

**Sentence**

Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd; I know My own and My own know Me." *John 10:14*

**Collect**

Jesus, Good Shepherd of the sheep, by Whom the lost are sought and guided into the fold: feed us and we shall be satisfied, heal us and we shall be whole, and lead us so that we may be with You, where You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

**FIRST LESSON**

**Acts 4: 5 – 12**

**PSALM**

**23**

**EPISTLE**

**1 John 3:16 – 24**

**GOSPEL**

**John 10:11-18**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

For most of modern western people, the imagery of the shepherd is utterly foreign to their view and experience of life. While it is not hard to pick up on this imagery, most of the nuances would be lost for no one in our culture (except perhaps for the grazier) can really relate to the harshness of the life of the shepherd. In what was until recently my own part of the country, its past history has some ghastly stories of shepherds here, before fences and with an often antagonistic<sup>1</sup> indigenous population. There is nothing either soft or romantic about the life and work of a shepherd and never has been. It was nothing but long and continual slog.

**FIRST LESSON**

I remember, not long ago, hearing a short talk by a minister, as he talked about the Magi – who came to acknowledge the truth that the truth-holders, the Jews, failed to recognize. Both that preacher and I would underline that this same capacity of avoiding the evidence and hence the truth, is not limited to Jews for it is a far-too-common human failure. That is the issue underlined here. And I have to say that that particular issue is aligned with another one.

I have lost count of the number of debates I have had with the most eager of Christians, who seem to rejoice in the final verse of this passage. Their myopic vision would have it that there is no other salvation than via their remarkably narrow vision of Jesus. The reality is rather more inclusive. What Jesus had come to bring is radically different approach to life, to relationships and to restoration. Through forgiveness, certainly, through integrity, through love and through justice, life can become what it was designed to be. And anyone who catches sight of the reality - within whatever culture or religion - has 'come to the Father by Me.' *Never lose sight of that.*

The imagery, also, of the stone that the builders rejected is a remarkably common in, in Old Testament as much as New. You will find reference to this image in the Psalms, and repeated in the Prophets. Part of the huge irony is – and remains – that the very People of God who should be aware of what is true and what is false, tend to be the very ones who avoid that reality .... And wonder why they are in line for rejection themselves.

**Psalm**

I doubt if I can offer any thoughts on this Psalm that you have not encountered before. I find it sad, actually, that this Psalm has become so familiar that for most people it is a case of in one ear and out the other. Familiarity *can* breed contempt. May I suggest that you ponder each line, not only for you in your situation, but also for people at the time this was written? *A similar exercise with the Lord's Prayer may likewise produce some valuable thoughts.*

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<sup>1</sup> And often with good and solid reason, let it be observed.

## Epistle

In this period of history when the wide world has become a global village, it is more than used to be necessary to take John's words to heart. We must get way past that view of the Faith that sees it as little more than an escape from responsibility for sin and the certainty of life hereafter. That bland and pathetic view of the Faith has done more than enough damage.

Two particular matters seem to hit me: and the **first** is love. If there is one huge and vast lack in today's world, at whatever level you like to ponder, it is lack of love. And the outcome of that lack is increasingly obvious. Everyone is aware of the need of it; but few people actually express it.

The **second** matter is of **conscience**. Somehow or other, this utterly common human capacity seems to be disregarded totally. It takes no imagination to see where that lack takes us all.

So, the action of Christ, in His life, death and resurrection is NOT for me to **revel** in, but for us all to be most grateful for and to **emulate**. Knowing we are loved by God MUST lead us to a deep and abiding love for our fellow humans, and more often than not, this is a powerful challenge indeed. Christ loved the unlovely and died for them (us!) *and we in turn must give our lives for our fellow-Christians<sup>2</sup>* and fellow humans. It was only as Christ's self-giving was incarnated, in the real world, that it became visible, tangible, followable. And the same process has to happen for people around us to see, feel and touch, what Jesus was on about. Anything less than that is mockery. *And for the purists, this is no attempt to return to 'salvation by works.*

## Gospel

Now perhaps we have prepared ourselves to see a wider dimension in this stunning imagery of Jesus as shepherd. He is where the rubber hits the road; He is the One Who gets His hands dirty. He is the One Who leads the way and offers the example. Ponder that a while, if you will. 'Other sheep I have.' I recall, in my youth, asking my parish priest if this meant Jesus was thinking about people in other galaxies, but that really only led me to avoid facing the outsiders in my own community then. And we can still avoid the obvious. All humans (and anyone of any other part of the universe) are, *ipso facto*, my brother and sister, and I need to relate to them as I would like them to relate to me.

## Notes for a Sermon

It was ever so many years ago when a new Bishop was being installed in our Diocese, and preached at that event, as was fitting. His aim, fairly obviously, was to convey to the Diocese, and the clergy in particular, what he saw and understood as essential Gospel, in a world that even then was in fairly rapid change. I found his words and view of the Faith exhilarating, and making far more possible a real and solid contact with the people of the time and place. However, I was appalled at the time of refreshments after that service when one of my somewhat fundamentalist colleagues almost spat out his disgust at all that had been preached. In fairly predictable distaste, he thundered against 'relativist gospel' and all sorts of stuff like that. He had not listened, but had simply left his mind closed and adamant – and to my knowledge of the man, still has, nearly 40 years later.

