

Sentence

Suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them and from the cloud a voice said, "This is My beloved Son with Whom I am well pleased; listen to Him."
Matthew 17: 8

Collect

Almighty God, You have given Your only Son to be for us both a sacrifice for sin and also an example of godly life; give us grace that we may always thankfully receive the benefits of His sacrifice and also daily endeavour ourselves to follow in the blessed steps of His most holy life; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Exodus 24: 13 – 18

The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them."

Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Psalm

2

Why are the nations in tumult: and why do the peoples cherish a vain dream?

The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers conspire together: against the Lord and against His anointed, saying 'Let us break their bonds asunder: let us throw off their chains from us'

He that dwells in heaven shall laugh them to scorn: the Lord will hold them in derision

Then will He speak to them in His wrath, and terrify them in His fury: "I the Lord, have set my king on Zion my holy hill.'

I will announce the Lord's decree, that which He has spoken: "You are my son, this day have I begotten you.

Ask of me and I will give you the nations for your inheritance: the uttermost parts of the earth for your possession 'You may break them with a rod of iron: and shatter them in pieces like a potter's vessel.'

Now therefore be wise, O kings: be advised, you that are judges of the earth.

Serve the Lord with awe, and govern yourselves in fear and trembling: lest he be angry, and you perish in your course.

For His wrath is quickly kindled: blessed are those who turn to Him for refuge.

Epistle

2 Peter 1: 16 – 21

We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

GOSPEL

Matthew 17: 1 – 9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a

voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

© New Revised Standard Version of the Bible
Copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the
Churches of Christ in the USA, and used by permission. All rights reserved

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

As time goes by and people are less familiar with the Old Testament stories and accounts, much of the impact of the Gospel stories is reduced. On top of that a lack of familiarity with old Hebrew story-telling and the point and purpose of the imagery fails to produce the old result. That is rather sad, and I venture to suggest that moderns spend more time reading the Old Testament, particularly the more significant areas.

Here is part of the tale of the giving of the Decalogue, and the cloud imagery has always been seen as portraying the power and majesty of God. It is quite important that this passage is read in conjunction with the story of the Transfiguration, for there, too, clouds, mountains, and even Moses and Elijah rate significant mentions. Stop and ponder why if you would!

Psalm

A little matter of trivia might be interesting: that John's Revelation includes quite a commentary on this Psalm. (Read my notes on Revelation for more info, or get GB Caird's Black and Black series Commentary. His was a far wiser head than mine.)

This is a fascinating insight into what must have been remarkably early theology; Psalm 2 must date from around 1000BC or even earlier. It is a study of the relative values of human kingdoms and their power, and that of JHWH. Predictably, it is human power that gets a hammering, but the grounds of that perception are both valid and real - as is John's commentary!

Epistle

The Apostle is here combatting the idea that the Faith was based on fable and fiction. In response he pointed to the incarnational verities of both Judaism and Christianity. Whilst some of the stories may be told in what may be described as mythical terms which is only a means to express the significance of those realities. So Peter was at pains to attest to fact that he and others were present at real events in real time and in real places. In fact one of the fascinating things about the Judaic/Christian Faith is the importance that is seen in the historical realities. *The Word became flesh* -- and the Faith continues to be spread by ordinary humans in the real world, There is no room for fairies.

GOSPEL

It is helpful to remember that the Evangelists are careful to report that the Transfiguration occurred a week after Peter's so-called confession of Jesus as Christ. While some people are convinced that this was a great step forward for Peter, I suspect that the reality was that he saw part of the story but still had a long way to go. Today's incident underlines that fact, does it not!

This event has often been portrayed as some sort of reassurance for Jesus Himself, but I have long doubted that such was the case. The reassurance, or underlining if you like, was for Peter, James and John, the sort of leadership group of the Twelve. And the nature of this reassurance lay in the fact that Moses (Law) and Elijah (prophets) showed up as someone subservient to the Christ. On the other hand there is the clear statement that Jesus is in the line of both those particularly Hebrew Faith icons. This Christ was the final development of this faith once delivered.

Notice, in the light of today's first lesson, of the connection with Moses, mountain, smoke and thunder. This imagery is for ever embedded in Biblical perception and expression as the power and glory of JHWH. You will note the repetition in other situations as well, so do not miss seeing it as pointing to those factors of the Creator.

Transfiguration is nothing less than seeing with fresh eyes what has always been there but now it is seen to be a flowing out of what was already apparent but not recognized.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

EPIPHANY IX Year A _____ **Responsibility: Canon Barlow**

TRANSFIGURATION

[Based on the Gospel for today viz. Matthew 17:1-9)

"From the cloud a voice said: This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him. When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear." '(Matt.17:6) The old King James. version puts it even more strongly: "they fell on their faces, and were sore afraid." It is not to be wondered at, that Peter and James and John were terrified at hearing the voice from the cloud. The sight of Jesus transfigured - His face shining like the sun and His whole appearance white as light - this was awe-inspiring enough. But then they saw their friend talking with figures whom they instinctively knew to be Moses and Elijah - great men of history and long dead! The bright cloud and the voice from it was the last straw. They must have thought the Day of Judgement had arrived. No wonder they were awe-struck and afraid.

Psalm 111 tells us: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and they who live by it grow in understanding." Again, the Book of Proverbs says: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools scorn wisdom and discipline." (1:7) Not that Jesus ever suggested that we should be in fear of God. But an inexplicable experience, inexplicable in ordinary terms that is, does create fear in us. And certainly our experience with God, a realization of His mighty Being and our own smallness, and that He cares about us, each one of us, should lead to a sense of awe.

There was fear when the angel appeared to the shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus. The angel said "Fear not." (Luke 2:10) There was fear when Jesus walked across the Sea of Galilee to the disciples in the boat. He said to them: "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." (Matt.14:27) There was fear, as we heard earlier, at the Transfiguration. "But Jesus came and touched them, saying: "Get up and do not be afraid." (Matt.17:7) There was fear at the Resurrection: the women "departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy". When they met the Risen Jesus He said to them: "Do not be afraid." (Matt.28:8 & 9) Where there was fear there was also reassurance. "Fear not." "Have no fear." "Do not be afraid."

That fear, terror, comes from ignorance and lack of understanding. The people involved in the incidents which I have cited had not had sufficient experience of Jesus and of

the love of God for His children and had to be reassured. The more we know God and are aware of His love, the less becomes our fear of Him. St. John wrote in his first Letter to the Church: "So we know and believe the love God has for us There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." (1 John 4: 16 & 18)

However this is not to say that our awe of God should be any the less. All the more really, as we come to appreciate more and more that love of God for His unworthy creatures, who are so slow to follow and serve and worship Him, and so apt to err and stray from His ways like lost sheep.

