

Sunday 2nd March, 2008

**Fourth Sunday in Lent
Mothering Sunday (not noted)**

Sentence

Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world: whoever follows Me will have the light of life.'

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

1 Samuel 16: 1 – 13

Psalm

23

Epistle

Ephesians 5: 8 – 14

GOSPEL

John 9: 1 – 41

NOTES ON THE READINGS

It is getting to be a series – faith, water, light, and once again, in this set of readings, there is more than enough to bounce off, simply from the theme and readings. Light – for those of us who rarely go without it – was that which enabled you to see where you were. Sun down and end of work, was the constant for the ancients, except for candle light or something as minor. Stop and realize the importance of these things we take so much for granted, and then muse over the situation you would be in if you had a complete lack of light. Or water. Or faith! Just try the idea of the power going off, and get the sense of loss.

Old Testament Lesson

What do you look for in a potential leader? Insight may be a better word to use than light here, but we humans tend to be fooled rather easily. How did you vote at the last Federal election, and was your insight about your candidate close to reality? Not too many potential Davids around, were there? (This is written before said election was even called!) And what did poor old Samuel have to go on anyhow?

Don't go all floppy on me – be real. Partly he was in a scary position, and partly he knew the total need for someone with strength and maturity and balance. It must have been a great surprise to find that his leading was to the young kid who almost did not count as a son of Jesse. He was too young.

Now David never was saint, was he now! But he certainly did have some of the real and human characteristics that make for a good (even great!) leader. On the other hand, he managed to bedazzle Israel into turning him into a prototype messiah, and that was not an entirely helpful exercise, we can say with the hindsight of history. Every issue can be a learning curve, then can't it!

Psalm

Once again we must avoid being all sappy and soft. Anyone who has had anything to do with sheep will know how stupid, contrary and wilful they can be. Like kittens: adorable when young, but watch out!

So the Shepherd needs to have his wits about him, allowing for the flock's stupidity but not belting the living daylight out of them. And the life of a shepherd was always a hard and lonely task. In this neck of the woods, the early shepherds lived an extraordinarily lonely and dangerous life. Not only was the weather, lack of feed and water and distances great problems, but the indigenous locals were not all that pleased to have them around. It could only have been a hand-to-mouth existence for them, and not a lot better for the flock.

So the image is of a Lord of the sheep who in spite of all those factors, took great and self-giving care – a rather severe balance to the messiah image of David, don't you think?

Epistle

So here we have a sort of telling interlude. The unveiling of the fact that light shows things up for what they truly are. 'Men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil.' Where have you heard that before? And while it may take some time for the process to work., truth will emerge eventually, so that you are better enabled to steer the ship that is your life around all the reefs and wrecks – and there tend to be rather a lot of them these days.

It may help to take on board the way that God seems to cope with human evil. He does not, in spite of some appalling preaching, belt the living daylights out of sinners. In Biblical terms, evil is defeated when 'it is seen for what it is.' That then provides people with the choice – to turn their back on it, or the opposite. And evil, you may find, constantly falls into the trap of defeating itself.

Gospel

What a stunning, stunning illustration. In this powerful incident in John's series of signs¹ the author relates an incident that – like most of Jesus' ministry – had and has enormous implications. Sadly, few of those implications have been noted. Here is a blind man, ignorant about the faith as well he might be, for he would have been excluded from synagogue because of his disability. Physical deformity was shunned by Jews.

The initial encounter brought almost pagan 'theology' from the disciples: for them illness meant sin meant punishment from God. A very common view, then and still. All that in spite of Job, one of the oldest books of the Old Testament which dealt with exactly this issue. *When will we ever learn?*

I suspect that we moderns are far too wooden when we respond to the reply Jesus gave the Twelve. It may well be clearer if we understand it more in good old Aussie terms of 'take a breather and watch: you just might learn something!'

This important thing to notice is (a) that Jesus denied that overdone punitive view of illness, and (b) did exactly what a good Jew would never have done, and met that man right where he lived. As far as Jesus was concerned here was another human being. And in some need. The noise of Jesus' hawk (if I may put it that way) – for spittle was deemed to have curative capacity, would have indicated, sound-wise, that something was afoot and something that had to do with healing. It was not all done for the bloke: he had to stick his neck out, too, and find his way to Siloam and commit himself to a course of action. I find it fascinating that Jesus never offered freebies, do you see. There was mostly a request or requirement that the patient put themselves out quite a bit. This case was a mega-event along those lines, as you are aware.

