

Sentence

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

1 Peter 1:3

Collect

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

Amen

First Lesson

Acts 2: 14a & 27 – 32

Peter rose to speak : "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say..... Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know-- this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

For David says concerning him, 'I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will live in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.'

Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, 'He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.' This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.

Psalm

16

Preserve me O God: for in You have I taken refuge.

I have said to the Lord, You are my Lord: and all my good depends on You.

As for those who are held holy on the earth: the other gods in whom people delight,

Though the idols are many that they run after: their offerings of blood I will not offer, nor take their name upon my lips.

The Lord is my appointed portion and my cup: You hold my lot in Your hands.

The share that has fallen to me is in pleasant places: and a fair land is my possession.

I will bless the Lord Who has given me counsel: at night also He has instructed my heart.

I have set the Lord always before me: He is at my right hand and I shall not fall.

Therefore my heart is glad and my spirit rejoices: my flesh also shall rest secure.

For You will not give me over to the power of death: nor suffer Your faithful one to see the Pit.

You will show me the path of life: in Your presence is the fullness of joy, and from Your right hand flows delights for evermore.

Epistle

1 Peter 1: 1 – 12

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace be yours in abundance. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith--being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire--may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful

search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven--things into which angels long to look!

GOSPEL

John 20: 19 – 31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

First Lesson

This section of Peter's address after the Resurrection should be very well known to all who are likely to read this. It may be best to read the entire address to get the full gist, anyhow. This recitation of the events leading up to the resurrection are interesting, especially from the point of view of the understanding of Peter (and Jewish people) of the time. There is the constant reference to Scripture and even the reference to the Psalmist as a prophet.

At the same time, Peter was not averse to laying the responsibility for Jesus' death – murder actually – right at the hands of the Jewish authorities. But there was ever the emphasis in the whole issue to the authority of God. That, seems to me, is the over-riding emphasis.

Psalm

The use of this psalm as we celebrate Easter is interesting: originally it was the outpouring of someone in the distant past who had undergone considerable trauma - and apparently at the hands of people who misunderstood the truth of the situation. It is remarkably difficult to undergo such experiences, when others are convinced that you are in the wrong – especially when your opponents may well be lying their heads off. But – at an outcome that vindicated the sufferer, there is the glad relief of praise to God: truth itself has been vindicated –as in the Resurrection of Jesus.

Epistle

It would repay some research on your part to discover quite where the Apostle Peter exercised much of his ministry. Quite some of the ground he covered was parallel to St. Paul, as both Acts and Paul's letters indicate. (One wonders whether they managed to get under one another's skins somewhat!) It is somewhat justified to regard much of Peter's ministry was to Gentiles, being as he was the first major Apostle to minister to them. Mind you, reference to the Diaspora would tend to mean the Jewish aspect of that wide spread of those people.

However the emphasis in this passage lies in Peter's recognition of the change of status, I guess one would say, of those who believed and followed Christ. It is almost flamboyant language in a way, although the author had his feet on the ground as he recognized that being a disciple in such cultures meant difficulty more often than delight.

Obviously Peter was writing to people who had not seen Christ in the flesh, though comparisons with those people who had such experience did not mean that the learning curve was any easier for those who had physical contact. *This point is quite important when considering today's Gospel.*

GOSPEL

There are two important issues to consider in this passage: the first is John's description of 'Pentecost before Pentecost.' There can be no doubt that John was doing other than almost pre-empting the Lukan version. Here the Spirit is poured out in the Eleven, and the authority of absolution given as well.

I still feel keenly to debate those who will persist in laying a failure to believe in Thomas the Twin. I always point people to consider the evidence not only of this passage, but of all the other references John makes to this disciple's responses to Jesus. In each case, Thomas shows up as the one way ahead of the other in perceiving the direction Jesus was taking, or asking the sorts of questions no one else would, for fear of revealing their inability to catch sight of what was going on. In particular, at the raising of Lazarus, Thomas was the only one aware of the enormous danger when Jesus indicated His intention to move towards Jerusalem. Even then, Thomas was prepared to go to certain death rather than break solidarity with his Master.