Fear is unhealthy, in our relationship with God. Awe is healthy. Fear is overcome by the word of Christ: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32) Love casts out fear. But familiarity casts out awe, and it would seem that the trend among Christians today is to lose not merely the fear, which we rightly should dispense with, but also the awe which should be an indispensable aspect of our relationship with God.

There has long been disagreement in the Church as to how to best express our awe in worship. One extreme has been to use traditional language - Latin, elaborate vestments, clouds of incense, many candles, and so on. The other extreme has been to worship in a building with the plainest and barest of furniture and decoration, so that the sense of awe might not be distracted by outward things. The Anglican tradition has been and is the middle way; "decently and in order" is the watchword of the Anglican Church, and we recognise and accept that some prefer to express their worship more outwardly than do others.

Change happens in the area of worship as in other things, and many of those external things which once helped express awe have become empty of meaning and so, rightly rejected. Other things which were once viewed with suspicion are now generally accepted. Some might recall that not so very long ago no member of the Sanctuary Guild would carry out her duties without her head being covered. We would come across a lady busily dusting and polishing, with a little lace hanky on her head because she had forgotten to bring a proper head covering. How silly it seems now. And yet in rejecting that, we lost something of the awe-full approach to worship and holy things.

Of course the externals of worship can become empty customs: the vestments, the traditional furniture, the sign of the cross, kneeling for prayer, acknowledging the altar, and so on. They should be outward expressions of deep awe and awareness that we are in the presence of God, and that we are addressing ourselves to Him, and worshipping Him.

Awe and reverence for God is not something restricted and confined to worship though. Our whole life, in everything we do, must have behind it that same awe and reverence. Awe for God as we consider the world in which we live, will result in proper use of our environment and

of its produce. Awe for God as we relate to other people - again His creation - will result in a proper respect and treatment of our fellow children of God.

The awe I have been talking about can only come to be our attitude towards God as we come to know Him. The fear experienced by Peter and Jams and John at the Transfiguration, as at other times, came because they were still getting to know Jesus. Today probably no-one would admit to being afraid of God. We have become accustomed to thinking .of God as loving us, forgiving us, caring about us. There is little fear it seems, even as we sin against God - we take it for granted that He will forgive us yet again because for some inexplicable reason He loves us. In the circumstances of sin we should fear God, fear His displeasure, and fear His wrath. We dare not take Him for granted. God is absolute truth, absolute justice, absolute purity - and we who are His children are an affront to Him whenever we are untruthful, unjust, and impure. Certainly we should fear God in those circumstances, and repent and amend our ways with all haste.

Awe and reverence for God the Father, who has created us and sustains us; for God the Son, our Saviour and Redeemer; for God the Holy Spirit, who guides and strengthens us - awe and reverence for God the Holy Trinity will keep us faithfully worshipping, following, and serving Him all the days of our life: and fear will have no place. AMEN

ASH WEDNESDAY

9th March, 2011

Sentence

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

Joel 2:13

Collect

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

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Joel 2:1-2 & 12-17

Blow the trumpet in Zion, sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, a day of darkness and gloom is at hand, a day of cloud and dense fog. Like blackness spread over the mountains a vast and countless host appears; their like has never been known, nor will be in all the ages to come.

Yet even now, says the Lord, turn back to me wholeheartedly with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Rend your hearts and not your garments, and turn back to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, long-suffering and ever constant, ready always to relent when he threatens disaster. It may be he will turn back and relent and leave a blessing behind him, blessing enough for grain-offerings and drink-offerings to be presented to the Lord your God.

Blow the trumpet in Zion, appoint a solemn fast, proclaim a day of abstinence. Gather the people together, appoint a solemn assembly; summon the elders, gather the children, even babes at the breast; bid the bridegroom leave his wedding-chamber and the bride her bower. Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, stand weeping between the porch and the altar and say, "Spare your people, Lord; do not expose your own people to insult, to be made a byword by other nations. Why should the peoples say, ""Where is their God?" "

PSALM

51:1-17

Have mercy on me, O God, in Your enduring goodness: according to the fullness of Your compassion blot out my offences.

Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness: and cleanse me from my sin

For I acknowledge my rebellion: and my sin is ever before me

Against You only have I sinned and done what is evil in Your eyes: so You will be just in Your sentence and blameless in Your judging

Surely in wickedness I was brought to birth: and in sin my mother conceived me

You that desire truth in the inward parts: O teach me wisdom in the secret places of my heart

Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean: wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

Make me hear of joy and gladness: let the bones which You have broken rejoice

Hide Your face from my sins: and blot out all my iniquities

Create in me a clean heart O God: and renew a right spirit within me

Do not cast me from Your presence: do not take Your holy spirit from me

O give me the gladness of Your help again: and support me with a willing spirit

Then will I teach transgressors Your ways: and sinners shall turn to You again

O Lord God of my salvation, deliver me from bloodshed: and my tongue shall sing of Your righteousness

O Lord, open my lips: and my mouth shall proclaim Your praise

You take no pleasure in sacrifice, or I would give it: burnt offerings You do not want.

The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart You will not despise.

EPISTLE

2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors. It is as if God were appealing to you through us: we implore you in Christ's name, be reconciled to God! Christ was innocent of sin, and yet for our sake God made him one with human sinfulness, so that in him we might be made one with the righteousness of God.

Sharing in God's work, we make this appeal: you have received the grace of God; do not let it come to nothing. He has said: In the hour of my favour I answered you; on the day of deliverance I came to your aid. This is the hour of favour, this the day of deliverance.

Lest our ministry be brought into discredit, we avoid giving any offence in anything. As God's ministers, we try to recommend ourselves in all circumstances by our steadfast endurance: in affliction, hardship, and distress; when flogged, imprisoned, mobbed; overworked, sleepless, starving. We recommend ourselves by innocent behaviour and grasp of truth, by patience and kindness, by gifts of the Holy Spirit, by unaffected love, by declaring the truth, by the power of God. We wield the weapons of righteousness in right hand and left. Honour and dishonour, praise and blame, are alike our lot: we are the impostors who speak the truth, the unknown people whom all know; dying we still live on; disciplined by suffering, we are not done to death; in our sorrows we have always cause for joy; poor ourselves, we bring wealth to many; penniless, we own the world. We have spoken very frankly to you, friends in Corinth; we have opened our heart to you.

GOSPEL

Matthew 6:1-6

Jesus said "Be careful not to parade your religion before others; if you do, no reward awaits you with your Father in heaven. So, when you give alms, do not announce it with a flourish of trumpets, as the hypocrites do in synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Truly I tell you: they have their reward already. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing; your good deed must be secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. Again, when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; they love to say their prayers standing up in synagogues and at street corners for everyone to see them. Truly I tell you: they have their reward already. But when you pray, go into a room by yourself, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. In your prayers do not go babbling on like the heathen, who imagine that the more they say the more likely they are to be heard. Do not imitate them, for your Father knows what your needs are before you ask him."