So the guy received his sight back, but at this point he was still in the dark as to who did it, except that he knew the man's name. Now let's be real. 'Jesus' was as common as 'Tom, Dick or Harry,' and still is in Latin and Spanish parts of the world. Not a lot of help there.

The crisis comes when people had to come to terms with the *outcome* of this **sign**. Now as intimated above, a sign is a pointer, almost a crisis point in a way, for one has to come to terms with something that has happened. If it happened, how does one deal with the executor of the event; but if one does not wish to travel that path, how does that alter your response?

The rest of the tale is a penetrating exploration of how different people responded, or **refused to respond** to the healing. All manner of excuses were dragged out, and most of them were little more than smokescreens. Friends of the man were unwilling to be dragged into the morass, and even his parents prevaricated. They too were under threat. The Pharisees of course were the chief standard setters, and that made them far more culpable than the rest. They knew what the real implications were, and refused to follow that lead. So those who were 'sighted,' physically and supposedly spiritually, turned themselves into being blind *because they refused to follow the evidence of their very eyes. And they attempted to dragoon all the rest into their chosen blindness. How culpable is that!*

On the other hand, the poor beleaguered patient was far more amendable to following the evidence of his indisputable experience. If that took him past either his expectations or even his comfort zone, so be it. He is the one who lost his blindness in both the physical and spiritual sense, whereas his tormenters were consigned to the utter blindness of their own utter folly. They totally disqualified themselves from being even remotely the leaders and teachers that they regarded themselves to be. And Jesus left them in the hell of their own making.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I suspect you have more than enough already.

¹ You will have noticed that John calls them signs, σημεια, and not miracles. The NIV renders this quite improperly as *miraculous sign* and that is to miss the point entirely. Ponder my comment please.

Sentence

'I am the resurrection and the life,' says the Lord: 'whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.'

John 11:25-6

Collect

Life-giving God, Your Son came into the world to free us all from sin and death: breathe upon us with the power of Your Spirit, that we may be raised to new life in Christ, and serve You in holiness and righteousness all our days, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Old Testament Lesson

Ezekiel 37: 1 – 11

Psalm

130

Epistle

Romans 8: 5 – 11

GOSPEL

John 11: 1 – 45

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Once again we have such huge Gospels, and this time the focus is on resurrection, even if that sounds a little previous before Easter. But be patient and see where this gets us- mostly see that the resurrection emphasised here is before our deaths not after if that does not sound too Irish!)

Old Testament

I have confessed previously that, as a young person, the OT prophets had very little to say to me, but that was largely because of my immaturity. Passages like this one would stand out, but only in a rather 'spiritual' sort of way. However, put it in its historical perspective, and the impact can be translated so very powerfully.

Israel was in dire and desperate straits. Exiled, separated from centre of worship and culture, under close arrest, it was not to be wondered at their sense of dearth. Where was God in this? There was no hope, no future, no life. As in most such situations, we humans tend to lay blame at the feet of whoever happens to be closest. All ahead was black.

Ezekiel's answer in this most potent of visions has long been the source of refreshment for so many of the people of God. Mind you, this is no automatic elixir, but the recognition that it is by the Spirit of God that life comes back into even the heaviest of souls.

Israel in exile was so certain that God had deserted them that they became dispirited, - depressed we call it these days. And where did the healing lie? Not in themselves, but in the God Who brings life out of death, as He always has. The Call to Abraham, the experience of Joseph in Egypt, the Exodus and so on, time and again. All are illustrations of the way in which God works with His people, with His world indeed. (If you are game to see it, the very rise and fall of empires and powers are illustrative of the same process of regeneration.) It strikes me as being a significant message in our own day and age, when the sense of 'where is it going to end' strikes so much of the world, and even the Church. God is a God of resurrections, but part of the problem lies in the fact that we need to 'die' first – that is, surrender what we see as essential when God does not.

Psalm

And there we have it beautifully expressed in this short and simple psalm. It seems that the author has reached the end of his tether, for whatever reason we are not told. However, beyond the blank wall in front of him, the author was aware of forgiveness, - which can just as easily be translated as 'the way forward.' And in the confidence that God provided, through his previous experience, the author was happy to wait and see what lay ahead. That repetition of 'more than watchman wait' has long intrigued me, and I suspect it has become clear just now, as part of that passion of fear yet expectation.

