

Sentence

Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon His while He is near

Isaiah 55:6

Collect

Lord God our redeemer, Who heard the cry of Your people and sent Your servant Moses to lead them out of slavery; free us from the tyranny of sin and death, and, by the leading of Your Spirit, bring us to the promised land, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 55: 1 – 9

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Psalm

63: 1 – 9

O God, You are my God: eagerly will I seek You

My soul thirsts for You, my flesh longs for You: as a dry and thirsty land where no water is.

So it was when I beheld You in the sanctuary: and saw Your power and Your glory

For Your unchanging goodness is better than life: therefore my lips shall praise You

And so I will bless You as long as I live: and in Your Name will I lift my hands on high

My longing shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness: my mouth shall praise You with exultant lips

When I remember You upon my bed: when I meditate on You in the night watches

How You have been my helper: then I sing for joy in the shadow of Your wings

Then my soul clings to You: and Your right hand upholds me

Epistle

1 Corinthians 10: 1- 13

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and that rock was Christ.

Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness. Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

GOSPEL

Luke 13: 31 – 35

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

NOTES ON THE READINGS

OLD TESTAMENT

If ever there was a passage that requires readers to think past their nose, however spiritual, this surely is it. There are two powerful points made here: the first is that there is more to life than meets the eye, and that is patently obvious. The second is here is something offered that the rest of the world needs (if not wants) and whoever has it also has the responsibility of sharing it with others. This raises the bar well above the 'religious' and is far too significant to fall into the atheists' fond position of 'superstition.' And it is about time that all humans saw this.

As with Jesus' comment at His temptation that 'man shall not live by bread alone' comes this profound challenge to live life at a rather more significant level. Here is no fear of hell fire, but a far more significant pointing to such sense of values and meaning that surpasses all that 'ordinary' contributions can offer. Please read this through again and espay what the prophet is really on about.

PSALM

Now it is quite clear that the author of this Psalm knows what Isaiah was on about, for this author would have preceded Isaiah by several centuries one would think. Whilst it may be true to say that not everyone finds the deeper things of life, it remains just as true that whoever does **not** have such is somewhat deeply aware of the lack. Ask any child of a dysfunctional family, and they will tell you, if they can put it into words. Here is no escapism, I am sure; rather it is rejoicing in catching sight of and living by all those ancient and well-known (if occasionally despised) verities of all human life of whatever time, culture or history.

EPISTLE

Paul often came up with some fascinating illustrations or perhaps we should call them paradigms. The real point at issue is to remember that the Bible is a concerted whole, recording the God Who rescues His People even at the point of threatened extinction. The Exodus and Exile are two major parallel events in this process, and the last Biblical one, of course is the Cross. God is Rescuer *par excellence* and yet one cannot muck around with Him, for He does expect a significant response. Israel was not rescued to a life of debauchery, for that is not the goal and aim of life and living. So when modern Christians talk, as often they do rather cheaply about the Saviour, it needs to be understood that the same Person is also Lord.

There is a delightful promise for all believers in that last sentence or two. The reality of the promise is great, but the modern mind tends to blame anyone but oneself when it seems not to operate well. However, the reality of Paul's comment remains true – but expect to be strong!

GOSPEL

If this passage has not all the reality of life about it, I do not know what has. Remember that this Herod was interested to hear John the Baptist¹, but ready to get rid of Jesus. It would have been extremely difficult for Jesus to cope with such a violent and deadly man, but there is no sign of Him crumbling in spite of the threats. The only way through it was through it, as they say. And Jesus was quite up to the challenge.

Nor was it some sort of bravado. That poignant and passionate response of Jesus about hens and chickens is indicative of a greater commitment than any overt threat could overcome. Our Lord's deep compassion even for those who could not give a toss is exceptional stuff. This is *agape*, the Divine, altruistic love that loves for the sake of the loved one is very often beyond our capacity or effort. It was not beyond

¹ There is great expectation that Herod was not intending a serious response, mind you!!

our Lord.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

If ever there was an antidote to those who consider religion in general or Christianity in particular as some sort of escape from reality, then today's readings should disavow such people from their biases. As we have seen in the notes, if there is one thing about the old Hebrew Faith it is the fact that it faced reality before determining the direction they understood God, and life and relationships.

And here is a passage that puts it all in one single situation. "Go tell that fox" I can imagine Herod's explosion when this comment was reported back to him. He would have spat the dummy in no uncertain terms. He was King, for heaven's sake, and no-one would ever dare to back-chat him!!! Most people would have been far too scared to make such a comment, especially when one's life was at stake.

