

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 understand 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. *This is not history*, it is a case of taking old stories and building a theology on to it. Put another way, here we have the Hebrew 'Divine philosophy of history.' No self-respecting Jew ever understood these tales literally – here is poetry, legend, myth if you dare. This does not render it untrue by any means. It is a sort of prophecy written backwards.

The real issue of this Saga is that whereas one might expect, from a human perspective, that God would always be One to interrupt evil and punish evildoers, the reality and experience of life is that He tends to operate on a different wave-length. There is always that aspect of God that prefers compassion and fresh opportunities rather than 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

Psalms

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. I often suggest that the modern Australian equivalent of 'meek' is 'fair dinkum.'

Epistle

The Epistles of Peter have long presented many people with a sense of confusion, while others seem to take delight in the 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 why 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.) Just as a matter of interest, baptism in the NT is the completion of circumcision in the OT – except that baptism is available to the whole of humanity, not just males.

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 increasingly aware of His remarkable calling, 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 remain available to this day in the Old Testament prophets, including the stunning series of Servant Songs in (Second) Isaiah – from Chapters 40 on. 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, Shepherd, and other perceptions all coincided in the person and ministry of Jesus.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

You may well have heard me on this before, but it strikes me as sufficiently significant to reiterate it, as we look at the Testings of Jesus. I tell the story of a young mother some years ago, who had sat through similar sermons for the seven years I had been priest in that parish, and at the end of that time, after hearing again what follows, asked me 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 seem 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 meant 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. My teacher rebuked me soundly, and expelled me from the class. If you dare to think about it, the story does sound ridiculous, until you ponder the matter more deeply. Never lose sight of the fact that the old Jews were past masters at telling a story, expecting serious thought on the part of the listeners. What was really 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 should He messiah?* How to gain a following, how to get the message across, how to win disciples And keep them?

That turning of stones into bread was a figurative way of operating. The Romans ruled, it is said, by means 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 Aussie expression that really expresses it vividly. You know the one, don't you? Jesus knew that if He filled people's bellies, some would follow Him. But 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. It avoided the real issues, and diverted people's attention to non-issues.

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 are followed by the 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 more deeply or love their neighbour more genuinely?

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.**

This is the way of humans, of politicians, salespeople and 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 ponder 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 too many 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? And more than once.

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

You might well be sick and tired of me having a shot at what is cheapskate Christianity. However, if you enter, really and truly, into the sort of emphasis that Jesus constantly pointed to, you must get the message surely.

That incident of Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah – when seen in full context, - shows how shallow was that first step on the part of the disciple. Part of the dawning was coming; part of it remained potential rather than real.

I have often commented on how – in my reading and pondering of the Gospel stories, - it must have produced great strain for Jesus to try and get this group of men *moving*. One of the great traps of 'being religious,' is that one can step off the real world and become involved in what surely amounts to unreality. All is lovely and sweet and uninvolved. But life is not like that, and nor is Gospel.

Up to this point, Jesus' ministry had been 'travelling' somewhat smoothly, but our Lord was painfully aware that ahead lay encounters far less peaceful. Someone has said that, as long as people did not understand Jesus, they followed Him in droves. However, when they were faced with the realities He offered, they turned away from Him as rapidly and completely.

The fact the Jesus nominated Peter as 'Satan' is fascinating. Jesus was making it clear that the disciple was operating from the side of evil, even if he knew it not. Peter had not even begun to see what it meant for Jesus to be Son of the Living God. He had followed his own rather shallow perceptions, which avoided the issues and certainly avoided the confrontations that lay ahead. 'Satan,' if you dare to see it in Biblical terms, is no super-human influence but is the expression, the personification, of all that is human and human capacity for short-sighted, shallow evil choices. Satan is my capacity for evil. *No one else is responsible; just us!*

The over-arching point of the Gospel at this stage in progress or proceedings is the concern so clearly enunciated by Jesus that the disciples' view bore little resemblance to the reality of life at that stage. Perhaps the Twelve were somewhat carried away with the rather lovely (can we call it religious) atmosphere where, as many folk think, nothing very shattering is likely to happen. Both life and Gospel are far more realistic and substantial than that.

Sunday 15th March, 2009

Third Sunday in Lent

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 . As people often notice, without the Decalogue we will have chaos. Without such rules, if you will, we will have neither direction nor values and certainly no safety. Ponder the outcome of that!