Epistle

It is not always easy for the modern reader to understand Paul's way of expressing things. I know it was true of me when I was younger, and wondered quite how a person made the transition from 'old nature' to 'new.' That became particularly painful to a young and active male, living in a fairly secluded and segregated situation.

It may be helpful to stop a moment and ponder what is being conveyed here, in rather more down-to-earth terms. As like goes on in our culture, the differences are becoming rather more vividly apparent. (Or maybe it is just that I am getting older.)

In the world in which we tend to live, the atmospherics are becoming, seems to me, increasingly hysterical and self-obsessed. If you are going to be anyone, you have to sell yourself, buy the right gear and wear the right labels. You must have the biggest and best of everything, because after all, '*you are worth it!*' Obviously, if you do not crack up to this, then you are clearly a nobody, a nerd, a dork. The final nail in the coffin of all this stuff is that it is totally, utterly false and destructive. But it sells like mad and people buy it and pay for it with their very souls.

The alternative is seen to be rather darkish I guess. The opposite to living self-obsessed is to live self-giving. Obviously the patterns and prototypes for the patterns and Adam and Jesus. The irony of it all is that the truth runs like this: if (Christian or not, believer or not) if I live for myself, I will die alone. I think I have gathered everything, but in fact have sweet nothing worth having. On the other hand if I live self-giving, then what may appear like loss at the outset becomes almost the total opposite.

In other words, it is not essentially religious. It is essentially real.

Gospel

The tale of Lazarus has long had me wondering. Why! Oh! why did Jesus go to the bother of raising Lazarus just before the Crucifixion, when the poor old bloke still had to kark it again later on sometime? It is not as if Lazarus is still hanging in there at the delicate age of 2000 or a little less. So what is the point of the exercise?

There are a couple of salient points that may help here. First notice Jesus' problem with the disciples' lack² of sense of the closing doom so to speak. The Lord had a fairly clear idea of what lay ahead, and the disciples seemed blissfully ignorant. So what would happen when the crisis occurred and they had not time to consider? So the death of Lazarus offered quite something of a **sign**, remember σημειον, that would give them furiously to think even if *post eventum*.

Second, be aware that the reason for Jesus' delay in attending Bethany was to heighten the point and purpose of the sign anyhow. In Jewish thought then – perhaps even now – the soul of a person did not leave the body entirely for some time after death. Some days in fact. So Jesus' delay was to underline the fact that Lazarus was well past any resuscitation – and the four days and the 'stench'³ would underline that rather powerfully. In other words, the situation was quite clearly way beyond any remedy. ***Totally.***

Now dear old Thomas never gets very good press, because he has been misunderstood almost completely. Pity, really, because he was ever the thoughtful, realistic, questioning one, inquisitive and demanding answers. ***And these were (still are) good healthy Jewish traits.*** When the Eleven decided the risk of heading to Bethany was all a bit much, Thomas at least saw that, if Jesus was prepared to take the fatal risk, then he was prepared to go the distance with his Lord. Bully for Thomas. It must have heartened Jesus quite a lot, because Thomas was not like Peter, all talk and little action. *Thomas understood the almost fatal nature of the path. He was well ahead of his confreres.*

So when all sense of hope was gone, when there was absolutely no chance of escape from the realities, Jesus raised Lazarus. It was not simply a matter of bringing someone back to life, **but rather a far more significant way of showing that even when all hope was gone, that all hope was not gone when you are dealing with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.**

And that was the point of the exercise. And what a stunning point it was – though I suspect it did not hit the people present until some time after the event, even after the Resurrection.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

² However not Thomas as shall be seen

³ Naughty me! Old readers of the Authorized Version will remember the 'behold he stinketh! Rather vividly I imagine.

Again, I think there is enough to go on there, is there not?

Sunday 16th March, 2008

Sixth Sunday in Lent
Passion Sunday

This does not follow the Liturgy of the Palms

Sentence

At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. **Phil. 2:10-11**

Collect

God of all, You gave Your only-begotten Son to take the form of a servant, and to be obedient even to death on a cross, give us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, that, sharing in His humility, we may come to be with Him in His glory, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 50: 4 – 9a

Psalm

31: 9 – 18

Epistle

Philippians 2: 5 – 11

GOSPEL

Matthew 26: 14 – 29

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

Is it not the case that whereas as are ever ready to catch sight of these OT readings and relate them without difficulty to Jesus, we then seem unable or unwilling to make the next and most important step. Have you ever wondered *why* you have finished up with a Lord Who acted like that? For what reason and with what goal in mind?