Here, then is the clear evidence of someone **not prepared to take someone else's word for the Resurrection.** For an issue as hugely significant as this there needs to be tangible evidence – and please note that Jesus gave it to him. Please read on:

- a. If the tale of any resurrection was not true, then absolutely nothing in life – and death – had changed one iota. So the story needed checking for that reason alone. But there is another greater reason
- b. If the resurrection is real, then all the goalposts in life have moved, all the old verities are hugely enhanced, and not only can life never be the same again, but also everyone's hopes for a new life for love, truth, justice and integrity have received such a massive endorsement that confidence, trust and assurance are guaranteed.

So please do see that this questioning of Thomas' was not a lack of faith, but a very profound awareness of the complete and utter change to life and living that Jesus' rising has made. Certainly John's Gospel makes sure that those, whoever they are, who have **not** seen and yet believe are to be honoured, but they and we too need positive reassurance of the veracity of the event, **and its significance. Never again put Thomas down.**

If you find this unconvincing, please read again right through John's Gospel. Please note that at the beginning, in his prologue to the Gospel, John makes some astounding claims about the nature and person of Jesus. However, he does not expect you to believe because John has told you. His writing goes on to provide all the evidence to establish the case, to prove those comments, chief amongst those elements are the Seven Signs for you to consider.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

For me, all of these readings provide some answers to the question that runs something like 'what do you mean by 'faith,' or 'what does it mean to believe?' And the answer to such a question is just as important now as it was back in New Testament times, or even the Old.

I have commented before a couple of times of a great banner that was put up a few short years ago in the church of a charismatic group. Whilst I am not having a shot at the group, I certainly am at the poster they displayed, *and hammered!* The poster read **'Reason and logic are the enemies of faith!'** I kid you not.

Now that might once, long ago, been something of a populist view, ---- and with all due respect it is that which encouraged non-believers to regard religionists of any sort as naïve, stupid and terribly easily led up the garden path. *And they were quite right.* In reality, that attitude needed to be turned on its head, for if it was ever a necessity to commit intellectual suicide to be a Christian then I would have departed long ago. Your Creator gave you a good dose of grey matter in there back behind your eyes for the very good reason that you are expected to use it. And whilst few humans have any difficulty with doing so in most areas of endeavour and effort, some still have considerable reticence in employing that ability when it comes to matters of the faith.

Part of that difficulty, I suspect, lies at the feet of that remarkable and very odd (to me at least) popular approach of today that seems to rely on 'feelings' to establish the sense or nonsense of anything. Emotions, surely, are the least reliable of human capacities, and it has always seemed a total nonsense to turn in that direction to find significant answers to *anything!* I can tell you a few stories about people who followed that route and ended up in disastrous outcomes.)

So why is it, when it comes to dear old Thomas, do people have shots at him for expressing the need for stable and tangible evidence of the Resurrection of Jesus?

I have long had great and profound respect for this rather little known Apostle, for the Gospel of John in particular show him to be a remarkably aware member of the Dozen, in several incidents. What followed after the end of the Acts of the Apostles¹ - whilst tradition, *with strong evidence* – has this man travelling as far as the western coast of what we call India, founding Churches along the way. Many centuries later, Christian missionaries were stunned to find the Mar Thoma Church existing and thriving 17 centuries after the resurrection. (I had the honour of knowing and working with one of their priests when I was training in College. He was quite a man!)

You will notice, if you dare, that what Thomas asked for, was granted him. Thomas, a person of his age, but not one to be swayed by others, was not prepared to take anyone else's word for something so life- and world-changing as Jesus back from the dead. Whilst we may be well aware of the story, it was a rarity back then. And the point of *Jesus'* resurrection was far, far more significant than say the raising of Lazarus. That event was simply a pointer towards this far greater thing.

And I have to go along with Thomas. He, like many before him, was an inquisitive, searching, exploring sort of person. No pat answers would satisfy this bloke. Be fair dinkum or forget it. And Jesus would have been completely aware of that capacity in the man. And the reason Thomas needed **solid** answers was because Thomas, along with Jesus, was aware that **if** the resurrection was real, *then not very much in life – or death – remained as before*. The goal posts had shifted; the entire atmosphere had been lifted. Death, and evil, and other ugly things were defeated; and the beautiful things in life were restored – love is now invincible, justice likewise. Truth can be suppressed but not destroyed. Previously, everyone's experience was that evil people could control everything, just as they had tried with Jesus' execution. **But He left them all in His wake**. And Thomas needed clear evidence that this was so. *And Jesus gave it to him. No ifs, no buts, no 'naughty man, why can't you believe?'*

So this is what faith is. Finding the truth and reality – and living one's life on the basis of that discovery. Or as I often put it to people, **'faith is the direction you take on the basis of the evidence in front of you.'**

So please put the 'doubting Thomas' business to rest.