Notes on the Readings

Old Testament

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

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

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

Psalm

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

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

Epistle

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

The emphasis on reconciliation; and

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

In today's view of life, self-assertion is regarded as one of the goals of existence, and that brings with it a growing divide between individuals and communities. I am right; you are wrong: and if you disagree with me I will find ways of ensuring that you follow my pattern. I may even kill you to make sure that others submit *to me*. Contrast that with the longing Paul has for the divides between humans being overcome by love and forgiveness. It is a costly path, but it is the only way to healthy community.

Gospel

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

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

NOTES FOR A SERMON

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

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

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

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

¹ *Testing* I would prefer to describe it!

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

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

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

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

Sentence

We do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Matt 4:4

Collect

Almighty God, Whose Son fasted forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, and was tempted as we are, yet did not sin; give us grace to direct our lives in obedience to Your will, that, as You know our weakness, so may we know Your power to save; through Jesus Christ our Redeemer, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Genesis 2: 15 – 17 & 3: 1 - 7

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'"

But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

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 that 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 eyes on you and give you counsel.
Be not like horse and mule that have no understanding: whose forward course must be curbed with 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.

Epistle

Romans 5: 12 – 21

Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned-- sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification.

If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of

righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

GOSPEL

Matthew 4: 1 – 11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

© New Revised Standard Version of the Bible

Copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, and used by permission. All rights reserved

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

I am still surprised – in fact I am appalled! – that there remain modern Christians who strive to keep a literal view of the Creation Stories, convinced that they are being true to the Faith and to God. I have spent the past 50 years asking such folk to look past their strange loyalty, if only on the grounds that the original owners of the stories have never done so themselves. Almost all of the real point is lost when retaining literalism. Similar difficulties present themselves in today's Epistle as well.

However, on such a Sunday as today it is well worth the recall to come again to the foundational expression of both what is wrong with so much of life and where the cause and responsibility for it lies. This ancient legend contains a stunning evaluation of where so much *angst* emerges, and even points to the remedy. What is so hugely sad is the extent to which this evaluation is neither explored nor tested by the vast majority of humans, *including* rather too many Christians.

The story of the Fall is not some sort of past history. It is a tale that helps me to understand me – as well as you. It must have been the result of a lot of thought, prayer and assessment by people long gone, but who in spite of their early existence in terms of human history, began to understand so much of the roots of human volition. It has nothing to do with apples or any other fruit. It has everything to do with human motives. *For anyone who would like to explore this further, my Notes on Genesis are available via email.*

Sadly these notes need to be somewhat short-hand. Suffice to say that this tale conveys the harsh reality that temptation lies, quite simply and devastatingly in our terribly human refusal to be human and determination to be gods. By that is meant that common human trait of determining to get on top of whoever else is around. Add to that the capacity to enforce my will on to you. As the story unfolds here in Genesis 3, there is that tragic outcome portrayed, first by the sense of isolation mostly self-imposed, the sense of being God-forsaken (which soon proves unfounded!) and the Cain and Abel saga that underlines the second-stage rebellion that leads to murder, or destroying the 'opposition.'

(It can never be said that Scripture attributes 'sin' to someone in history's ancient past. Had that been the case, then any responsibility that I have is removed: I am reduced to a puppet on a string in that regard.)

Here lies a tremendous contribution to human self-understanding, and one – dare I say it – that remains valid even for those who deny the existence of God. *I am human; I am responsible.* And that is a ‘pill’ that few moderns would wish to take.

Psalm

It may come as some surprise that this psalm, also, has a great contribution to make to the balance of present-day human sanity. The process remains the same for believers or on-believers. This ancient worthy was making the point that when he faced the truth of his own short-comings, that provided a means of moving on from there, rather than hiding from them himself, and trying to hide them from others.

I have found it strange that lots of Anglicans had not realized the point, purpose and value of the Confession and Absolution in so many of our regular services. That point is not to relegate you to the state of a cringing sinner, but to offer the opportunity to acknowledge, if only to yourself, that you have issues that need attention. As this old worthy experienced, the relief in so doing is tangible and redemptive. It is only when I am honest, particularly with myself, that I can cope with who I am, and from that can cope rather better with you, too!!!

Epistle

I have great sympathy with people who find St. Paul’s argument rather difficult to follow. Mind you, there was a time when he really made sense to me, but that was nearly half a century ago. One is left wondering how Paul understood ‘Adam,’ and I have to confess that I do not see the distinction Paul makes between ‘the free gift and the trespass.’ Both have the capacity to affect all humans, both Gospel and sin. The outcomes of course are totally different.

GOSPEL

Most readers of these notes will have travelled this path before. Reference to previous years’ notes will uncover all that. And it must be added that this incident in Jesus’ ministry was not to prove Him sinless, but to show that path He travelled to ensure that His life and ministry was not rendered invalid by following the Adamic pattern.

For the sake of anyone who has not travelled that path, I repeat previous commentary:

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?

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. 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 a rather mindless multitude. Shoot me down if you like, but what has any singer, or dancer or ever sportsman really done for you and others? Jesus was not stupid, and knew that if He started out that way, it may begin with the pinnacle, but would have to expand into ever more stupid and risky procedures. And in what way does that process ever get anyone to think or love their neighbour.

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

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

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

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

ALTERNATIVE ADDRESS FOR LENT I

Rather longer on the grounds that you are not hearing this but rather reading it

In the light of the comment made at the start of the other option for today, may I offer an alternative sermon – this time bouncing off the Genesis story of the Fall. It is only recently that I heard from a person who has been freed from the perceived necessity of understanding the stories literally, and he was astounded at the way the very familiar tale almost blew up in his head. Hopefully the same may occur from this – if you have not travelled this way before. I have long suffered from holy ones who determine to be true to the Bible, and refuse any other approach than literal. What they do not realize is that they tend to make nonsense of the stories, and --- dare I suggest it – they make God out to be a bit of a dill.

From the beginning, people of faith or no faith need to understand that these Creation Stories were not composed nor written for an audience that was naïve, stupid or gullible. Whilst people in those early days may well have needed stories rather than ‘theology,’ than only meant they were like most others of the time.

These stories were, in fact, designed to convey the possibility of a choice in understanding what it meant then (and now) to be a human alive and pondering meaning on planet earth. (I am cheeky enough to suggest that a reason for so many in our culture who have rejected this option have finished up with none. Small wonder there is so much confusion and baloney in our day and age.