In a day and age when suicide bombers seem to be the order of the day, attempting to alter the course of history by their violent actions, it is perhaps easier to see why there is that gulf between those folk and our Lord. Violence may well force people into certain forms and modes for a time – of that there is little doubt. But there can be no firm or permanent value in such horrific forms of control.

As we glimpsed in Lent 1, the sort of leadership style that Jesus chose was one that did not follow that violent path, even though violence was meted out to Him. And His reason for operating in that way was not simply because ‘He was too nice to do otherwise,’ but because He refused to take control of people’s lives and decisions away from them. Anyone who followed Him had to do so from their own choice entirely. So any violent reaction fell back on Him. His ministry was a matter of being open, patient, self-giving – being vulnerable in fact. And that is so often seen as little other than weakness in today’s world. *Small wonder that we have the mess around us, eh!*

Go the whole hog: the Gospel impels us to operate at the same gentle, self-giving level. Yes, that means you and me. Our only confidence is that – in the final analysis, - God will show where the real truth lies.

Psalm

Before you go screaming off at this psalmist’s apparent attack of self-pity, try entering into what it is like when the world is against you, charging you with all manner of hideous crime and fault, and you are profoundly aware of the fact that they are the liars and you are the victim. (Jesus’ position, if you will.) In all that stress, strain and pain, the only comfort you have is that you are confident that you are doing what God wants and expects, and that sooner or later, others will realize that too. It is not a pleasant position to be in, but it becomes slightly more tolerable if you can be confident of God’s vindication.

Epistle

Here it is again: this stunning brief passage contains all of the Gospel in its brief verses, and if this is all we had, then we could understand so much of the rest of it. *Have this mind in you that you find in Christ*

Jesus the AV used to have it. But it is not until you see in front of you that He Who did **not** ‘grasp at equality with God’ was doing the reverse, if you will, to that which impelled Adam in the story of Genesis 3. Here is counter-Adam, another prototype, another and far better and more redemptive pattern to follow, where there are no destructive and demoralising outcomes. Sin consists in replacing the real God with a false, ersatz one, *ourselves*. And hell is the damage that ensues.

The challenge for the Christian is not just some sort of matter of ‘believing’ Jesus to be this other Adam, but it is a matter of taking up the challenge of following Him **yourself**.

Gospel

There is almost too much in today’s Gospel to give any of it the comment it deserves. Here it is all in a rush, as the choice is placed before the Twelve, somewhat before they are ready to understand all the implications. But that is life, is it not? Who has not been in such a situation of having to make serious choices without all the relevant detail?

First of all, the celebration of Passover, and the Evangelists make clear the link between Passover and Cross. See it more in terms of God rescuing His people than in the narrower views of atonement, please. It seems clear that Jesus had taken the care to arrange this celebration somewhat secretly, so that there would not be an intrusion from Jewish authorities when every other Jew was safely tucked up at home in their own ritual. (Try getting anything done on Melbourne Cup afternoon!) There is nothing ‘miraculous’ about all this – simply practical!

Nor was there anything miraculous about Jesus’ awareness of Judas’ betrayal. Anyone who knows people well will be quite aware of their strengths and weaknesses. I suspect it was a case of Jesus, choosing Judas in the first place, was giving the man a chance to rise above his current level. Sadly, Judas chose otherwise, **but never fall for the proposition that Judas HAD to do what he did, or there would be no Cross. That is a ridiculous view – reducing everyone involved to mere puppets on strings.**

The real point is that each person needs to be certain of their commitment to Jesus. This is no mere matter of ‘belief,’ but a matter of following *wherever that takes one*. And it does involve, also, the movement in a direction that is often contrary to the direction that most other people will follow.

And then there is the Eucharist. The Last Supper. For any who may not have made the connection yet, this service, then and now, draws together all the activity of God towards the world, from Exodus, Exile and Incarnation. As the Epistle today has it, the Gospel consists of that completely different *modus operandi* of self-giving as Jesus did, and it is in that that the Gospel consists.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I’m cooking cabbages twice, I fear.