If ever there is a verse that tends to generate such myopia, it is that last verse of the first lesson this morning. '***There is no salvation through anyone else; in all the world no other name has been granted to mankind by which we can be saved.***' And before anyone has a heart attack, I report that I do not dispute the text one little bit.

The difficulty that I do have with proponents of narrow response to this text is that they tend to miss the point. What they seem to be saying is 'that unless a person has the same view, the same experience and the same limited picture (as those folk) of what is being said here, then they are on the outer, unsaved and condemned to an eternity in Hell.' Pity the poor sods who have never even heard of Jesus, let alone have never had the same 'born again' experience.

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<sup>2</sup> This must read 'fellow humans,' surely.

I ask you to come on a journey, if you will, in this Easter Season, and enter in to what both the Season and the Biblical lessons are underlining for us. Remember though that this real Biblical stuff, both in those long past days as well as now. It is long past time that we stopped long enough to realize that there have always been thinking, wondering, and inquisitive people in every race and culture, who have wondered about this business of being human and alive in this universe. Even Monty Python had a go at that wide-ranging question. I am eternally grateful that our dear old ancestor, Abraham, did exactly that, and followed the leadings of what he discovered to be God, and encouraged his kids to do the same. What Abraham had understood about life before Haran he had largely to discard, but anyone else who has had to travel the same risky road, knows that it is no easy business to discard the familiar, even if it has proved insufficient or ineffective.

One of the rather interesting things about life and people is that those of goodwill, regardless of culture, creed or religion, look for better things in life than seem to emerge through violence, or bigotry or just plain bloody-mindedness. Through often harsh and bitter experience, they know that resolution of issues is not brought about through force, through imposition from above. We in Australia are not very familiar with such approaches to solving problems, although it seems that experience is not all that far away from any of us. Remember, the Gospel is as much for this world as it is for the world to come.

May I revert to telling a story, real life and recent, to attempt to illustrate what I am on about (and so, I dare to say, was Jesus.) I had been asked to discuss the Faith with a mature and educated man who called himself an atheist. A friend of his was concerned about this person, who had been to one of the prestigious city Colleges. The man began his tirade - as one might have expected - against what he perceived to be the uselessness of 'religion,' and its tendency to narrow itself to dogma and creed.

As the discussion raged, I had to comment that my experience had not been focussed on dogma and creed, but I did ask him to look beyond his arguments. 'What is it,' I asked him, 'that you as an atheist long for?' His answer was rapid and precise, as I expected it would be. 'When I find issues like justice and integrity the focus of people, then I will feel something useful has happened.' The poor man was surprised when I suggested to him that we are on the same side. He had never taken time to see or realize that or look past his bigotry.

'There is no other name under heaven .... by which we must be saved.' I find it tragic beyond imaginings that those who see themselves as the defenders of the real faith have so little understanding of the very Faith they profess. What Jesus holds out to a world that is in crisis, is a far more just and true way to live, to relate to each other, and to reach towards the possibilities in life and relationships that seems always to have been the Divine plan. As Paul expresses it in Philippians 2, Jesus proffers us all an alternative to the pattern of life and relationships that the Story of the Fall provides. There the imagery of the Adamic pattern is self-centred and self-protective. 'You shall be like gods' is the tempter's challenge, and it is a challenge that seems to be almost universally taken up in our day and age. The Gospel of Christ is hugely about reconciliation between humans and God, *and between humans and each other, and to miss the twin response is to emasculate the Gospel.*

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> May, 2009

Fifth Sunday of Easter

**Sentence**

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us. Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

*1 John 4:10*

**Collect**

O God, so form the minds of Your faithful people that we may love what You command and desire what You promise, so that, amid the changes and chances of this fleeting world, our hearts may there be fixed where true joys are to be found, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**FIRST LESSON**

**Acts 8: 26 – 40**

**PSALM**

**22: 26 – 32**

**Epistle**

**1 John 4: 7 - 21**

**GOSPEL**

**John 15: 1 – 8**

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

**First Lesson**

This story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch has been familiar to me since Sunday School days, and that is a long time ago now. In those early days, the appeal of the story had to do with Philip racing to catch up with the chariot. Good stuff for a young kid. Add to that the mystery of Philip's 'disappearance' straight afterwards, and you have a thriller. But most of the time, the real point of the story was lost on us kids.

The 'eunuch' business should have been enough, although one did not explain castration to kids in the 1940s and 50s. The fascinating business about this tale is the fact that here was a person of some importance in another country who would have been an outcast in the Hebrew one. And yet he was a searcher after truth, and had come to Jerusalem to join in worship and learning. He was disqualified from either interest to God or attachment to Temple and synagogue, according to the Law. But it did not seem to make a lot of difference to Philip. And thank the Lord or that.