In fact, these Creation Stories, stand on the shoulders of other and previous ‘dream time stories’ (if you can cope with that idea,) – a factor most visible in Genesis 1:1 did you know. In a world then of many hundreds of choices of gods, goddesses, wizards, warlocks and other various pretend divinities, this pointed up a search that would meet everyone at their deepest level. Here is no dogmatic outline, to be believed against all odds: this is a question being offered to you, on the basis that it might, perhaps should, give you something to go on. The more I discover in this ancient quest, the more I stand amazed at the wisdom of whoever it was in generations so long past that offered a series of tales so telling and so profound, that actually leaves modern psychology in its wake, actually.

So this is to be pondered, tossed around, questioned and then understood. It may well be that your best teacher in understanding this series may be some of Jewish faith. (Mind you, said Jewish people may, if my experience with them is anything to go by, will assure you that three Jewish people may well come up with about twelve different ways of looking at it. *My best suggestion is to find and read David Kossoff.*

The passage set for today is in two parts, the first section is part of the second Creation Story with its focus on humanity itself. It may well help to understand that ‘adam’ in Hebrew actually means, not a person, but humanity, or even closer: ‘adam’ is made up of ‘ish’ and ‘ishsha’ – male and female. And one does not ‘get’ adam until both male and female are present and together. Did you know that if you take this second creation story in this section through to the end of Chapter 2, that actually it had to stem from rather later in Jewish history, *for it reads as a complete rebuttal of the patriarchal society where women were mere chattels. It is really explosive. The imagery is powerful – and was intended to be!*

But it is the sin business that really stokes the fires. Have you been long imbued with the Christian idea that we all sin because of Adam? He mucked it all up and we are left with the consequences! Quite some correction is required before you travel that path.

Note, and note well: *this tale is not about someone from a distant past* – it is description of you and of every human who has walked this earth. It is designed to help you understand yourself, and more importantly, to catch sight of at least some of the answer to the question which is ‘if God made the world to be so good, where has the stuff-up come from?’ And sorry, this part of the passage suggests that answer indicates ‘that is you; and me; and everyone else who share the responsibility.

If you would like another culture shock, Chapter 4 points up the second stage of human capacity for evil, *and it still comes from us. Cain and Abel. Not a pretty sight.*

Now as we come to the crunch, do not get led astray like so much of the Church over the earlier centuries. The problem was not Eve in the story; the problem was not sex; so what was it? And it certainly was not about apples.

It is a simple tale, told to underline how we humans make foolish choices, try to avoid the issues, avoid the responsibilities, and thus miss the lesson there to be learnt. There they are, the three factors in the story, man, woman and snake. Now not many people find snakes all that attractive, and that included most Jewish folk, I gather. Fewer still have ever heard snakes talk! Those sorts of inserts in the story were designed, from the beginning, to

ensure that NO ONE ever took things literally. Snakes are sneaky things and can be deadly dangerous. So in Hebrew thoughts, snakes represent danger, disaster, evil.

So there were our two characters in the story, given all they need to grow and flourish – and with a few sharp edges thrown in, for life tends to be like that, eh? Choices, decisions. Helmut Thielicke in his own 'The World Began' has a chapter titled, 'Man, the Risk of God.' But, is this not true, for us – like ruminants, – the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence, and when someone says you cannot or ought not, you and I are ever ready to overstep the mark.

Temptation does not, repeat not stem from outside you. Now does it! (Statement, not question.) Temptation stems from within. So don't blame the snake; it is human greedy eyes and hearts – as the story-teller was very aware. Satan does not tempt you; in fact, in Biblical terms, Satan (and by whatever other name) is your capacity and mine to move towards evil, and whatever gets me over the top of you. Human evil. Boom!

Then notice how the lies begin to fly around. 'You shall not die!' You have been led up a garden path; you are not going to believe that #\$\$%^&, are you?' The questions arise in order for me to justify whatever course of action that I will decide. Damn the facts; let's have the spin. *Politicians, amongst others, are rather well-skilled at this, not outright lies perhaps, but that spin that drives you mad.*

And when you do surrender to that urge, you tend to make sure that you are not alone in it: you make sure someone else is there to cop the flak with you, if it all comes out. In the tale, it was the woman who decided to eat, but made sure that Adam of the story is right there in the pooh with her.

The only and sad outcome of the mischief is the creation of the great divide between 'Adam' and 'Eve.' They discovered that they were naked! It has nothing to do with sex or gender: it has everything to do with hiding from each other out of shame, or being lumbered with the blame. Does this describe you, or does this describe you?

Two aspects that stem from a little further on in the tale:

When in the story, the two were walking in the garden after the event, God was looking for them, not to punish but to meet. It was they who felt the guilt: God felt the longing. No harsh judgement, do you see? Just concern, like a disappointed parent.

And stop a moment or two to see where Adam, in this tale, attributes the blame. 'The woman you gave me, she beguiled me and I ate.' Ponder a moment, for most need to take ten: where does Adam lay the blame? No, not on the woman, but on God. What a twit! Still lying his little heart out and doing what so many still do when things don't go their way. *God is at fault. And most of the time, a God such people do not consider to be existent.*

In rather non-Biblical terms, it can be said that Scripture posits two basic approaches to life; the first is Adamic, self-centred, self-obsessed and God-denying in the end. Perhaps that might be put better if I suggest this path is setting oneself up as God. 'You do what I demand of you!' One is perfectly free to choose such a path, but is just as bound to encounter the results of such a choice. No I am not talking 'hell.' I am talking what others seem these days to call 'karma.' Or as a past Archbishop of Canterbury said 20 years or so ago, you were in your face, if you are over 40, the nature of the choices you have made before that time. We wear our choices, sometimes to a terrible extent. It is not God's judgement; it is my folly.

The second alternative is Christ-like. Do NOT read that as meaning 'religious,' for I lay no claim to being that, not would I want to. Christ came as Saviour, certainly, and as Servant. In other words, as Philippians 2 has it, he lived the complete opposite of Adam. Self-giving, other-serving, caring, loving, risking life – so different that few leaders are ever game to follow that path of reconciliation.

That should be enough to ponder for a while. Feel free to come back at me, but I suspect that – like most Biblical stories, parables, myths or whatever, – they will come with their own stunning impact. A final story:

It was the day of our engagement party, and my soon-to-be father in law came with his boozy mates into the dining room where I was waiting. With some warm malice aforethought, Syd asked the question: "Ron, if Adam and Eve were the first two people on earth, where did their sons get wives to marry?" The men thought that they had me, with nowhere to hide. 'Syd,' I responded as gently as I could, 'That story is not history, it did not actually happen. It is a parable, a myth, designed to help us understand something about ourselves and about life.'