I seem to remember having told you the tale of a man who still carries on about his experience of never having heard the Gospel until he was in his mid-thirties. A regular attender at an Anglican Church, he is certain that he never heard the Gospel preached there. He only heard it elsewhere. Fifty odd years on he still complains, but his idea of the Gospel is of being forgiven through the blood of the Lamb and of going to heaven. It is a sadly myopic understanding of the Faith, and a remarkably introverted one at that. It strikes me that the by-far saddest element of this tale is that the man has progressed no further, during the last 40-odd years, than the (questionable) development in the ‘50s.

Mind you, there has been that long-standing perception of Church as being that place where you do your duty once a week, receiving Communion and then going on for the rest of the week with nothing changed, challenged or progressing. If this Faith is reduced to a ritual, then it has been drained of all and any of its point, purpose and direction. If a person operates on such a wave-length, then there is no room to move or progress or grow. On the other hand, I have to express my conviction that in liturgical worship, there is the constant availability of the Scriptures and the ‘acted parable’ of the Eucharist, both of which provide, surely, the very fertile soil for any questing and questioning soul to develop. Mind you, both that opportunity for growth and the possibility of being static has always been there. It is a matter of what one does with the material that shows up the outcomes.

To look at one aspect, for instance: have you ever wondered why Judas Iscariot did his dastardly deed? And was his betrayal any less than Peter's denial *really!* Think about it if you would, and while one may not be able to provide definitive answers, there are clues along the way.

There was a bloke whom, I suspect, Jesus chose on the basis of giving him a chance to rise above his capacity and circumstance. Jesus did little different with all and any of the people whose lives He touched in His healing ministry. Then the guy became treasurer of the group, and that can tend to be a risky path to travel. A wayward one can sneak a little cash now and again – IOU replacement of course -, as the temptation arises. And there can also be something of a power game as well. If I am treasurer, then I must be a cut above the others.

As wiser heads than mine have commented, as long as people did not really understand Jesus, they followed Him in droves. When, however, they saw the direction He was heading, they deserted in very similar numbers. And Judas would have been right there in that particular sort of grouping. He saw his dreams of being right up there with the heavies, basking in reflected glory from Jesus, disappearing into smoke, he seemed to determine his revenge, and make a quid on the side. Small wonder when, later, the realisation of his perfidy hit him, he 'topped' himself. Peter seemed able enough to cope with his own weakness and others' clear awareness of it; Judas was rather too self-centred to allow himself to be shown up for what he was. It is the difference between remorse and repentance. And the gulf between those two aspects of life is huge.

So with the commencement of Passion Sunday and Holy Week, the emphasis surely is on the nature of commitment and the extent to which we are involved. To my mind this does not mean we are called to some internalised holiness, but rather to *Imitatio Christi* – or determining where the real truth of life lies, and following along to wherever that leads. It is not a matter of some single act or deed, but to the living of life in terms that the Epistle underlines.

I have previously referred to the mind-boggling, life-changing understanding when the NT lecturer in College drew our attention to the impact of Philippians 2. The contrast between Adam and Christ is laid open ready for exploration, and it changed my then very narrow view of Gospel from 'my salvation' to the 'redemption of the world.'

In this solemn and serious lead-up to Holy Week and Easter, it behoves us to ponder the nature of our own discipleship. Are we back-peddalling or coasting? Does each annual reminder move us on further in our pilgrimage? If the former is the case, then we are missing out on our God-given challenge to grow, move, develop not just as Christians but also as humans.

Sunday 23rd March, 2008

Easter

Sentence

This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Psalm 118:24

Collect

Glorious Lord of life, by the mighty resurrection of Your Son, You overcame the old order of sin and death to make all things new in Him; grant that we who celebrate with joy Christ's rising from the dead, may be raised from the death of sin to the life of righteousness, through Him Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever

Amen

**FIRST LESSON
FOR THE PSALM**

**Acts 10: 34 – 43
Hymn to the Risen Christ**

EPISTLE

Colossians 3: 1 – 4

GOSPEL

Matthew 28: 1 – 10

NOTES ON THE READINGS

First Lesson

One of the important things that seem to bypass the modern Christian who tends to read Scripture like some sort of rule book. Here is a fascinating example of the way Hebrew people grew in their understanding of God.