The eunuch had (somehow) managed to be reading while driving his chariot. (I find it difficult to read in the car!) And Isaiah was the focus, Chapter 53, one of the final servant songs. And once Philip made clear to the man that Isaiah was saying, the final piece of the jigsaw fitted for that man from Ethiopia. So he was baptized.<sup>3</sup> The point of the story is that, as far as God is concerned, the person who seeks will find. And be accepted. It still took quite some time for the rest of the Infant Church to catch up with this new and apparently divisive activity ... of allowing Gentiles (and eunuchs which made it considerably worse) to be part of the People of God.

**PSALM**

Here is what appears to be a quite low-key and almost naïve psalm, from an apparently early period of Israel's history. And the words could simply pass our ears without registering. But re-run these words please. There is reference to the meek; reference to the rest of the world, and nations. There is the simply evangelical call to let the rest of the world know.

Who knows how many times this psalm will have been recited in Hebrew worship, and in Christian, without the concepts striking 'pay dirt' in the minds and hearts of worshippers. From long before the time of this psalm, the reaching out to the rest of the world was an oft-repeated but rarely acted-upon activity for the People of God. *Far easier, was it not, to remain in the holy huddle, and keep it all to oneself.*

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<sup>3</sup> Was this man the one who began the Coptic Church?

## Epistle

Here is naivety again, is you don't mind. How do you imagine that 'love' went down with the roughest of pagans when John was active? But like meekness, this business of loving and being loved was and is the most potent of all human capabilities. Mind you, this is no cloying affection, but commitment in depth.

When John talks here about God's love being 'brought to perfection,' I dare to suggest that you replace perfection with **completeness**. Perfection – in our terms – tends to have to do with being squeaky clean, whereas 'perfect' in NT terms has to do with completeness. In Christ we have all that is required, all that is necessary to see the job through. And please do see that, in the wider scheme of things, acknowledging Jesus as God's Son' is not so much a doctrinal or credal necessity: it is rather more a matter of seeing that all that Jesus represents in His life, death and resurrection, is seen as the true and complete direction that all life and living needs to head. Jesus is *telos* or goal, not the 'end.'

## Gospel

One of the sad things, in my experience, is the way in which the more keen Christians take hold of passages such as this, see it as almost exclusively spiritual or devotional, and turn it into something internal, introverted and personal. The reality is rather different.

Almost always, the Biblical picture is not so much about the individual but about the community, indeed even the entire world. And the point and purpose of the vine and branches is that it continues and widens the OT imagery of Israel as vine and vineyard. Obviously, a vineyard that produces lousy grapes – and worse wine! – is pretty useless material in the hands of the Creator.

Dwelling in Christ is not some sort of devotional exercise, but expresses belonging to Him, being His person, expressing His characteristics – by which God is glorified. And that happens when the characteristics of the Father are reflected, however dimly, in the life of the People or person of God. This is what incarnation is all about. When this is reflected in human life and intercourse, it shows up to be valid, effective and beneficent. In reality, as Jesus found, dwelling in Him is not the easiest path for a person or group to take!

## NOTES FOR A SERMON.

I wonder if I can let some of my hang-ups hang out, please? And the stimulus for this approach stems from my comments on the first lesson. It is a remarkable but very sad reflection on so many people's discipleship that whereas they may well be quite familiar with the Biblical stories, they seem to be content with knowing the story rather than drawing the implications. If that path is followed, then much of the Biblical information loses its point, purpose and power. That Ethiopian Eunuch offers a real case in point. It is a lovely and refreshing story, a sort of powerful cameo that underlined one of the great problems for the Infant Church. And bear in mind that no one comes to any point in life, without some sort of baggage, good or not so, that needs to be recognized and considered.

As mentioned in the notes, this tale was always a favourite Sunday School story, for it had all of the action and interest of a small thriller. An Important Person, riding home from Jerusalem in a chariot (and doubtless surrounded by all manner of military support, so he would not have been alone,) reading – believe it or not – as he drove. He must have had independent suspension in his chariot, would he not? And dear old Philip just happened to be in the right place at the right time.

Ethiopian = Gentile = persona non grata. Here is a nobody in Jewish eyes. Not worth attention, unless perhaps a quid might have been made out of him. Eunuch = bad karma = very damaged goods, and man-made damage at that. Not unlike a gay fellow these days. OK perhaps on the edges, but put him in charge of **nothing and no one**. Out of sight and out of mind is the easiest way to handle this very difficult precedent.

But the bloke had been to Jerusalem for the festivals, and to find out more about Judaism would you believe. How he managed to cope with trying to enter either Temple or synagogue is a question, or even

trying to handle Jewish suspicion and isolating tendencies. One gets a reasonably sound picture of the persistence of this man. And he knew where to look, obviously, in that book foreign to him, the Old Testament. Isaiah 53 was a remarkably sensible place to begin.