There was a shocked moment. Those three men, far from being Churchies, knew enough of the story to change their mocking disregard of the tale into something that blew up in their face, so to speak. In fact, I often

wonder whether that may have been a starting point for Syd who later became quite ill, and gave himself the chance to think about things somewhat. He even had the local Vicar call regularly.

Sunday 13th March, 2011

First Sunday in Lent

Sentence

We do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God *Matt. 4:4*

Collect

O Lord, Who for our sake fasted forty days and forty nights; give us grace to use such abstinence that, our flesh being subdued to the spirit, we may ever obey Your godly will in justice and true holiness; to Your honour and glory, Who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Genesis 2: 15 – 17, & 3: 1 – 7

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

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 that 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 eyes on you and give you counsel.
Be not like horse and mule that have no understanding: whose forward course must be curbed with 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.

Epistle

Romans 5: 12 – 21

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned-- sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For

the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification.

If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

GOSPEL

Matthew 4: 1 – 11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

© New Revised Standard Version of the Bible

Copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, and used by permission. All rights reserved

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

I am still surprised – in fact I am appalled! – that there remain modern Christians who strive to keep a literal view of the Creation Stories, convinced that they are being true to the Faith and to God. I have spent the past 50 years asking such folk to look past their strange loyalty, if only on the grounds that the original owners of the stories have never done so themselves. Almost all of the real point is lost when retaining literalism. Similar difficulties present themselves in today's Epistle as well.

However, on such a Sunday as today it is well worth the recall to come again to the foundational expression of both what is wrong with so much of life and where the cause and responsibility for it lies. This ancient legend contains a stunning evaluation of where so much *angst* emerges, and even points to the remedy. What is so hugely sad is the extent to which this evaluation is neither explored nor tested by the vast majority of humans, *including* rather too many Christians.

The story of the Fall is not some sort of past history. It is a tale that helps me to understand me – as well as you. It must have been the result of a lot of thought, prayer and assessment by people long gone, but who in spite of their early existence in terms of human history, began to understand so much of the roots of human volition. It has nothing to do with apples or any other fruit. It has everything to do with human motives. *For anyone who would like to explore this further, my Notes on Genesis are available via email.*

Sadly these notes need to be somewhat short-hand. Suffice to say that this tale conveys the harsh reality that temptation lies, quite simply and devastatingly in our terribly human refusal to be human and determination to be gods. By that is meant that common human trait of determining to get on top of whoever else is around. Add to that the capacity to enforce my will on to you. As the story unfolds here in Genesis 3, there is that tragic outcome portrayed, first by the sense of isolation mostly self-imposed, the sense of being God-forsaken (which soon proves unfounded!) and the Cain and Abel saga that underlines the second-stage rebellion that leads to murder, or destroying the 'opposition.'

(It can never be said that Scripture attributes 'sin' to someone in history's ancient past. Had that been the case, then any responsibility that I have is removed: I am reduced to a puppet on a string in that regard.)

Here lies a tremendous contribution to human self-understanding, and one – dare I say it – that remains valid even for those who deny the existence of God. *I am human; I am responsible.* And that is a 'pill' that few moderns would wish to take.

Psalm

It may come as some surprise that this psalm, also, has a great contribution to make to the balance of present-day human sanity. The process remains the same for believers or on-believers. This ancient worthy was making the point that when he faced the truth of his own short-comings, that provided a means of moving on from there, rather than hiding from them himself, and trying to hide them from others.

I have found it strange that lots of Anglicans had not realized the point, purpose and value of the Confession and Absolution in so many of our regular services. That point is not to relegate you to the state of a cringing sinner, but to offer the opportunity to acknowledge, if only to yourself, that you have issues that need attention. As this old worthy experienced, the relief in so doing is tangible and redemptive. It is only when I am honest, particularly with myself, that I can cope with who I am, and from that can cope rather better with you, too!!!

Epistle

I have great sympathy with people who find St. Paul's argument rather difficult to follow. Mind you, there was a time when he really made sense to me, but that was nearly half a century ago. One is left wondering how Paul understood 'Adam,' and I have to confess that I do not see the distinction Paul makes between 'the free gift and the trespass.' Both have the capacity to affect all humans, both Gospel and sin. The outcomes of course are totally different.

GOSPEL

Most readers of these notes will have travelled this path before. Reference to previous years' notes will uncover all that. And it must be added that this incident in Jesus' ministry was not to prove Him sinless, but to show that path He travelled to ensure that His life and ministry was not rendered invalid by following the Adamic pattern.

For the sake of anyone who has not travelled that path, I repeat previous commentary:

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?

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. 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 a rather mindless multitude. Shoot me down if you like, but what has any singer, or dancer or ever sportsman really done for you and others? Jesus was not stupid, and knew that if He started out that way, it may begin with the pinnacle, but would have to expand into ever more stupid and risky procedures. And in what way does that process ever get anyone to think or love their neighbour.

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

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

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

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

In the light of the comment made at the start of the other option for today, may I offer an alternative sermon – this time bouncing off the Genesis story of the Fall. It is only recently that I heard from a person who has been freed from the perceived necessity of understanding the stories literally, and he was astounded at the way the very familiar tale almost blew up in his head. Hopefully the same may occur from this – if you have not travelled this way before. I have long suffered from holy ones who determine to be true to the Bible, and refuse any other approach than literal. What they do not realize is that they tend to make nonsense of the stories, and --- dare I suggest it – they make God out to be a bit of a dill.

From the beginning, people of faith or no faith need to understand that these Creation Stories were not composed nor written for an audience that was naïve, stupid or gullible. Whilst people in those early days may well have needed stories rather than ‘theology,’ than only meant they were like most others of the time.

These stories were, in fact, designed to convey the possibility of a choice in understanding what it meant then (and now) to be a human alive and pondering meaning on planet earth. (I am cheeky enough to suggest that a reason for so many in our culture who have rejected this option have finished up with none. Small wonder there is so much confusion and baloney in our day and age.

In fact, these Creation Stories, stand on the shoulders of other and previous ‘dream time stories’ (if you can cope with that idea,) – a factor most visible in Genesis 1:1 did you know. In a world then of many hundreds of choices of gods, goddesses, wizards, warlocks and other various pretend divinities, this pointed up a search that would meet everyone at their deepest level. Here is no dogmatic outline, to be believed against all odds: this is a question being offered to you, on the basis that it might, perhaps should, give you something to go on. The more I discover in this ancient quest, the more I stand amazed at the wisdom of whoever it was in generations so long past that offered a series of tales so telling and so profound, that actually leaves modern psychology in its wake, actually.