This tale of the Roman centurion says it all: as far as the Law (and rule book) said, this man was totally disqualified from having anything to do with the Faith, with God and certainly with the rites and ceremonies. That is what the rules stated. However, it became clear to Peter that real life is rather too large for the rule book, and the realities of faith in that Roman man was such that showed clearly that a far more flexible path needed to be taken. So Peter did – and whilst the issue of Gentile acceptance or otherwise was a huge issue for the Church,⁴ it was important and necessary to step right outside the legal approach to things. All too much for some, eh!

For the Psalm

Debate it with me if you wish, but I have long been running contrary to those who delight to turn this passage into some sort of devotional exercise and go off with the fairies. When that is done, this passage is emasculated and misunderstood totally.

Here is not some sort of move to holiness (as generally understood) but rather the statement of the totally new approach to life and relationships rendered possible the Cross and Resurrection. Adam represents all that is self-obsessed and –directed in human life, and that is so destructive. Set that against the approach to life and relationships reflected by the self-**giving** Jesus, and then go on to see that, if I take up the Gospel promise, then I shall – increasingly – live and operate like Jesus. Now there lies a challenge of great moment.

Epistle

And now would you see that Paul is expressing exactly what I refer to above in this passage also. If I aspire to the realm above, *I am not panting and puffing to get to heaven but am attempting to reflect the nature of the Father.* It is that approach to people and life that is redemptive, or at least is meant to be. There is no room for 'holier than thou' because I am painfully aware of the fact that I have a long way to go anyhow. *And so do you, do you not?*

Gospel

⁴ Gentils *could* become Jews, but the process was long and involved. But notice such events as the Ethiopian eunuch and the controversy that the Gentile issue presented to the Church – Acts 15 in particular.

It is an interesting exercise to compare and contrast the various Evangelists' reporting of the resurrection, as well as to note that the Acts of the Apostles focusses on the resurrection too. It is useful to note that it all came so totally unexpectedly for the disciples and for the women too. Jesus did His darnedest to get things across to His followers, but it was all too big and outside of their thoughts and imaginations.

I am naughty enough to suggest to people that the business of the resurrection is not so much a matter of 'miracle,' as it is a matter of doing what I emphasised when reporting on the First Lesson. The real question is 'what does it mean?' And the answer to that is just as remarkable.

Jesus' life, ministry and action was really a challenge and rebuke to the self-driven 'Adamic' way in which most humans operate. Our Lord's *modus* still looks to many to be weak and pathetic. However His manner of openness and acceptance and self-giving, that whole remarkable business of loving rather than hating, seemed consigned to the rubbish bin of history. The Cross looked as if the final answer was utter defeat at the hands of 'sinful men.' With Jesus killed, the whole 'gospel' was dead. But, as I often say to folk, you can kill truth for a while, but it will poke its head up again. You can kill love, compassion, justice and all those important life issues, but they will not stay dead for long. And that is what the Resurrection is preaching.

Notes for a sermon

It has long been a sort of mission of mine to offer a solid and real answer to those who regard the Christian Faith (or any faith come to that) as irrelevant and immaterial in today's world. I find it odd, really, that so many critics' challenges go unanswered, and that is partly because there are still lots of Christians whose understanding of the faith remains amorphous and unreal. (I am open to debate on the subject, so feel free to offer your own challenges.)

All too often, the faith tends to be limited to the edges of life, like so much else these days going off in to the wilds of 'spirituality.' Cynical me tends to see that as little more than an escape from a reality that is too hard to face. And the reality is hard, and becoming more so as time goes by. Oddly enough, my own conviction is that the further people move from God⁵ the further they move from each other. You cease being brother and sister, and become competitor and threat. So it becomes my role to get on top of you, control the living daylights out of you, and make you conform to my expectation of you. Mostly that will leave me well and truly in command, and you at the bottom of the heap.⁶ Just read Genesis 3 again, this time reading the fine print and keeping your imaginative mind operating.

What is the Gospel, the Faith, the Scripture all on about? Exactly this huge tragedy in human life and relationships. The human dilemma. It is not about believing the incredible or impossible, it is not about paying some sort of lip service to creed or dogma or tenet. It is about understanding the enormous issues and seeing how and where the Biblical faith (Jewish and Christian!) is offering resolutions to the hideous reality.