This was not a case of Jesus acting with bravado! This was no shot at cheap publicity. This was an essential response to a fear-monger who was trying to divert the Lord from what had to be done to resolve the situation that Gospel came to deal with. And all history will show that it takes a particular and strong and committed person to refuse to be cowed by any bully, however 'authorised' he might be.

And there is the nub: this Faith of ours is no 'pie in the sky when you die' sort of rubbish. It has to do with a strong, serious and significant challenge to the status quo of whatever time and place. In spite of all the pious chat about the atonement, Christ was crucified because He was a total and unacceptable threat to the power-brokers of the day. And it has to be noted that their 'power' had no control or authority over our Lord. Truth and love might be suppressed for a while, but neither will be overcome.

It is a powerful and yet remarkably low key reaction to the controllers of this world. I have just been watching a TV article on the Amazon River, where the locals were overpowered, as they put it, by the moneyed and wealthy people. Control was by fear and threat; and the Cross is the example *par excellence*, that such means do not have to be controlling. That Cross – as has been mentioned in these pages often enough, has more to do with reality that offer forgiveness. It is reconciliation that lies at the heart of the Cross, and that reconciliation is as much needed horizontally (between all of us humans) as well as vertically, (between us and God.) Please ponder the enormous implications of the Faith **in the here and now.**

Sentence

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

2 Cor 5: 18

Collect

God of compassion, You are slow to anger and full of mercy, welcoming sinners who return to You with penitent hearts: receive in Your loving embrace all who come home to You and seat them at Your bountiful table, that they may feast with delight in all that satisfies. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour, Who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. **Amen**

Old Testament Lesson

Joshua 5: 2 – 12

²At that time the LORD said to Joshua, "Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites a second time." So Joshua made flint knives, and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath-haaraloth. This is the reason why Joshua circumcised them: all the males of the people who came out of Egypt, all the warriors, had died during the journey through the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt.

Although all the people who came out had been circumcised, yet all the people born on the journey through the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt had not been circumcised. For the Israelites travelled forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, the warriors who came out of Egypt, perished, not having listened to the voice of the LORD. To them the LORD swore that he would not let them see the land that he had sworn to our ancestors to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. So it was their children, whom he raised up in their place that Joshua circumcised; for they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised on the way. When the circumcising of all the nation was done, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed.

The LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day. While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the Passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

Psalm

32

Blessed are those whose sin is forgiven: whose iniquity is put away
Blessed are those to whom the Lord imputes no blame: and in whose spirit there is no guile
For whilst I held my tongue: my bones wasted away with my daily complaining
Your hand was heavy upon me day and night: and my moisture was dried up like a drought in summer
Then I acknowledged my sin to You: and my iniquity I did not hide
I said 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord': and so You forgave the wickedness of my sin
For this cause shall everyone who is faithful make their prayer to You in the day of trouble: and in the time of the great water flood it shall not come near them.
You are a place to hide me in, You will preserve me from trouble: You will surround me with deliverance on every side
I will instruct you and direct you in the way that you should go: I will fasten my eye upon you and give you counsel
Be not like horse or mule that have no understanding: whose forward course must be curbed by bit and bridle
Great tribulations remain for the ungodly: but whoever puts their trust in the Lord, mercy embraces them on every side
Rejoice in the Lord, you righteous, and be glad: and shout for joy all you that are true of heart

² This section in italics has been deleted from the English lectionary used at Holy Innocents'.

Epistle

2 Corinthians 5: 16 – 21

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

GOSPEL

Luke 15: 11 – 32

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe-- the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes; you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

Whilst it may be a little disconcerting to the modern mind to have all this emphasis on circumcision, it remained and remains a critical issue for Jews, even more than baptism seems to be for Christians. And there lies part of the pity: whilst moderns consider *individual* faith the issue, the ancients regarded the *community* as more important, and commitment to the Covenant above that. So do not shrug your shoulders: rather take hold of what really should remain of importance, and that is to be part of the living community.

The closing section of this reading has a further interest, too. Once the Exodus was complete and the trek finished, so were the unusual catering arrangements. Manna and quail ceased for the moving community: now things were settled, they had their own resources, and were expected to utilise them. Not a bad process to follow: as Paul said, '*if they will not work, then let them no eat!*' There was no room for mendicants in Israel.