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 and 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 Gospels 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 too much notice of chronology – placed 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

Reference to an article in a copy of the Advertiser 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 article 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 and life itself is rendered more tenuous.

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.

Some of the guys at local Prison Bible Study group asked me to pontificate on what is sinful and what is not. After some thought, 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.**

And that 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 increase proportionally. 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 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 are 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!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Be it noted carefully and completely, that this disintegration of society is not some sort of sign that God and Gospel have been discredited or become passé. In fact, the opposite is very much the case.

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. We would call this a sort of reverse psychology. It may well be that – in a manner of speaking – that focussing on the cause of the problem can point one to the solution. It has long seemed to me that the point and purpose of the confession and absolution in the Communion service, is not so much a matter of breast-beating for past sins in hope of forgiveness, but rather that this process offers a chance to face my faults and sins, knowing forgiveness is offered, in order to learn from the experience. Seeing mistakes clearly provides a means of avoiding repetition. There lies the way forward, surely.

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. 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. Then the matter of the execution of the Bali bombers has brought about mixed reactions, including fears of reprisals. 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 become scapegoat or someone else to 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 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. Greed is good has been the catch-cry for some time now, and perhaps the current financial collapse just might get people furiously to think. Mind you, from past experience, no one seems likely to learn a damn thing, for each of the successive financial collapses are brought about by exactly the same human failure to be responsible and determination to be greedy.

Now, like it or not, but people 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 are 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. The current move of so-called born-again Christians who are attempting to get themselves into positions of power and Parliament 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, past the sort of stuff people were taught in by-gone Sunday Schooldays – and their refusal to move past those views – is horrendously hard stuff to try and deal with.

So, here lies a plea: that each of us takes a long hard look at our perceptions of the Faith, and takes 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,*

Sentence

This is the covenant that I will make with them, says the Lord; I will put My law within them and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God and they shall be My people. *Jeremiah 31: 33*

Collect

O God our redeemer, in our weakness we have failed to be Your messengers of forgiveness and hope: renew us by Your Spirit, that we may follow Your commands, and proclaim Your reign of love, through Jesus Christ our Lord
Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

PSALM

119:9-16

EPISTLE

Hebrews 5:5-14

GOSPEL

John 12: 20 – 33

NOTES ON THE READINGS

It is a very sad state of affairs that there remain many people who are unfamiliar with the Scriptures, - and even somewhat unwilling to fill in the blanks, so to speak. This is not so much a criticism as a statement that such lacks make the Sunday Readings provide much mystery instead of great insight. Not only does knowledge of Hebrew history help enormously in understanding the New Testament, but there are also myriads of references and nuances that enlighten Gospel and Epistle. Indeed, perhaps the greatest reason that John's Revelation poses mystery or threat to readers stems from the failure to notice or know the extent to which John's imagery stems from the Old Testament.

Sadly, it is not possible to make up any shortfall here, but the attempt to provide some insight is paramount.

Old Testament Lesson

One of the matters referred to above is the constant reference in the OT to 'covenants.' Space does not permit an exposition here, but it should be noted that Israel always understood their faith in terms of the God Who commits Himself to His people. And just as a growing child needs successive 'contracts' with parents, so Israel needed the similar progression. (There were several covenants before Moses, but at that point in history, there was the Law – Exodus and all that.) But legislation does not make a lot of difference to people's actions and behaviour, as attitudes must be 'owned.' Discipline may begin from outside a person – but the only real discipline is from within, *self-discipline*, and that is very much a matter of personal choice, commitment and involvement. It is towards this latter growth that Jeremiah pointed.

Psalm

While lots of Christians seem to rejoice in what they describe as a free Gospel, where forgiveness is offered without any real response, the Psalmist was aware of the value of all of God's 'judgements' and 'statutes' – without which, life becomes remarkably fragmented and disoriented. Gospel does not free a person from responsibility but rather charges them with it. And the reason for that is that no one, ever, grows into anything like adulthood without taking responsibility for all manner of things, including their own behaviour.

Epistle

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews may often sound obscure to modern readers, but if one can get past the cultural 'thing,' (and is aware of the Biblical background) there is a lot to be uncovered. Perhaps the most fascinating thing, for me at least, is that Biblical emphasis on the fact that the human damage caused by human sin can only be addressed and 'repaired' by a human. Hence the profound statement here that although like Melchizedek, there are other 'connections,' Jesus had to go through the same sorts of life and experiences as you in order to be Saviour.