'You overcame the old order of sin and death.' So the Collect for today runs. And what does that mean? Exactly what we have been thinking in the previous paragraph. 'Adam' and 'sin and death' and all that stuff has to do with the 'human dilemma.' Nothing airy fairy about this – it is the rugged reality of life in the self-obsessed lane. And its remedy is what is offered in Christ, through Cross and Resurrection. 'The life of righteousness.' Do not EVER confuse that with being holy in the conventional sense. It is not about being religious and pathetic and inward looking. For 'righteousness' read 'justice.' In Greek δικαιοσυνη - one of those important elements of life so lacking and not visible. If I act with justice towards you, I take all the factors into account, and see the whole issue and matter. I do not blind myself to that which makes my case weaker. I look for the whole truth and respond to that. The whole you.

Ponder a moment how modern history, relationships between countries and within countries, would be if even a small part of this were to be taken into account. Gone would be all spin, half-truths and lies-truths (what would an Election Campaign have left, eh?) Not more bull****! Plain unvarnished truth, which would require me to take responsibility for my actions and you also.

⁵ Which is another way of saying 'from truth and justice, from integrity and compassion, and all those hugely important factors of life *of which God is guarantor.*

⁶ Sadder still is to find clergy who operate on precisely this sort of level.

The mind boggles does it not? And just how many issues would be resolved even before they became issues. How much more peaceful, fair and compassionate life would be.

Now if that possibility is irrelevant, then I guess we can discard the Faith. Unless and until it is irrelevant, then lets see it for what it is, and stick out our necks and follow Christ!

Sentence

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By His great mercy He has given us a new birth into a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. *1 Peter 1:3*

Collect

Almighty and Eternal God, the strength of those who believe and the hope of those who doubt; may we, who have not seen, have faith and receive the fullness of Christ's blessing; Who is alive and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

FIRST LESSON

Acts 2:14a & 22- 32

Psalm

16

Epistle

1 Peter 1: 1 – 12

GOSPEL

John 20: 19 – 31

NOTES ON THE READINGS

First Lesson

This passage, of course, is part of Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost, which must have been an event quite staggering in which to be involved. It marked the start of a huge learning curve for the Eleven and other followers of Jesus. It is important to notice that, while Peter seems here to be concentrating on 'prophecy,' the reality is that the followers perceived the huge and important connection between what they were experiencing and all that had preceded them in the great holy history of Israel. *Never, never lose sight of the fact that the Old Testament is always pointing to the culmination in the Incarnation.*

These days we may well see only a most tenuous connection between the Psalm and Jesus. I find it fascinating to watch the growing perception that there had to be more to life than this experience, and David was exploring that concept. There is nothing all that new about life after this 'theologies' in other earlier cultures, and in spite of those parallels it took quite some time for Israel to head in that direction.

So two great Hebrew values come together here: the first is Israel's long expectation that God would vindicate His people (making the truth of things show up clearly for those of His downtrodden ones.) The second is that this vindication will not be visible in this experience of life.

However I draw your attention to the thoughts expressed in last Sunday's notes: that part of this vindication, paralleling Jesus' rejection in His execution, and the rejection of that rejection in His resurrection (if you follow my drift) – in that truth, love and justice may be overcome for a while, but they will always rise again just as Jesus did.

Psalm

Please stop and see what this Psalmist is actually celebrating: it is not his faith but God's faithfulness. He seems to have explored other gods and their faiths, and returned to the most significant and relevant one in JHWH. Even this author sees that God is Lord even of death, in spite of the fact that this Psalm is quite early in the Psalter.

Epistle

It might seem easy to write off the delight and enthusiasm of the writers of the epistles, but do stop for a moment. Many, many people these days worry about 'where are things going to end.' And life in the first century of the Christian era would have been far, far more tenuous than we find today. So the point of all that is to stop long enough to see that the author⁷ was delighting in the fact that the Resurrection of Jesus was as much a guarantee of sound and sensible outcomes from even the most devastating experience of life. Salvation – please remember – is as much a matter of 'being made whole now' as it is of 'getting to heaven.'

⁷ Some people are 'awful' enough to decide that Peter could not have been the author of this epistle. If he was, then his grasp of Greek had to have improved enormously from his fishing days. The Greek in this epistle is remarkably sophisticated and complex.

It is a significant concept to grasp. *Soteria*, salvation includes all the aspects of life that include health and wholeness, and even freedom from slavery and room to move. (See the Exodus in that light.)