And stand on solid ground. Apart from any other evidence, is it not so patently obvious that truth is far superior to falsehood, love superior to hatred, integrity better than its opposite? And whilst these may not be the most tangible of life issues, it does not make sense to reject them because of that.

¹ Which did you know should read 'Some Acts of Some Apostles!' The Greek title of the book is quite bare of the definite articles.

Sunday 8th May, 2011

Third Sunday of Easter

Sentence

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2: 38-9

Collect

Gracious Father, Who in Your great mercy made glad the disciples with the sight of the risen Lord; give us such awareness of His presence with us that we may be strengthened and sustained by His risen life, and serve You continually in righteousness and truth, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

First Lesson

Acts 2: 14a & 36 – 41

Peter rose to speak : “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.....Let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

Psalm

116: 1 – 4 & 11 – 18

I love the Lord, because He heard my voice: the voice of my supplication
Because He inclined His ear to me: in the day that I called to Him
The cords of death encompassed me, the snares of the grave took hold on me: I was in anguish and sorrow
Then I called upon the Name of the Lord: “O Lord, I beseech You, deliver me!”

How shall I repay the Lord: for all His benefits to me?
I will take up the cup of salvation: and call upon the Name of the Lord
I will pay my vows to the Lord: in the presence of all His people.
Grievous in the sight of the Lord: is the death of His faithful ones
O Lord, I am Your servant, Your servant and the child of Your handmaid: You have unloosed my bonds.
I will offer You a sacrifice of thanksgiving: and call upon the Name of the Lord
I will pay my vows to the Lord: in the presence of all His people.
In the courts of the house of the Lord: even in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the Lord.

Epistle

1 Peter 1: 13 – 25

Prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.

He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God. Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. For "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever." That word is the good news that was announced to you.

GOSPEL

Matthew 28: 8 – 15a

The women left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, telling them, "You must say, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day.

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

First Lesson

It is really a great pity that apparently people's patience is stretched if the entire passage of Acts 2 was set to be read in a single sitting. Had that been done, rather clearer sense would be more visible. (We really must get past the idea of hour-long services.)

The outcome of Peter's address, that mass confession of sins and their forgiveness, is worth attention. Here is no search for internal sins, so to speak, but the event needs to be seen in terms of Peter's command. 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.' That generation, not unlike our own, was one where justice, truth and integrity were covered over by absolute aversion to those qualities. When we talk of spin in government, for instance, we acknowledge the extent to which truth is being discarded. So Peter's challenge was for those people to move away from such falsehood – and what a difference to life that would have made.....

Psalm

And the Psalmist, long centuries before, was aware of the relief and 'breath of fresh air' that emerges when the ancient verities are responded to. I am amazed constantly, at the extent to which the Faith is rejected, usually on the most spurious of grounds. It is not as if the Faith is silly or shallow! The outcome of following Christ is enormously beneficial even to people around about!

Epistle

I have a sneaky suspicion that when Scripture talks about 'being holy as Your Heavenly Father is holy,' that readers think, either, that this is an impossible dream, or that they are expected to be so like God that they are out of this world. **The word 'holy' seems to have all manner of implications for us. Actually it means 'different,' different from the ordinary human.** Reference has been made before often enough of the difference between Adam and Christ. That difference is really between the self-obsessive, and self-giving. So it is all a matter of direction and emphasis. I can never be holy in terms of being pure and sinless; nor does God expect that of me. **But I can operate selflessly and in that respect, Christlike-ly.** Does that make some sense?