Psalm

There will ever be those who complain about the Faith and its emphasis on sin, for their presumption is that this leads to punishment. The Psalmist would see things otherwise, would he not? Trying to hide misdeeds from others tends to do more harm to the 'sinner,' as the psalmist discovered. Facing the issue and resolving things is the redemptive reality. As I often say to folk, all the Anglican forms of worship begin with confession and absolution, and it is not a matter of cringing over mistakes and sins, but rather facing them, for that is the only way to recognise the fault, *and then have the freedom to learn from it*. There lies the real benefit.

Epistle

Reconciliation, oh! Blessed word. I have wondered for decades why it is that so vastly important an issue has tended to be hidden away or not responded to in this glorious Gospel given us. In fact the refusal to face this factor is one of the supreme causes for the Faith being discounted and disregarded by many of our contemporaries. *And it always has.*

How is it that so many people have failed to see that the prime factor for which this Faith is relevant and important, is that it faces the Great Human Dilemma and offers a solution. You will know the Story of the Fall backwards I am sure, and yet miss the huge significance that this is not so much talking of 'sin' and it is referring to that which divides and isolates people from each other, and from God. and causes such conflict and hatred and damage. The Cross is the symbol and the process of reconciliation, without which the entire Faith is emasculated. Repentance and forgiveness is the way forward, and that forgiveness has to come from the wounded party first for the process to have any impact. (You will have to look elsewhere in my notes and comments to work this concept through.)

GOSPEL

And here is part of the process laid out for all to consider and work through. How does one handle a crisis without cutting either party off from progress and growth? And sometimes the only way is to step back and await some outcomes.

The issue here is not so much that the sinful son was forgiven, **but that there is a better way to proceed than to punish and to isolate**. Someone has noted that, during the absence of the son, the father's hair turned white with concern. And it takes little in the way of imagination to be sad and/or cross at the other son whose nose was put out of joint. What a pious prig he was, and singularly unpleasant, don't you think?

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I have related the story before of a young wife asking to be prepared for Confirmation, with a husband who was somewhat bitterly atheist insisting that the classes be held at their home so that he could have the opportunity of decrying all the Christian baloney that he expected to be presented to the candidates. It made life hard for the several other adults in that group, though it was something of a steep learning curve for them. As each gathering dealt with various issues, he began to have his say, and then there was a chance for our views to be presented. I remember quite vividly the situation when it came to discussing the Story of the Fall, and the underlining of the fact that even Hebrew faith was dealing with what tends to be called the human dilemma, that this young man started to listen. When it came to the Cross and reconciliation, the husband began to see that, not only did the Faith present a response to an issue to fundamentally human, but also had a significant answer, that the bellicose responses began to assuage.

It was not long after that, that the same man stopped me in the street one Saturday morning, and asked if it were possible for him to change sides! You can imagine the delight of the wife to find that her husband would be confirmed alongside of her; you can imagine my own delight more than 30 years later, to be told that both those two had continued on their Christian pilgrimage! It was not 'religion' that convinced that young man, but the relevance of the reconciliation process.

After a lifetime of preaching, teaching and Bible Study – and exploring the wonderings of other people, it has been an interesting business when one finds that other people, much older and wiser, had been seeing things the way that had been occurring to me also. I remember, in College, having been stunned to

read a book by Bishop Stephen Neil, then a Bishop in the Indian Church, underlining the strong point of contact between Christian Faith and Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist people was just this business of reconciliation. I had been concerned about the apparent oddity that the Christianity of the time and place where I grew up was more concerned with 'personal holiness' and seemed to produce little other than a refined form of selfishness.

If there is one huge and overwhelming issue that dogs the whole history of this planet, (and seems to be moving towards a drastic and destructive goal,) it is that human dilemma that seems to parallel 'Murphy's Law.'³ Hatreds between individuals, groups and cultures – yes and even religions – manage to produce constant crops of destructive outbursts and wars, exacerbating the terrible conditions under which millions of people live. Greed and selfishness have people and people set at conflict with each other, with no regard given to the opposition. They are there to be destroyed. And the millennia of human history attest to the constant breaking out of such terror.

(There will be those who will cheer at these words, certain in their own minds that the great cause of this trouble lies at the feet of religion. That rather stupid and cheap shot may have some currency when it has to be said that there are those people on the lunatic fringe who provide enough examples establish the case in a way. However, the reality lies in the fact that those who indulge in such ugliness have distorted whatever Faith they profess, and in doing so have rendered their subject unrecognizable. There never has been any guarantee that humans will profess properly the Faith they 'own,' and distortions are far too common and damaging.)