So this is to be pondered, tossed around, questioned and then understood. It may well be that your best teacher in understanding this series may be some of Jewish faith. (Mind you, said Jewish people may, if my experience with them is anything to go by, will assure you that three Jewish people may well come up with about twelve different ways of looking at it. *My best suggestion is to find and read David Kossoff.*

The passage set for today is in two parts, the first section is part of the second Creation Story with its focus on humanity itself. It may well help to understand that ‘adam’ in Hebrew actually means, not a person, but humanity, or even closer: ‘adam’ is made up of ‘ish’ and ‘ishsha’ – male and female. And one does not ‘get’ adam until both male and female are present and together. Did you know that if you take this second creation story in this section through to the end of Chapter 2, that actually it had to stem from rather later in Jewish history, *for it reads as a complete rebuttal of the patriarchal society where women were mere chattels. It is really explosive. The imagery is powerful – and was intended to be!*

But it is the sin business that really stokes the fires. Have you been long imbued with the Christian idea that we all sin because of Adam? He mucked it all up and we are left with the consequences! Quite some correction is required before you travel that path.

Note, and note well: *this tale is not about someone from a distant past* – it is description of you and of every human who has walked this earth. It is designed to help you understand yourself, and more importantly, to catch sight of at least some of the answer to the question which is ‘if God made the world to be so good, where has the stuff-up come from?’ And sorry, this part of the passage suggests that answer indicates ‘that is you; and me; and everyone else who share the responsibility.

If you would like another culture shock, Chapter 4 points up the second stage of human capacity for evil, *and it still comes from us. Cain and Abel. Not a pretty sight.*

Now as we come to the crunch, do not get led astray like so much of the Church over the earlier centuries. The problem was not Eve in the story; the problem was not sex; so what was it? And it certainly was not about apples.

It is a simple tale, told to underline how we humans make foolish choices, try to avoid the issues, avoid the responsibilities, and thus miss the lesson there to be learnt. There they are, the three factors in the story, man, woman and snake. Now not many people find snakes all that attractive, and that included most Jewish folk, I gather. Fewer still have ever heard snakes talk! Those sorts of inserts in the story were designed, from the beginning, to

ensure that NO ONE ever took things literally. Snakes are sneaky things and can be deadly dangerous. So in Hebrew thoughts, snakes represent danger, disaster, evil.

So there were our two characters in the story, given all they need to grow and flourish – and with a few sharp edges thrown in, for life tends to be like that, eh? Choices, decisions. Helmut Thielicke in his own 'The World Began' has a chapter titled, 'Man, the Risk of God.' But, is this not true, for us – like ruminants, – the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence, and when someone says you cannot or ought not, you and I are ever ready to overstep the mark.

Temptation does not, repeat not stem from outside you. Now does it! (Statement, not question.) Temptation stems from within. So don't blame the snake; it is human greedy eyes and hearts – as the story-teller was very aware. Satan does not tempt you; in fact, in Biblical terms, Satan (and by whatever other name) is your capacity and mine to move towards evil, and whatever gets me over the top of you. Human evil. Boom!

Then notice how the lies begin to fly around. 'You shall not die!' You have been led up a garden path; you are not going to believe that '#\$%^&, are you?' The questions arise in order for me to justify whatever course of action that I will decide. Damn the facts; let's have the spin. *Politicians, amongst others, are rather well-skilled at this, not outright lies perhaps, but that spin that drives you mad.*

And when you do surrender to that urge, you tend to make sure that you are not alone in it: you make sure someone else is there to cop the flak with you, if it all comes out. In the tale, it was the woman who decided to eat, but made sure that Adam of the story is right there in the pooh with her.

The only and sad outcome of the mischief is the creation of the great divide between 'Adam' and 'Eve.' They discovered that they were naked! It has nothing to do with sex or gender: it has everything to do with hiding from each other out of shame, or being lumbered with the blame. Does this describe you, or does this describe you?

Two aspects that stem from a little further on in the tale:

When in the story, the two were walking in the garden after the event, God was looking for them, not to punish but to meet. It was they who felt the guilt: God felt the longing. No harsh judgement, do you see? Just concern, like a disappointed parent.

And stop a moment or two to see where Adam, in this tale, attributes the blame. 'The woman you gave me, she beguiled me and I ate.' Ponder a moment, for most need to take ten: where does Adam lay the blame? No, not on the woman, but on God. What a twit! Still lying his little heart out and doing what so many still do when things don't go their way. *God is at fault. And most of the time, a God such people do not consider to be existent.*

In rather non-Biblical terms, it can be said that Scripture posits two basic approaches to life; the first is Adamic, self-centred, self-obsessed and God-denying in the end. Perhaps that might be put better if I suggest this path is setting oneself up as God. 'You do what I demand of you!' One is perfectly free to choose such a path, but is just as bound to encounter the results of such a choice. No I am not talking 'hell.' I am talking what others seem these days to call 'karma.' Or as a past Archbishop of Canterbury said 20 years or so ago, you were in your face, if you are over 40, the nature of the choices you have made before that time. We wear our choices, sometimes to a terrible extent. It is not God's judgement; it is my folly.

The second alternative is Christ-like. Do NOT read that as meaning 'religious,' for I lay no claim to being that, not would I want to. Christ came as Saviour, certainly, and as Servant. In other words, as Philippians 2 has it, he lived the complete opposite of Adam. Self-giving, other-serving, caring, loving, risking life – so different that few leaders are ever game to follow that path of reconciliation.

That should be enough to ponder for a while. Feel free to come back at me, but I suspect that – like most Biblical stories, parables, myths or whatever, – they will come with their own stunning impact. A final story:

It was the day of our engagement party, and my soon-to-be father in law came with his boozy mates into the dining room where I was waiting. With some warm malice aforethought, Syd asked the question: "Ron, if Adam and Eve were the first two people on earth, where did their sons get wives to marry?" The men thought that they had me, with nowhere to hide. 'Syd,' I responded as gently as I could, 'That story is not history, it did not actually happen. It is a parable, a myth, designed to help us understand something about ourselves and about life.'

There was a shocked moment. Those three men, far from being Churchies, knew enough of the story to change their mocking disregard of the tale into something that blew up in their face, so to speak. In fact, I often

wonder whether that may have been a starting point for Syd who later became quite ill, and gave himself the chance to think about things somewhat. He even had the local Vicar call regularly.

Sunday 20th March, 2011

Second Sunday in Lent

Sentence

God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life.

John 3: 16

Collect

Remember O Lord, what You have wrought in us and not what we deserve; and as You have called us to Your service, make us worthy of our calling, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Genesis 12: 1 – 4

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Psalm

121

I will lift my eyes to the hills: but where shall I find help?
My help comes from the Lord: Who has made heaven and earth
He will not suffer your foot to stumble: and He Who watches over you will not sleep
Be sure He Who has charge of Israel: will neither slumber nor sleep
The Lord Himself is your keeper: the Lord is your defence upon your right hand
The sun shall not strike you by day: nor shall the moon by night
The Lord will defend you from all evil: it is He Who will guard your life
The Lord will defend your going out and your coming in: from this time forward for evermore.