GOSPEL

For me, the saddest thing about this passage is the cover-up attempt on the part of the authorities to avoid the realities of the resurrection. Whenever I cover up the truth with a lie, I have precluded myself from any real response to whatever has happened. And I try to blind you as well. I might protect myself for a little while, but apart from anything else, liars need to have excellent memories – which is rarely the case. Even that will not rescue you from corners into which you paint yourself.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I am getting old so this may be somewhat dated, but on the other hand, there needs to be some movement ahead for old time pulpit-bashers. It is this business of repentance, or more particularly its abuse in some circles.

It was the funeral for a lovely faithful old soul whom I had known – at that stage – for something like 40 years. She was simple and even naïve, as was her whole family, a lovely, inoffensive person of great faith and faithfulness. Her family had belonged to an old but tiny sect of Christendom, rarely heard of at all. At one stage, in the Outback they had all been part of our Anglican congregation. When they moved in closer settlement, they also attached themselves to a charismatic group. It was a previous pastor who demanded the right to address the gathered mourners, and he did so with great panache. It was no panegyric for the deceased; it was an impassioned, old-time altar call for those present to repent and believe the Gospel. The harangue continued for some time, to the embarrassment I suspect of the then pastor of that group. It was *appalling*, and – to my mind – disgusting. However I had encountered such before, not from a small group as on that day, but in a Presbyterian funeral. Same harangue, same emotional and moral blackmail really. Also speaking at *that* funeral was a retired Bishop, brother of the deceased. He was not happy, as you might imagine.

It is that rather distorted concept of ‘repentance’ that is the issue. Do you ever read of Jesus twisting the arms of his listeners, demanding confession and repentance? No you do not. Do you encounter any resemblance of the guilt pressure from our Lord? No, you do not.

So what is repentance, and from what anyhow?

One clue (already mentioned in the notes,) stems from the first reading. And it is important to notice, for few of the ‘old time religion’ preachers see past sins other than moral. And sin is rather more encompassing than that. In fact it is very much a widespread failing.

When Peter had all those people respond to him at Pentecost, those 3,000 or more, just look at what he had to say: it was not just a matter of remembering all those naughty bits you might recall. It was a matter of ‘saving yourselves from this corrupt generation.’ The question is ‘of what was that generation corrupt?’ And with the crucifixion in particular so recent, the answer is not all that hard to find. When a society is so corrupt that it executes the innocent in place of the guilty, it is obvious that there is something rotten ‘in the State of Denmark.’

That something rotten included the Jewish hierarchy; it also included the Roman authorities; in fact one of the most appalling comments to come out of the trial of Jesus was that question of Pilate’s ‘what is truth?’ It would seem that so far had that Roman figure moved from reality that he had no idea where reality actually was. Seems it is a common experience of those who are involved in matters judicial or consular or diplomatic. Everything turns into shades of grey, and it becomes a matter, not of truth but of saving face. Spin; double-talk, or dare I call it by its plain Australian name?

This is, increasingly, the situation in which we find ourselves these days, and the slow disintegration of society and relationships displays itself. Trust goes out the window, because none of the normally valid canons of reality are visible any more. ‘Not one stone shall be left on one another.’

And that **does** require repentance. That does require a radical change of heart, of direction, of mind and intent. And that is what repentance really is. The Greek word in the New Testament is *metanoia*. Μετανοια. A turn around in mind. In direction. In intent, In action. A refusal to tamper with truth. Not only does that cover the sorts of areas we have been considering, but it also deals with more personal and private issues. When I refuse to tamper with truth, then you and the whole world of people are safe from me, and safe **with** me. *And that is a radical departure from what has become the norm.*

Repentance. It is not a matter of religious significance. It is a matter of total significance, for believer or unbeliever. And it can change the world. Bring in the Kingdom.

Ponder that for more than a moment eh!

Sunday 15th May, 2011

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Sentence

Jesus said, 'I am the Good Shepherd; the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.' *John 10.11*

Collect

God of peace, Who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make us complete in every good work to do Your will and work in us that which is pleasing in Your sight, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

First Lesson

Acts 2: 42 – 47

The disciples devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Psalm

23

The Lord is my shepherd: therefore can I lack nothing.

He will make me lie down in green pastures: and lead me beside still waters.

He will refresh my soul: and guide me in right pathways for His Name's sake.

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for You are with me, Your rod and Your staff comfort me.

You spread a table before me in the face of those who trouble me: You have anointed my head with oil and my cup shall be full.

