or adult learns life’s lessons.

Out of that, Isaiah could look for a far more creative future than any of the evidence would seem to provide. That most remarkable cameo from the prophet came at a time when all or most of Israel could see nothing but a doomed and very brief future ahead of them. Whatever his contemporaries may have thought, Isaiah remained confident in the face of almost total pessimism. But look what the prophet was conveying!

Do not look back, he was saying, although that was the source of most of Israel’s insight for centuries. It may well have been a case of the prophet saying ‘do not **focus**’ on days gone by, but look ahead. God is ever the Saviour of His people, and there will ever be a future for those prepared to stick their necks out and search for it.

History makes it quite clear that Isaiah was correct. The OT books of Ezra and Nehemiah relate how the capital and country was repossessed and rebuilt, even though it must have been a heart-breaking struggle to get there. It was not an easy way forward, but then nothing that comes easy is ever valued very highly.

Here, in our part of the world, we Christians (of all sorts of denominations and none) are pushing wind uphill, as they say. What does the future hold for the faith and Church, people ask constantly. When we die, who is there to continue the work? And the answer is neither simple nor bland. Just as Israel had one hell of a job in front of them, with very little to connect them to the traditional past, there was life after the Exile, however different. What is more, those differences were very necessary.

The point of asking you to think along these lines today is simply to stop and realize that the People of God have been in similar positions quite regularly over the past 2,000 years and more. What is required of us is to be constant, to think outside the square, and to be ready to follow wherever it is that the Lord leads.