Epistle

Romans 4: 1 – 5, & 13 - 17

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")- -in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

GOSPEL

John 3: 1 – 17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where

it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

So this is where history, cold hard history begins in the Hebrew Scriptures. Whilst some before Abram were real, this man is the start of it all. And it is a fascinating picture to unravel.

Please realize, if you will, that here is a person from the Tigris-Euphrates Valley who started the process of Judaism and then Christianity. One must add that Islam as well sees its roots right here.

It is almost certain that Abram began life as a moon-worshipper, or similar, growing up where he did. And one has a sneaky suspicion that the call of God came to this man because he was of inquisitive and exploratory mind and heart, and had lost credibility with his existing religion. It strikes me that the Lord is ever on the lookout for questioners, *and sadly, the history of the Church in dealing with such folk is not the best by any means.*

Two thoughts: 1. Were it not for Abraham, how long would God have had to wait for someone to respond.?

Thought 2. How many other Abrahams have been 'tapped on the shoulder' -- and not responded?

Thanks heavens for such a person, eh!

Psalm

Perhaps it is the very familiarity with this psalm that had reduced its value for me, or maybe I am simply too cynical. Whilst I delight in having a God Who takes interest in each of us and encourages us, I have never found that He stops me dropping myself into a mess. Simply, I feel that this author has over-simplified the reality, although it is a heart-warming thing.

Epistle

Pardon me, but this strikes me as a very convoluted argument, which stems most likely from the Pharisaic background in which Paul grew up. It would seem to me that Abraham's response to God had rather little to do either with works or law. It had rather more to do with the nature of his search. His was a sticking-out-of-the-neck sort of situation, a sort of dipping in of toes to see what was next. And that is an important part of the Hebrew genius in the continuing search. As far as I can see, there was very little, initially at least, of the dogmatic in Hebrew religion, and very much a matter of finding out from real life and experience whether the growing and developing faith was big enough to fit life, let alone to discover the nature of God.

Once again I offer you the freedom to shoot me down if you think otherwise.

GOSPEL

Here we go again, for I suspect that this is one of the most abused and misunderstood passages of Scripture by those who limit this to their version of 'being born again.' How many decades have I wondered why people have turned 'being accepted by Christ' into 'accepting Him, and this being the pattern *par excellence*.

Can we look at the story openly?

First of all, when Jesus – or John! – talks about the Kingdom of God, they are not talking 'heaven.' The Kingdom of God is the rule, the pattern, the modus operandi of those who choose to live in Jesus' way. And that choice involves a radically different mode of operation, very different from the normal human way.

Dear old Nicodemus. The silent and somewhat hidden disciple. And perhaps he needed to be. But he was a long way off understanding as he should, even as a Jew. Oblique questions resulted in direct answers from Jesus!

That business of being born again (or from above or whatever) had absolutely nothing to do with some religious fervent experience, but – as Nicodemus clearly understood – a totally new beginning or outlook or attitude. It amounts to the leopard actually changing his spots. Small wonder that Nico was bemused! How in the name of

fortune can that happen? A person is the present result of a lifetime of decisions and experiences, as well as a lot of baggage.

It is fascinating that our Lord pointed to *pneuma*, wind, spirit, breath. One of the aspects of Hebrew Scriptures that constantly recurs is precisely that business of 'Spirit.' The Genesis story has it right from the start; the Wisdom literature gives it another name; and Ezekiel has a glorious example of breath and renewal. So Jesus was quite taken aback to discover that a Jewish leader should not be aware or responsive to what we call the third person of the Trinity. Being open to the Spirit of God is to find the way to this newness of life, this kingdom.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

Have you ever pondered quite what is 'faith?' Is it something you believe in or the fact that you do? Is it some sort of quality without which you cannot claim to be Christian? One of the difficulties in this most materialistic of ages is that the intangible things are less recognisable by Generations X and Y, and that is sad. This is not because there is something wrong with intangibles; the problem lies with us humans, I am sure.

We have a couple of rather interesting examples of faith in today's readings, and whilst the source of them may be somewhat old, if not old-fashioned, I suspect we moderns need to be reminded or reassured that everything old is new again, or certainly can be. Faith then.

For me, dear old Abraham is the example *par excellence*, of a faithful person. By that I do not mean 'religious,' but rather, real. Honest. Searching and looking for answers that stand up to the test of life and time. Just take a look for a while.

As I have written in the notes above, Abraham would have started off life as someone you may well regard as pagan, which is not all that fair to say in this politically correct (and often stupid!) climate. A moon worshipper almost certainly, and well involved in that cultus. As subsequent reports would suggest, he may well have been involved in child sacrifice, or at least tolerated it. However, the real point to notice as we watch proceedings, is that he was not satisfied with it as a religion, as an explanation of the meaning and purpose of life. So he was on the look-out for something better, something more in tune with reality. He was inquisitive. He was an asked of questions. (I remember as a young teenage raising questions of the Faith with my then Rector, and being told to 'shut up and believe.' That was supposed to be faith? I think not!!!!)

Thank God that Abraham began that pilgrimage not only for himself but also for the rest of humanity – for make no mistake, the Biblical record makes it quite clear that this bloke was to become progenitor not only for his family, not only for the Jews, but for the entire population of this planet. He was to become a blessing to all people.

And how did all this unfold? That itself is interesting, and in spite of Paul trying to make it somewhat convoluted, it unfolded through the very ordinary business of this person's life. Mistakes were made, and great discoveries uncovered. Good things and less than good. Even some lousy things, shameful things, became stepping stones in that family's pilgrimage. And the further they went, the more they understood of the nature of the God Who was calling them. *And that process has continued right through all the generations, except when rather short-sighted humans (many of them clergy!) tried to put a stop to the development.*

That is faith; a questioning, growing, exploring, pilgrimage. And when pilgrimage stops and being settled takes over, things become quite flat. Do not be concerned at the present, apparently threatening time when life seems to be hard for Christians. This is what happens when 'settled' stops and pilgrimage restarts, *and that can only be great.*

Then there is the greater focus on faith as illustrated in the Gospel today. If you have read the notes above, it can avoid some repetition. Faith, in the broader sense of the word, can be a fairly vague sort of thing. It can run from a strained hope that something will occur, even a nonsensical matter, to a profound conviction based on sound evidence. That does not need to be proof, but occasionally it can be quite close to that. However, it must have reality behind it. Otherwise it is little more than superstition, is it not. *Deal or No Deal* talks a lot about faith – *but that is a groundless thing, based only on chance!*

In Nicodemus' case, it was a matter of heading out way beyond that man's comfort zone, and apparently beyond where he had even thought prior to his encounter with Jesus. He had obviously been a religious man, and also had thought a lot about life and its realities. He was profoundly aware of the very low likelihood of a person changing their characteristics and actions: he had seen too much – perhaps even in himself.