Now the problem arises for Philip. How accessible is the Faith for people of such a background? And is not the Faith rather exclusive? The Jewish answer would have been rapid and final. *Get lost.* So what does a Christian do, how is this sort of situation handled? Philip would have had the beginnings of a handle – and guess why. Philip is a Greek name, not a Jewish one. It means ‘horse,’ actually. And Philip was one of the deacons ordained for helping the widows and others in need. And here he is stepping right outside the parameters set by that ordination, and he has the Holy Spirit nudging him along the way. On the one hand it may well have been far easier for one already Gentile to recognise the genuineness of this searching person. But how hard is it to step over the boundaries already fairly clearly set, when it comes to Gentiles. Sure in the Acts we have the story of the Roman centurion, (next Sunday’s reading) and Philip may or may not have been sticking his neck out. And remember, this is Acts 8 and it is not until Acts 14 – and considerable debate and confusion - that the Infant Church recognised that inadequacy of the traditional ‘Biblical’ view of Gentiles, and moved towards inclusion of them, *with certain conditions applying.*

Thanks heavens that Philip acted in the way that he did, over-riding his (or others’) baggage, for this may well have been the person through whom the ancient Coptic Church had its beginnings.

In other words, here is no simple lovely story about the growth of the Christian Church, but a tale about the profound changes that were necessary for the Church to grow and move outwards. It meant the facing of pressure from conservative circles, -- and don’t conservatives of all natures know how to hang on to their precious inheritance. The reactions would have been rather more severe, one suspects, from the leaders of Temple and synagogue – and remember that the break had not yet come with Judaism.

In other words, this is an iconic account of one of the more radical, and necessary steps that the Church needed to take, without which Christianity would have remained, for a short time one suspects, a sect of Judaism, before it disappeared from history. This is remarkably powerful stuff, and the implications still need to be drawn as time passes and situations change. I dare not suggest that the implications from this story have been taken hold of yet!

In other words, as the tale of the growth of Judaism and Christianity are recorded in Scripture, one needs to know, not only the stories, but the implications for the faiths that those stories reveal. Don’t just **believe** Scripture; learn from it, understand it, grow from and in it. Most of all, stop and realize the extent to which all manner of apparent barricades had to be faced and dealt with. And the hardest part of dealing with such things is the tenacity and determination of conservative people to hang on, sometimes mindlessly, to their traditions.

That, as one past Archbishop of Sydney once said, is dribbling a bib-full! So think about it. Please.

**Sentence**

Jesus said, 'You did not choose Me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit.'

*John 15:16*

**Collect**

Loving God, Your Son has chosen us and called us to be His friends: give us grace to keep His commandments and to love one another, and to bear fruit which will abide; through Him Who is the true vine, the source of all our life, Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**FIRST LESSON**

**Acts 10: 44 – 48**

**PSALM**

**98**

**EPISTLE**

**1 John 5: 1 – 12**

**GOSPEL**

**John 15: 9 – 17**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

**First Lesson**

For anyone unfamiliar with the story of Cornelius, it would be helpful to read Acts 10 from the start, for then the fuller picture will become clear. Mind you, one needs to be aware of the fact that behind this story lies an enormous challenge to the Apostles, and Peter in particular. It was a matter of facing one's prejudices and having to come to terms with their demolition. This is never a nice experience for anyone.

We read last week about Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch; and noted then that the important man from the south would have been absolute *persona non grata* within Judaism because he had been emasculated. Such people then were about as popular as gays or HIV people have been these days.

In Peter's situation, there is a parallel. Not only were 'deviates' unwelcome; Gentiles, especially Romans, suffered the same fate. Even Cornelius, who had shown himself to be what were then called 'god-fearers,' would have been unacceptable. So people in the Infant Church were confronted with people, normally unacceptable people, wanting to be part of the People of God. And a decision had to be made. The hardest part of that decision was overcoming all the inbuilt traditional views that had been held to firmly for centuries. Such views become sacred cows, as they say. And sacred cows are defended, not logically or even theologically, but sometimes almost insanely. These are the hardest sacred cows to dislodge.

But dislodge they did, as the unfolding story of Acts reveals. And while it was not without pain and anger, the question was resolved, and *resolved against the ancient and long-held traditions*. [If that had not happened, long ago, you would not even be aware that there had been a Church. It would have disappeared within a generation or two. And so would the Gospel.]

**PSALM**

It is always a wonder to me how people can recite Psalms in Church and have not a clue what they are saying. Is this because they expect not to understand, or is it because they assume it will have nothing to do with them? Or is it because they are quite sure that it is all a block of nonsense and a waste of time really.

The sorts of sentiments expressed in this Psalm are really quite interesting and important. Here the author is rejoicing in the 'faith once delivered' in his (or her!) day and age, as it impinges on life as then lived. Mind you, there is no explosive effect, but a quiet and confident one.