Should there be some answer to this tragic state of affairs, then one would have thought that the person who invented the solution would make the traditional millions. The greater tragedy is that Someone has, whilst having no interest at all in the possible profit. But too many of His followers can only see that Jesus has saved them from Hell⁴ when in reality that Lord of ours offers answers to a far more immediate threat anyhow.

Read the Bible (dare I say it sensibly) and you will see that it is precisely this issue that is the focus from start to finish. From Genesis 3 and its diagnosis of the human ill, to Revelation which offers a goal to the people of the late First Century, who had the challenge of failing to see Jesus as Lord, because all the blandishments of Rome and commerce⁵ was blinding them to rather lesser goals. Genesis 3 is actually pointing up the fact that the real problem with us humans is, to put it in the Biblical terminology that we all want to be God and rule the rest of you. Those ancient authors were far from silly, and were certainly not naive. Actually, it is stunning to see that people of such a remote and unsophisticated (?) period of history had the insight to see the real issues.

Both the Old Testament prophets, (Isaiah in particular) realized and articulated the need for Someone to show the way, in real life and in real time. Isaiah 53 – one of the Servant Songs – doesn't get the picture entirely right, but it is a clear and remarkable insight into resolution of the problem. And Jesus lived it, in life and on the Cross, **showing the costly but effective path to reconciliation: and that much of that cost would have to be borne by the reconciler, not the offender.** Here, of course, lies one of the real reasons why the 'Jesus' approach to reconciliation has tended to be disregarded. Humans are far less willing to follow in a direction that would seem to be rather demeaning to a proud person. But that is rather the point: pride is one of the great barriers to reconciliation, because 'I prefer to blame the party of the other part,' and that blocks the process.

Neither time nor space permits a complete look at this, but it is important to realize that the Cross of Christ is not just there to provide me with forgiveness. **It is there as the process, *par excellence*, that restores the peace, provides justice and enables people to get along together regardless of what lies behind them.**

³ For the uninitiated, Murphy's Law reads 'whatever can go wrong, will go wrong and Murphy was an optimist.'

⁴ It is a very poor response to the Gospel to align oneself to it out of fear, would you not think?

⁵ Yes, dear reader, John was not on about the end of the world!

Sunday 21st March, 2010

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Sentence

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

Psalm 126:6

Collect

Christ, Whose feet were caressed with perfume and a woman's hair, You humbly took a basin and towel and washed the feet of Your friends; wash us also in Your tenderness, that embracing Your service freely, we may accept no other bondage in Your Name.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 43: 16 – 21

Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, Who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honour me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Psalm

126

When the Lord turned again the fortunes of Zion: then were we like those restored to life
Then was our mouth filled with laughter: and our tongue with singing
Then said they among the heathen: 'The Lord has done great things for them.'
Truly the Lord has done great things for us: and therefore we rejoiced.
Turn again our fortunes, O Lord: as the streams in the dry south
Those who sow in tears: shall reap with songs of joy
They that go out weeping, bearing the seed: shall come again in gladness, bringing their sheaves with them.

Epistle

Philippians 3: 3 – 14

It is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh-- even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

GOSPEL

John 12: 1 – 8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her

hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

One of the annoying things about some people and their use of the Old Testament is that they try to make the words there say the most unlikely and stupid things. That tends to be because they are completely unaware of who the prophets were, what was their role and why they wrote (and said) the things they did. This passage is a clear link which tends to be missed for some reason.

Please read it again; and then wonder what is being said. Part is quite clear: with the contrast between past and future. (Immediate future I might add!) Now when Isaiah refers to chariots and horses, being quenched, the clear reference is to the Exodus and the escape from Egypt. God is the God Who rescues His people from almost certain extinction.

Now, while one is discouraged from looking back to past events, the coming event remains a parallel; the return from Exile. And in quite typical Hebrew hyperbole, even the animals will sit up and take notice. God is bringing His people back - and the reason? **So that Israel may be pointers to the God of the whole world, for the sake of that whole world.**⁶

Psalm

This Psalm should be well-known to modern people of around middle age or older, as this was the basis for a rock song about 30-40 years ago. It was the celebration of Israel in exile as the time came for their release from Babylon and return to their own land. It really is a joyful outburst.