Mind you, the same author seemed to have difficulty with his own congregation or churches, finding even then that people preferred to stay at their comfort zone level rather than more towards maturity. Sadly, little has changed in the intervening millennia.

Gospel

One hardly knows where to start in trying to unpack this passage. Dear old John managed to write his Gospel deceptively simply, but there is also a far more profound level to what he conveyed. This is true of all his writing.

I often ask people to read the fine print. Here it is quite critical. *'There were some Gentiles.'* Sure they were at the Festival, so must have been people looking at becoming Jews. But Gentile they were, and it is fascinating to find that Jesus spoke to them in terms that He seemed unable to use with obtuse Jews. It is a flash of revelation, indicating how far ahead of His Jewish disciples, that Jesus was. Even more surprising is the clearer perception of those Gentiles.

Whenever John talks about 'glorification,' are you aware of what he is really describing? We often use words that mean little to us. Here is no self-wrap like a pop star! It is something far more important.

Whenever Jesus is glorified, or God is, then it is a case of **them being seen for what they truly are**. Here is a transfiguration, if you like. The sudden dawning on (some) people as to the true nature of the person they are confronting. *And it is to Gentiles, **Gentiles!** That Jesus offered this 'glorification.'* And that is completely unexpected.

On top of that, Jesus faced those potential Jewish converts with the complete and required response to the Gospel. That was – and is – to forget self, *deny* self, and follow Him. Does that not hit you right between the eyes, so to speak? To top it all off, John shows how Jesus found such a commitment quite something of a challenge.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

You might recall that, right at the start of this Season of Lent, I was naughty enough to suggest that Lent is not so much a period for giving things up for a time, but rather a matter of taking time out to check our priorities and choose the important aspects of discipleship. It strikes me that today's Readings offer both the necessity and the process for growth in that discipleship.

But first to 'real life.' One of the discoveries that I made, a long time ago, is that this business of being a believer, a Christian, is not a matter of sudden discovery, change and 'born again.' On the contrary it is a long process, of spits and starts sometimes, that is a life-long experience. In fact, it is rather like being a person. Let me explain.

When I was a child, loving and remarkably wise parents nurtured me. There was nothing very fancy about Mum and Dad, - or they would not have seen themselves as extraordinary. As we grew, it was not so much a matter of rules that had to be followed, but it was certainly a matter that we had to take notice of and respond obediently to our parents. Occasionally, I recall, punishment was meted out, like the time when I was ten and had a go at smoking. Dad made me wash my mouth out with soapy water. However, as time passed and we grew up, there was far less evidence of rules and far more expectation that we would learn from experience. All this was done in an atmosphere of love and caring. [I feel deeply for people for whom such an experience never occurred for them.]

I remember, for instance, Dad talking to me as a mid- teenager. 'I will never say to you "Don't drink, Ronald. However I will simply tell you that I have never drunk, because I did not know whether I would become a drunkard or not, and do not intend to find out the hard way.'" That tended to illustrate the sort of learning that was our experience of growing up. In other words, there was a subtle move from discipline imposed to discipline encouraged from within. In this day and age when discipline tends to be the current obscenity, I look for the time when wisdom overcomes even adult stupidity and when political correctness disappears into limbo.

Now all the above is there to try and set the scene. The long history of Israel parallels that growth from childhood to adulthood, with all the starts and stumbles along the way. And those starts and stumbles used to be presented to me as evidence of my sinfulness, something from which to repent so I would get to heaven. That annoys me still, as the real reason is far more adult and sensible than that. The whole point of the possibility of forgiveness in the Christian Faith is NOT to turn me into some sort of squeaky clean twerp, but rather is there to enable me to **face the fact** that I am capable of some pretty lousy things, to **learn from said mistakes**, and then to move towards that maturity that only Christian Faith can give.

So as Jeremiah has it, the passage of time and the growth towards development calls for changing relationships and progressive development. *From discipline imposed to discipline from within.* And the latter state is far more significant than the first. Apart from anything else, this is a far cry from the Christianity of my youth, when the charge was always to **believe, and ask no questions**. That can end only in a blank wall.

Often I ask people to ponder quite how they arrive at their theology, their understanding of God, How they learn to see the difference between what tends to be nothing other than 'accepted patterns of current behaviour and thought, and the really remarkably different approach to life that the Faith offers. And today I ask you to look at the continuing process of your discipleship , --- and to ensure that you continue to grow and develop way, way past your comfort zone.