What the author is rejoicing about is the fact that with God as God, a person can be sure, in the final analysis that truth will win over falsehood and justice over torts. While he may not be looking at minor issues of his time, he is certainly looking back over history as he knew it, and finding his certainties there. It is always in the real world that God is at work, but that working is never by force.

In our world, there are very many people who despair of any truth or justice, or even sense or purpose in life, so there is no room for joy, and space only for hopelessness. That cannot be so for the Christian.

## **EPISTLE**

There is little doubt that the modern reader will have quite some difficulty in being clear about what the author is on about here. Clearly, he is on about love, and God's love in particular, but when he goes on about water and blood and so on, confusion is near at hand.

Basically, John is pointing to the evidence, clear evidence, of the truth and validity of Jesus' life and ministry. The water and blood bit has to do with the fact that Jesus' ministry was in the real world and in real time. It was down to earth, and visible and testable by anyone. The triple witness evidence has to do with the Jewish concept that one witness to an event is insufficient, and even two can be misleading. Three is the effective minimum, and these the author produces. So it is love that carries the day, and few could have any disagreement or difficulty with that statement. Victory comes to the follower of Christ, because to put it in the simplest and most straightforward of terms, Jesus is the only one Who makes sense of this strange business called life. And what one has to do to establish the truth or falsehood of the Gospel is to stick their neck out and have a go. The evidence of that will establish the truth or otherwise.

## **GOSPEL**

Try putting this passage in front of your pagan friends! It looks like absolute garbage on the surface, for if ever there was a riskier way of living than to care about others, they will not know a worse one. In the world these days, it really does seem to be a matter of looking out for Number One and the rest can go to ..... wherever.

And whilst that may sound like a safe way to live and travel, it is the sort of attitude to life and others that has created the tense, dangerous and even violent world in which we live. So the Gospel may sound like sheer stupidity at first glance, but on pondering a little deeper, it is not anywhere near as silly as it sounds. In fact, it is very sensible and valuable indeed.

## **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

At the time of writing this, I have just received an email from a great mate who is having difficulty with her parish. Apparently, the real issue for people there is the lack of money and the lack of people,, which is a common enough complaint in this day and age, and one that seems to take far too much time and energy. Out of that struggle comes tensions that lead members of the congregation a long way off their target of being the Church of God. I imagine that almost every person who reads this will be aware of that issue, or may even have their noses in the air because it is a non-issue for them.

There seems to be no real answer to the problem, and for the priest especially, it can be a huge issue. What happens if there is not enough for the stipend? Etc., etc., etc. It is no great help to anyone if I was to comment that it was generally accepted 45 years ago that the parish system would have sunk under its own weight within 25 years. So we have done better than that. (Still not a lot of help?)

Let's start at the beginning, and with the sentence that is designed to be the focus from today's readings. 'You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you to go and bear fruit.' And there is both challenge and consolation in this. So let's go back to the beginning.

Imagine being a new Christian at the mid-term of the first century AD. You would be part of a congregation, but far from one organised as we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. No financial backup, and not a lot in the way of what we call infrastructure these days. Yet in spite of all that, without duly called and trained clergy, without Churches large and small, without all the history of two millennia, the tiny Church grew. Slowly, if you lived through it, but very rapidly as we look at it from this distance in time.

Now, don't get me wrong or charge me with going off with the fairies, but let's stop and think for a bit. First of all, most of us would have known exactly what we were on about as The New Way. We were aware, also, that there would be people among us who were there for the ride or the thrill, or perhaps even to undermine what was going on. That was life. We were also well aware of the fact that most of the power-brokers of the day, Jewish and Roman, and anyone anywhere else, were doing their damndest to destroy the little mob of us. And as the Empire grew in strength, and in ability to legislate opponents out of existence, we put our heads down and got on with it. And it had little to do with cold hard cash; and it had little to do with any future for paid clergy. It had everything to do with helping people get a clear hold on what we were there for. For we had discovered that love is better than hate; justice is better than ruthlessness; compassion better than putdowns, and forgiveness offered the only real way forward for people operating under repression.

In other words, all we did or even thought of doing was decided on the basis of the Gospel that we had been given. To operate any other way was to undermine ourselves and sap all the energy from within ourselves. *Methodists I have given enough for us all to ponder ..... and then change direction, eh?*

Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> May, 2009

Seventh Sunday after Easter  
Sunday after the Ascension

**Sentence**

Jesus prayed, 'Holy Father, protect them in Your Name that You have given Me, so that they may be one as we are one.'

*John 17:11*

**Collect**

Almighty God, Your blessed Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, ascended far above the heavens that He might fill all things; mercifully give us faith to trust that, as He promised, He abides with us on earth until the end of time, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.