Gospel

I remain amazed still that many people do not recognize that John portrays Pentecost as having come on the day of the Resurrection. (Mind you, John always did play fast and loose with chronology, using his *penchant* for making all manner of emphases and strong points.) Notice then the pouring out of the Spirit. And see it in terms of the call to continue Jesus' ministry – in Jesus' way. Nothing explosive here, but the call to operate as Jesus did. And that business of forgiveness needs rather closer attention than it usually affords. The presumption is that (a) you will have the *nous* to see when repentance is real, and when it is not! I find that many Christians see forgiveness as a right, when it runs far deeper than that.

And then there is that business of Thomas. I warn you, if you had not noticed earlier, that I am a great fan of Thomas. This is largely because the poor bloke gets very bad press, mostly because moderns do not read their Bible clearly enough – or even understand themselves well enough.

Before we explore this bit, stop and recap. Who was it who asked the awkward question about 'in My Father's house?' Thomas. No one else dared to ask the question ... but Thomas did, and received a significant answer. Who was it, at the raising of Lazarus, understood the profound crisis looming, and declared that he would go with Jesus, even if it meant death. Thomas was neither foolish nor faithless. Thomas seems to be one of the most aware of the Twelve, and his life subsequent to the birth of the Church shows that even more so.

Anyhow, in the incident recorded here, Thomas shows up as a person not prepared to believe second-hand, but must have the evidence himself. One of my profound convictions is that faith is 'the choice a person makes on the basis of the evidence available.' Thomas was taking no one else's word for it, Notice that Jesus' response was not in judgement, but in providing the very evidence he needed. That is not faithlessness. That is something far more significant. The response the disciple made was as profound as one might expect. And that man was to give his life for the Gospel, travelling as far as Goa in India.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I cannot remember the first time I asked people to think again about Thomas: for centuries he has been the butt of harsh comment as he had been labelled 'doubting Thomas.' The more I thought about this poor bloke, the less that title fitted, so much so that here is one man who had me rethink the entire business of faith and faithfulness all over again.

We do live in the strangest of times, I fear. While the general attitude to the Faith and adherents of it tends to be very negative and disparaging, those same antagonists find it totally acceptable to believe in the most ridiculous and incredible things. Read any magazine for women, (and I guess it is true also of men's magazines,) and there is all sorts of stuff about psychics and such, horoscopes and similar. It really is case of 'when people stop believing in God, they do not believe in nothing; *they will believe in anything*.

In today's Gospel, relating that remarkable business of Thomas who would not accept the resurrection on the basis of someone else's say so, it seems to me that rather too many people did not read the script very well, and simply did what Thomas refused to do.

Thomas is a fascinating character, from what little is available about him in the Gospels. John has the most material. Put yourself in Tom's shoes a moment, and think. All too easily, so many people go along believing what they are told to believe, or what other people say they ought. So their 'faith' is second-hand, which makes it about as useless as anything, especially when it comes to a crisis. In spite of all the baloney one reads about 'believing,' that generally is accepted as having the greater faith the more ridiculous or impossible your expectation of God. That is not faith; it is nothing less than credulity, and that says rather lousy things about such a practitioner. If you think about it, it tends to make God out to be something of an idiot, too. And idiocy has no part of the Christian Faith.

So what is happening here? Thomas had been confronted with the story of the Resurrection, and that provided him with a problem. If it was *not true*, then the entire lovely dream that Jesus brought was well and truly dead and gone. While there was nothing surprising about that, - for that is how life had always been – Jesus' death was the final nail in the coffin.

On the other hand, if Jesus *was risen*, then there was an entirely different ball-game, everything had been made completely different, and the resurrection was the sign, par excellence, that death was defeated, as was evil and injustice and all lies. However, all this was dependent totally on Jesus having risen. And **this** was why Thomas needed to have the evidence for himself. Nothing second-hand would do. No story from someone else. ‘Unless I see ...’ Do not **ever** knock Thomas for request and requirement. He knew as you should know that faith is not faith in nothing. Faith is confidence that the facts, the evidence is there to establish the reality of what has happened. **Faith, as I often suggest to folk, is the choice a person makes on the basis of the evidence available.** Here is no whistling down the wind, no crossing of fingers and hoping. Here is reality, though at times it may not be as obvious as one might like.

So you may well see why I have a lot of time for Thomas, and am enormously grateful for him and his questioning. Like him, I am inquisitive and need answers to questions. And following that lead, I have long encouraged people to ask the questions, however difficult, and search for the answers. That is how the ancient worthies of old operated: Abraham and company. In fact there is a whole Bible full. And it is not baloney that is being searched for but straight-forward, down-to-earth reality.