Epistle

I find it fascinating to encounter people who have become Christian recently, or who may have changed allegiance to another denomination because of something in particular that resonated in their deeper selves. Here Paul is going somewhat over the top, for he had passed from Judaism (and a very legalistic version of it) to something rather more aligned to the deeper part of him. In fact his comparison between what he now had and what he had left behind is fairly basically expressed. 'Rubbish' is the translation of what you have heard of more often as s**t. I kid you not. So Paul saw a great difference. But he also saw the need to remain both faithful and growing, developing, for there is ever a long way for any of us to go in out pilgrimage as Christians.

GOSPEL

Here is a quite passionate little cameo that speaks very much of what is important and what is not. Whilst one would hardly expect Judas to come out with anything significant, Jesus' recognition of Mary even though she may well not have been aware of the importance of her action. The real issue was the total self-giving of Mary, for that spikenard would have represented to her what moderns call superannuation.

Jesus, ever aware of what lay in front of Him, accepted the tender gesture and associated it with His sacrifice. That business about 'always having the poor with you' also indicated the knowledge that Jesus had, that in spite of the Gospel, there would ever be those on the outer. Human nature will always ensure that. It is a sad commentary on us humans.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

From what we read of Christian history, and ordinary human stuff come to that, there is always the tendency amongst some to see their religion as the guarantor that they are superior because they 'belong' as opposed to lesser mortals who are clearly 'on the outer.' So many of the odd-ball sects and groups have as

⁶ Check last Sunday's notes to see again WHY this should be so.

their promise, that their followers are ‘saved,’ and the rest of the world are not. It strikes me that this series of readings underline the opposite conviction: and thank heaven for that.

The First Lesson is a reminder that God is God and His people are just that! And the reason for their existence is **not, repeat not** for themselves but for everyone else. God is the centre and the People of God are, if you can cope with it, His instruments ‘for His praise.’ If you are silly enough to reckon that this means that God needs constant reassurance from ordinary humans that He is tops, then you miss the point also. The reason that God is God is because what He has to offer is of benefit to all who will take it up. God is guarantor of truth and of justice, integrity and loyalty, and knows that there is no other way to operate either for Him or for ordinary mortals. And that is Gospel. Even the Psalm for today reiterates the same sentiment, do you see?

Top that off with the Epistle, and notice that even St. Paul does not consider that ‘he has it made,’ but needs to remain true to Gospel and to God consistently. Then comes that rather surprising cameo about Mary, not because it is new to you but because it is quite ‘abnormal.’

‘Practice random acts of kindness’ is a statement that turns up now and again, and lately even a TV programme presents the same challenge. And there, surely, lies one of the avenues of service that is open to Christian people. Mind you, it remains – these days in particular – that one needs to be ‘wise and serpents and harmless as doves.’ All that really means, surely, that you need to know the person to whom you would so act.

But the real point is that these passages – seems to me – remove from us any chance of feeling or being superior. God is not a God of superiority; if He were, then those who complain that He is not on their radar would see Him, and, one suspects, be forced into following. There would be neither choice nor option. Moreover, it behoves none of us to assume that we have something to which no one else is eligible. There is no truth whatever in such an assumption, and if there were, it would be totally destructive to both demander and the ones left out.

Sunday 28th March, 2010

Palm Sunday

Sixth Sunday in Lent (Passion Sunday)

Liturgy of the Passion

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.

Philippians 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

The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens-- wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

Psalm

31: 9 – 18

Have mercy upon me O God, for I am in trouble: my eye wastes away for grief, my throat also and my inward parts
For my life wears out in sorrow, and my years with sighing: my strength fails me in my affliction and my bones are consumed
I am become the scorn of all my enemies: and my neighbours wag their head in derision
I am a thing of horror to my friends: and those that see me in the street shrink from me
I am forgotten like one dead and out of mind: I have become like a broken vessel.
For I hear the whispering of many: and fear is on every side
While they plot together against me: and scheme to take away my life
But in You, Lord, have I put my trust: I have said 'You are my God.'
All my days are in Your hand: O deliver me from the power of my enemies and from my persecutors
Make Your face to shine upon Your servant: and save me for Your mercy's sake.

Epistle

Philippians 2: 5 – 11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

GOSPEL

Luke 23: 1 – 49

Or Luke 22: 14 – 23: 56

The Gospel reading is not included, as this particular Sunday tends to be one where there is no sermon and the full story of the Passion is read.