**Amen**

**FIRST LESSON**

**Acts 1:15 – 17 & 21 – 26**

**PSALM**

**1**

**EPISTLE**

**1 John 5: 9 – 13**

**GOSPEL**

**John 17: 6 – 19**

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

*If ever you thought it was easy (a) to understand the readings and (b) to catch sight of why particular passages were chosen for a particular day, this set of readings will muck up your little expectations ever so nicely. Mind you, the Sunday after the Ascension is a far-from-easy thing to come to terms with, as it would have been for the Apostles. It was becoming a matter of sink or swim!*

**FIRST LESSON**

If you are game, try and put yourselves in the position of the Eleven. Jesus had returned to the Father and there they were, alone and somewhat rudderless. It was an awful position in which to be, but there are times when one has to be cruel to be kind. Jesus had to break free of the apron-string pulling disciples and they had to be dropped in the deep end. There is nothing like such an experience to increase a learning curve.

Mind you, I have always had a cynical turn of mind when I watch the Eleven find out what they should be doing. Their experience is echoed again and again in modern times, too. **What do you do when you do not know what to do? Form a committee and try and find an agenda.**

Can't you just imagine it? There was an obvious problem to solve, and Peter was just the man for the job. Judas had topped himself, and ruined the traditional number of chosen ones. Twelve it should be; twelve it was from time immemorial, and twelve it shall be again. It was all very Biblical and all very properly done, and Matthias was elected the ersatz Twelfth Man. *And we never hear of him again in the pages of the New Testament. Does that ring any bells for you?*<sup>4</sup>

**PSALM**

Is there any need to comment on this first and most direct of psalms? While moderns may disagree with the sentiments expressed, there can be no difficulty with what is being conveyed. It may well be that some believers find it hard to see any real evidence of the second half of the last verse, it has to be said that there have not been too many 'ungodly' people whose efforts are still cherished.

**EPISTLE**

As most of this material is repeat from last week, I will refrain from further comment.

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<sup>4</sup> If anyone filled the twelfth spot it was Paul, but that was a long way ahead in time at this point.

## GOSPEL

If you find that this High Priestly Prayer of Jesus is somewhat difficult to follow and to come to terms, then you would not be alone by any means. This soliloquy is difficult to follow, yet important to try and absorb. In fairly interesting Johannine terms, there is the contrast offered between faith and apostasy, and world and life. Perhaps the most powerful of the comparisons is between falsehood and truth. Although it may sound a little simplistic, the real issue of the Gospel is the need to respond to the truth in whatever situation one finds oneself.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

It was a conversation that really started from nothing much. We were chatting about the propensity that a lot of people seem to have these days, for a sort of faith that while appearing to be Biblical, is essentially little other than 'feel good' stuff. Actually we were talking about a fairly popular video course on the Christian Faith, and the number of people who delight, apparently, in going through the programme again and again. Little progress is ever seen in those dear people, but there is a lot of clucking and cooing.

In the notes above I have referred to the difficulty lots of people have trying to come to terms with that High Priestly Prayer of Jesus, as in today's Gospel. All that talk about making God's Name known, and belief and prayer and all sorts of religious stuff. Nice sort of territory to get involved in, and so avoid the realities of life and faith, eh!

However, it is fairly clear, is it not, that Jesus was on about His concern that those who were His disciples should remain true to the Gospel, as time went by and in spite of contrary pressure laid on them from authorities. Jesus was painfully aware of the pressure on people of faith to turn away from it. Far easier to get with the strength, and let the important issues fall by the wayside. *And that is the real point of Jesus' prayer.*

You will have had to do with people, who have made a great show of becoming Christian, and carry on for some time, then quietly fade away into the background. And you never hear of them again. I would not mind a quid for each of the number of people I have had to do with who start off very nicely and noisily – and disappear. It is not often a matter of belief or unbelief. It is often much more a matter of finding the Faith meet them *initially* at their point of need, but then offers them a challenge in directions they are not prepared to head. How would it have been if Jesus had started off with a flourish, and then faded ff into the middle distance?

*I am no longer in the world; they are still in the world.* And there lies the real issues, the hard spots, the points at which one has to face reality or get out. Obviously, in Biblical terms (or Johannine ones) the world is all that sets itself over and against Gospel and God, over and against truth and justice and integrity and compassion, about care and concern for others. Don't bother to look back to NT times to understand what Jesus was on about; look around you now. There was once a time, if you are old enough to look back to such times, when anyone in trouble had a lot of support from neighbours, family, friends. Even the local community would be supportive. Now it is a question of whether there is a quid in it for me, or not. It is a question of 'I am in control and you do what I tell you.'

The battle between those two ideologies, if you like, seems to me to be very much more significant these days than before. Sometimes, others will make you feel idiotic if you break rank to give someone a hand. And if you step outside the particular mores of your community to help someone regarded as outsider, then you may well be in all sorts of bother. It takes the strong person to cast aside the noisy protests of one's peers.

Have you ever stopped to realize the enormous risk that our Lord took when, after Crucifixion and Resurrection, He left the infant Church and its adherents, to carry on from where He left off? It was an enormous risk! It could easily have gone pear-shape, and collapsed in the sort of conflict with each other to which we humans are heir. It could have been torn into shreds as different strong characters tried to take over and control the Infant Church. It could easily have been lost in the chaos of spirituality and vagueness that

afflicted part of the Roman world as it seems to be doing worldwide these days. Whatever, simply stop and ponder the dilemma that faced Jesus as He faced the on conclusion of His earthly ministry. Jesus needed to pray about it all, and we humans needed all the prayer we could get.