But he had operated from outside what has always been quite something of the Jewish Faith. Sadly, 'religion' can be the very stumbling-block for progress, because religionists tend to be very conservative. On the other hand, from quite early in the peace, Biblical thinkers had moved past the traditional to the remarkable progressive. Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of Dry Bones is a stunning presentation of the view that people's lives can be changed when they are open to the Spirit, open to movement, open to change. (Now I would be conservative enough to add that – in my experience – this Spirit-driven change is not some sort of psychological or emotional outburst, but a very much deeper change of direction, change of heart, mind and will. I have long been suspicious of so-called 'spiritual experiences' that become sources of great embarrassment to the person as time goes by.²

Nicodemus was painfully aware of our human unwillingness, if not outright incapacity to change – and yet the possibility is there, thankfully. And it may take time to work through.

In spite of atheists and other sceptics, faith at this level is not superstitious or destructive. It is remarkably productive and beneficial, and that will show in quite easily establishable and valued ways. However, it does need to show itself as permanent, rather than flash-in-the-pan. That latter does far more harm than good.

² My experiences with Billy Graham Crusades over decades has tended to produce my scepticism.

Sentence

‘The water that I give will become in you a spring of water, welling up to eternal life.’ *John 4:14*

Collect

O God, the fountain of life, to a humanity parched with thirst You offer the living water that springs from the Rock, our Saviour Jesus Christ; stir up within Your people the gift of Your Spirit, that we may profess our faith with freshness, and announce with joy the wonder of Your love. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Exodus 17: 1 – 7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Psalm

95

O come let us sing out to the Lord: let us shout in triumph to the Lord our Rock
 Let us come before His face with thanksgiving: and cry out to Him joyfully in psalms
 For the Lord is a great God: and a great king above all gods.
 In His hands are the depths of the earth: and the peaks of the mountains are His also
 The sea is His and He made it: His hands moulded the dry land
 Come. Let us worship and fall down: and kneel before the Lord our Maker
 For He is the Lord our God: we are His people and the sheep of His hands

Today if only you would hear His voice – ‘Do not harden your hearts as at Meribah: as on that day at Massah in the wilderness

When Your forebears tested Me: put me to the proof, though they had seen My works

Forty years long I loathed that generation and said: ‘It is a people who err in their hearts, for they have not known My ways

Of Whom I swore in My wrath: They shall not enter My rest³

Epistle

Romans 5: 1 – 11

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his

³ For ‘rest’ read *sabbath*

life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

GOSPEL

John 4: 5 – 42

Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour."

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world."

© New Revised Standard Version of the Bible
Copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the
Churches of Christ in the USA, and used by permission. All rights reserved

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

There is always more in the Biblical accounts than tends to meet the modern eye. It is always important to 'read the fine print,' so to speak. A couple of matters are worth exploring:

1. The need for water is underlined as more important than just the physical requirement for survival, though it is that as well of course
2. The constant complaint of the Israelites that they had left behind not so much the slavery as the lack of rich foods.
3. And most to the point, note the place to which Moses was directed. It was Horeb, Mount Sinai the place where the Decalogue was given, and even the Law is associated with refreshment.

Note also how Psalm 95 underlines the tension and ugliness of this incident – and the memory Israel retained long after of the bitterness of the dispute. Who would ever want to be a Moses?

Psalm

This Psalm was always set for Morning Prayer – a seldom used office these days, sadly enough. On the one hand there is great delight expressed in the worshipful psalm, and on the other, the bitterness recalled as Israel was always the reluctant recipient of salvation. ‘Salvation’ in early Biblical terms was always seen in terms of ‘room to move and grow,’ the opposite of the bitter slavery to which the Jews were under in Egypt.

Epistle

This passage shows up the NT equivalent, if you will, of the Exodus redemption. In fact, the Bible contains three examples of redemption: the Exodus, the Exile and the Cross. Each successive event took people further into the significance of what is salvation and where it takes one. And there is no hiding the likely hardships along the way. Discipleship, Old Testament or New, offers no bed of roses, or escape from reality. Notice the fascinating ‘steps and stairs’ of growth through hardship. In fact, there is no other way I know of to grow and mature than by working one’s way through all manner of difficulty. Easy living produces nothing but poor fruit!

GOSPEL

The Woman of Samaria.

I know of no short and easy way of unpacking this fascinating incident in the ministry of Jesus. Not only does it portray Jesus’ refreshing and true response to humans of whatever nature, but also His great capacity of working through all manner of encounters, leaving people a means of understanding both themselves and the faith far more realistically. Here is Gospel of word and action.

This lady of the night had gone to the well in the heat of the day, certain of encountering absolutely no one there. Only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun, so to speak. It would have been to her great shock and horror that, not only was she not alone, but there was a Jewish bloke there. She must have had a thick skin to keep moving to the well, as all she could expect would be mouthfuls of abuse or worse from such a man. The greatest surprise was that she did not. Jesus – as usual – ignored the usual Jew-Gentile hatreds.

Have you realised how disarming it would have been to have had Jesus actually put himself under an obligation to you, if you were in her shoes? It must have been breath-taking for her! No abuse; a request for help! Small wonder that this most interesting of conversations began. And – in quite usual Jewish manner, Jesus employed a subtle *double entendre* - not risqué but strong, about water. South Australians are aware of the value and importance of water, and anyone even slightly associated with the Outback is extremely aware. I know from experience: no water means not-so-slow death in high summer. Not a pretty sight.

As the conversation progressed it is noteworthy to consider how things operated. She would raise an issue, Jesus would respond and she would retreat. That, until He asked about her husband. That of course raised the question of her progressive polygamy, so to speak. She was the red light district of Sychar, and yet it was not that that raised Jesus’ interest. She was caught up in the widening vision of things, and that was the trigger for all the growth to come.

The interval following the return of the disciples from the local McDonald’s was full of surprises for the Twelve. What in the name of fortune brought about Jesus’ involvement with the scarlet woman? And what did He mean about bread that they knew not of. The real surprise for everyone except Jesus and the woman was that the whole situation in that town was revolutionised. In spite of her low and questionable occupation, -- which almost certainly would have involved many of the local men, let’s face it – all concerned had the opportunity to leave behind a tawdry past and move towards a far more forgiving and saved future. Salvation here shows up as the old ‘room to move’ scenario, but room to move past a forbidding past.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I am going to cheat a little here, and on the basis of the long-drawn-out notes, consider that you have enough to build any number of sermons.