NOTES ON THE READINGS

From my point of view, that is a great pity as a close examination of the Philippians passage bears a great deal of value in understanding the reality and depth of the Gospel. This is not just for 'our salvation' in the world to come, but also the pattern of life in this world in which we live. More on this if you like to explore.

Old Testament Lesson

I wonder if any of you people reading this has got past looking at what is familiar, to discovering something really quite unexpected, in this Servant Song of Isaiah. When one considers that, around the time this passage was written, the general expectation of one's god of whatever 'religion' was one of overwhelming power, irresistible, and in control.

But what does one get? A very different sort of person, of ministry, of service. And that should have been enough to do one of two things: *either*, for Israel to have discarded the very idea that one supposed to be Messiah would be so gentle and caring, *or* to beginning the process of moving away from the almost military expectation of the Dominant One. Sadly, it seems to be the case that the very Faith and Gospel provided for us has not been listened to very well.

So please look again and note the creative, yearning approach Isaiah expected of the Servant of the Lord. Add to that the point the prophet was making all along, that the Servant of the Lord was Israel, faithful Israel. The translation to the Church as the People of God is simple enough and well-known enough surely. And still we tend to get leaders, and people in congregations that appear to delight in being control-freaks.

Psalm

Whatever is being said in this rather remarkable Psalm? It strikes me as the out-pouring of someone trying to be true to God in a world of people who have no idea of the real nature of JHWH. If you have been in a position of attempting to uphold the Gospel among a group of people or a community that is determined on another direction altogether, you have some idea of the struggle. It is far from easy to go against the stream, but that is exactly the position in which Jesus found Himself, and that constantly. It is trite and banal to talk about being, with God, a majority of two, but sometimes that is the harsh reality.

It is a measure of a person's greatness and strength to persist against huge odds. Thank heaven that Jesus was both capable, constant, and committed.

Epistle

As I have mentioned often, this passage from Philippians expresses the Gospel completely, and if this was all we had of the New Testament, it would still be enough to get the whole picture. At the risk of 'cooking cabbages twice,' I offer comment for exploring.

It may come as some surprise to realize the extent to which the Apostle, apparently using the words of a then-well-known hymn of the Church, to explore and unpack the Gospel. The vision extends from Genesis 3 to the end of the NT. For he who DID regard 'equality with God something to be exploited,' in the Biblical tale is Adam of Genesis. For heaven's sake, do not imagine that the author(s) of Genesis asks you to assume that Adam was a real person in some dark distant past. 'Adam' is a name generic, and the story a most telling myth or legend. **Never** imagine that 'myth' means 'unreal.' On the other hand stop and see that this most potent of stories makes clear that the ancient worthies understood very clearly that the human dilemma begins for human rejection of God (and truth and justice and integrity) and the demand to control, overpower, and *thus, attempt to become god*. Stop long enough to ponder the extent to which ALL human conflict stems from right here, and I am as likely to offend as any other human. And so are you.

The Divine answer to that usurpation of authority – one might have expected! – would have been to destroy the person/people who created the problem. (The Story of the Flood actually explores the

pointlessness of heading in such a punitive direction.) The real answer, as the Gospel indicates, was not to power people into conformity, but to love them from hate and fear, from power and control, but to offer the real alternative of service and self-giving. If this sounds all too easy and useless, then you are missing the point entirely. Watch the incarnate Christ as He ministered to people, not demanding loyalty but asking for discipleship. The Cross was the point, *par excellence*, that the wilful dismissal of human hatred met the Divine love, and the outcome is rather more fully understood these days than maybe it was at the time.

Here, the Cross is not simply some overcoming of your sin, but the defeat of human evil, accomplished not by the punishment and destruction of the perpetrators, for that would leave no room at all for repentance. Evil, in Biblical terms, is accomplished, not by the punishment or destruction of the perpetrators but by the simple and straightforward display of showing evil up for exactly what it is. Few people ever manage to realize the impact of that approach. Christians are not well known for understanding much of their own Gospel, sadly.

GOSPEL

Today you will almost certainly have no sermon, but will have the Passion Story read to you once again, without comment. (Stop and realize that this is how it all came to those who lived through that period in Hebrew [and Roman] history. No explanation was given, none at all. It required people to stop and think and ponder. Sadly, there are not a lot of humans who have either the wit or the patience to work through that process.)

Sometimes it is important to give people the chance to see past their predilections and presuppositions to find that some things take them way beyond their comfort zone and that is a constant when it comes to the Gospel of Christ.