Commitment is the word for it. And that is becoming rather rare in this world that worships ego and despises anyone lower on the scale. But commitment is what is needed, for the world at large let alone the Church-in-the-world, and that should give us furiously to think.

**Sentence**

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will put My spirit within you and you shall live.

*Ezekiel 36:26 et al*

**Collect**

Almighty God, You sent Your Holy Spirit to be the light and life of Your Church, open our hearts to the riches of Your grace, that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit, in love, joy and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who is alive and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Ezekiel 37: 1 – 14**

**Psalm**

**104: 26 – 36**

**For the Epistle**

**Acts 2: 1 –21**

**GOSPEL**

**John 15: 26 – 27 & 16:4b – 15**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

**Old Testament Lesson**

*Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.*

It is fascinating to see how, in days long gone, Biblical imagery became very much part of the Negro spiritual folk-lore. It is inspired and inspiring stuff, yet not as inspiring as the original has to be. One really needs to become familiar with the Old Testament prophets to realize how far ahead of their own time most of these people were.

They tended to live in a time when religion was seen in terms of ritual responses to situations and events, with little thought generally being given to responsibility of people and communities. But Ezekiel understood the need for response, and was as aware of the necessary depth of such response. It had to come from deep down inside a person; anything less was ineffective.

What is even more stunning is the perception by the prophet of the need humans have of support from outside themselves to follow the path they saw as necessary. And this is the imagery and clear picture that is offered.

Some modern Christians do not realize that the coming of the Holy Spirit long preceded Pentecost! There is also little perception that this same Spirit is and has always been at work in all humans, and all they have to do is to listen and respond.

**PSALM**

While early Israel may be criticised by some for not being scientific, there can be no criticism of their lack of imaginative observation of the natural world. Jews never made sailors at all, and seemed to be really quite fearful of the sea, but they still managed to keep an eye on it.

And they thought about it all, taking into account in their theology, all that surrounded them in life. This is something that moderns could well emulate; yet often seem fearful to do. What may come as a greater surprise is that this Psalmist seems to equate humans' experience of the spirit of God with that of the animals. In other words, the perception is that all life and creation is dependent upon the Creator. Rather more of that perception in centuries past may well have ensured no ecological downgrading would happen!

**FOR THE EPISTLE<sup>5</sup>**

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<sup>5</sup> In a footnote that may disturb some, please stop and see that John's Gospel appears to present Pentecost (or at the least the giving of the Spirit) as occurring just after the Resurrection.

It may well be old hat for many readers to hear again that there is an interesting conjunction of both Hebrew and Greek words that translate ‘spirit.’ In Hebrew, ‘ruach.’ In Greek ‘pneuma.’ And in both cases, this word can be translated as spirit, or breath or wind. And the connection – in terms of human life, - is obvious is it not. If I have no breath, I have no life either. Ichabod! My spirit has departed.

This story, surely, is as familiar as any other in the Biblical armoury, and there is small need, surely, to pick on minor issues. There is however, a need to differentiate between ‘languages’ and ‘glossolalia.’ The latter is not involved here. What this story does intend to convey is the reversal of that separation and division of tribe and language as portrayed in the tower of Babel story in Genesis. The emphasis is on restoration and reconciliation of peoples, and this is more than any other factor, miraculous or otherwise.

Both Joel and Ezekiel looked forward to this day when all people could see that the Spirit of God is at work to bring light and life to whoever will embrace it.

## **GOSPEL**

There is some remarkably powerful stuff in this passage that needs to be absorbed like one’s mother’s milk. Although the wording may sound a little mysterious to some, it is (while very Johannine!) very clear and pungent. The role of the Advocate, amongst other roles, is to point up and emphasise to (all) people where truth and justice and judgement<sup>6</sup> lie. In our present world of relatives as opposed to absolutes, such ideals tend to be regarded as passé and immature. On the other hand, it may be discovered that there is a need if not for absolutes then at least what I may call ‘generals.’ There is, and always will be, truth and avoidance of truth. And it is the latter that creates so much damage to individuals, communities and countries. It is remarkably destructive stuff.

The real point that bears emphasis, is that all this comment and commentary on the part of Jesus and of John underlines the fact that the Faith is not about vague indistinct and ‘spiritual’ issues, but is remarkably down-to-earth and tangible and relevant. More people need to see this, and then to get on with the job.

## **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

I always have quite some difficulty whenever I hear comments about the damaging effect that religion has on people and relationships. Northern Ireland used to be the focus in past years: the Middle East a more recent case in point, and just lately, Indonesia is in the wars where Christians and Muslims seem to spend time killing each other. My difficulty with the whole issue stems from the fact that it is not religion that is the problem, but severe and destructive distortions of it. This is so whether one is talking about Muslim or Christian, Catholic or Protestant – even black and white, black and black in some African areas. There are some idiots around and I suspect always will be, but they are not expressing anything but their own bigotries and biases. And such are nothing but sheer human distortions of the religions, eastern or western.

Part of the reason the damaging claims are made is, I suspect, because the assumption is that religion is all about weird and oddball stuff, with little or no connection with ordinary and down-to-earth life. I imagine that it would be (sort of) possible to claim that Pentecost panders to the mindset that looks for the oddball, but the clear and regular evidence of Scripture and Church takes us away from the weird. In fact it has to be said that all religions or any value and sense look for answers to the question what does it mean to be alive and living in this particular universe. It is all about relationships and reaching potential as humans.

Two foci I would emphasize to underline what I am trying to say. The first is encapsulated in the Epistle reading, the other is in the Gospel.

There has often been something of a fringe that loves to jump up and down about the apparent evidence of people ‘speaking in tongues’ in that passage from the Acts. The reality is nothing of the sort, and when one gets past a literal view of Scripture, something far more significant emerges.

One of the things that we fairly wooden modern Christians need to do is to come to terms with a far less literal and far more imaginative way in which various cultures respond to their ‘dream time stories.’ In

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<sup>6</sup> The Greek word is κρισις, - crisis, if you will. And crisis is always a choice that challenges to follow what is true or what is false.

Genesis, there is that opening series of chapters that conveys a stunning perception of what life could be like as compared to how it is. Part of that conveying of 'how it is' is the story of the Tower of Babel. The ancient Hebrews were –often painfully – aware of the distance apart that various cultures kept, and saw part of that cause of misunderstanding in terms of different languages and the enormous capacity for **mis**understanding that different languages create. Those ancients considered that this division and separation was as a result of human sin – perhaps better received these days if expressed as folly and sheer hardness.

What the Acts 2 story is designed to convey is not some miraculous ability of untaught people speaking in other people's languages (which is what the story says) but rather the fact that with the Holy Spirit, **all the ancient divisions can be overcome and reconciliation can be achieved.** Imagine, if you dare, a world where people would see past old bigotries and divisions to accept each other as equals, even if different. This is a line of thought that bears exploration, and could do much to enhance humanity, would it not? Here is nothing oddball or weird. It is remarkably redemptive.

The second issue emerges from today's Gospel, and is the passage that, once it burst properly on my vision, made me look very much more closely at the goals and directions of the Gospel. The passage?

***When he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin, justice, and judgement:  
about sin, because they refuse to believe in me;  
about justice, because I go to the Father when I pass from your sight;  
about judgement, because the prince of this world stands condemned.***

The real issue in life, according to this passage, is about what is right, what is true, what can be relied on, what is important. If the old Biblical words bother you, as they do for some these days, then we can easily offer a variant translation. Justice is clear enough, but judgement has all sorts of misapprehensions for many, not least Christians.

1. about sin, because they refuse to believe in me;

The issue is not, in reality, just about believing in Jesus or not. It is about seeing, and responding to whatever is the real truth about whatever situation that is being faced. Remember, and never forget, that the crucifixion of Jesus occurred because the people of the time preferred to run with the safe and known devious paths of politics and law, and to reject what they had to know was the reality of that situation. How often it is the case that truth is a casualty, and not only in warfare. Lying has become almost pandemic in our culture – which is one of the reasons for its increasing decline.

2. about justice, because I go to the Father when I pass from your sight;

Remove the 'religious' overtone of these words and look at what is being said? Those who put Jesus to death operated on the premise that their assessment of Jesus was true, or at least they left the populace in no doubt that they were boss, and shut up about the execution. Jesus 'going to the Father' was not, simplistically, His Ascension. It was a statement that Jesus was the only one who had justice on His side, the only one who had responded to and illustrated the truth. And the Ascension is seen as the vindication of that.

3. about judgement, because the prince of this world stands condemned.

As in so many of the show trials that have been held across the stretch of history, it is history which has shown where the real truth lay, where real justice prevailed, and who truly expressed it. And that was Jesus' conviction, that the unfolding of history would display, for all who cared to see, that His assessment of the realities was the true one.

The further life goes on, in the right here and now, people in this country at least are becoming increasingly concerned about real issues being faced and being dealt with with integrity, with justice, and with response to the truth. It has to be said that these are hardly traditionally 'religious' issues, but are very much issues basic to ordinary human life and relationships. As I have often said to people, I have huge difficulty when they label me 'religious' because that tends to be a smokescreen that enables people to avoid the basic issues that the Faith raises.

And as I have often said to people, this is the business of following Christ. The Faith is not a matter of believing the incredible, with the more incredible thing I believe in the more faith I am expressing. That is neither faith nor religion, but is superstition. The real Faith is far more relevant and proactive than that. And the less there is of it, the more our lives and times become damaged and bedraggled.

This may sound like a rather strange Pentecost sermon! However, I suggest that you give it some very deep thought.