Surely Your goodness and loving-kindness will follow me all the days of my life: and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Epistle

1 Peter 2: 1 – 10

Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation-- if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

GOSPEL

John 10: 1 – 10

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in

and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

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NOTES ON THE READINGS.

First Lesson

It may sound a little shocking, but this first move of the new people of God was towards what we would call communism. Not the atheist attempt in the USSR, -which really was not communism at all but a bastardized version of tyranny. 'All things in common, as each had need.' It was a marvellous experiment that just may have led to the poverty of the Jerusalem Church for some time into the future. But it was a marvellous and genuine attempt.

That time they spent in the Temple was interesting; first of all, their links with their spiritual roots were unbroken. Second, stop to realize that the only time they could have done so was either or both before work or after. And that indicates strong commitment eh!

It strikes me as significant that the present-day Church would not begin to consider such a move as sharing to that extent. Mind you, the very numbers of needy involved makes any such move extremely risky.

Psalm

Please note my comments the last time this Psalm was set for use.

Epistle

I am sorry if this sounds something like a lesson, but I wonder how many readers are aware of the extent to which this author has quoted from the Old Testament. If you have a word-search on your Bible programme or simply a concordance, look up words like *living stone, holy priesthood, God's own people (or peculiar people if you have a King James Bible.) Then there is cornerstone, and in the prophets, 'once you were not a people but now you are.' Once you had not received mercy, but now you have.' The implications of all this are enormous.*

And what follows comes from Exodus 19

Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ***but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.***" Small wonder that these words are often found in the Eucharistic prayers, and have always been, so what does that say to you?

Just ponder a moment. If I am a priest then it must be, not to a vacuum but to a congregation, a group of people. No people, no priesthood. So even in Exodus the People of God are called to 'priest' not just to themselves but to those in the same world where they live. So why did Israel turn its eyes only on itself?

*And that does **that** say to you?*

GOSPEL

Whenever you encounter this ovine parallels and parables, please stop a moment and think. We moderns tend to live in cities and have far too little to do with rural areas, people or their responsibilities. So lambs and sheep tend to become little soft objects all warm and fuzzy. *Forget it.* If you had been shepherd, you had a most difficult position. Lonely, dangerous sometimes, frustrating. Sheep can be idiotic or want to appear so. And the bigger the mob, often the harder the task. A shepherd was a total servant to his flock, no doubt about it. He had to find and provide fodder, water, shelter, and protection.

Now would you ponder why this particular role became the selected pattern for Jesus, and (OT again) the leaders of Israel. It began with David.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I will be hard on you this time, for with all the material above, you will have sufficient for mobs of sermons ... and exercise of imaginations

Sunday 22nd May, 2011

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Sentence

Jesus said, 'I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me.' *John 14:4*

Collect

Saving God, Who called Your Church to witness that You were in Christ reconciling the world to Yourself; help us so to proclaim the good news of Your love, that all who hear it may be reconciled to You; through Him Who died and rose again and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. **Amen**

First Lesson

Acts 7: 55 – 60

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

Psalm

31: 1 – 5 & 17 – 18

To You, O Lord, have I come for shelter: let me never be put to shame
O deliver me in Your righteousness: incline Your ear to me and be swift to save me.
Be for me a rock of refuge, a fortress to defend me: for You are my high rock and my stronghold.
Lead me and guide me for Your Name's sake: bring me out of the net that they have secretly laid for me, for You are my strength.
Into Your hands I commit my spirit: You will redeem me, O Lord God of truth

All my days are in Your hand: O deliver me from the power of my enemies, and from my persecutors
Make Your face to shine upon Your servant: and save me for Your mercy's sake.

Epistle

1 Peter 2: 11 – 25

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge. For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil.

Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honour the emperor. Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd² and guardian of your souls.

GOSPEL

John 14: 1 – 14

Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I

² Greek = επσκοπος – bishop in fact.

go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going."

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

First Lesson

This story of the execution of the first martyr, Stephen, is most moving indeed. Running against all the weight of authority that the Jewish state could muster, Stephen attested to what he knew to be true, though He also knew he ran the risk of following his Master into death. Death by stoning must have been a most hideous way to go, a long-drawn-out process of 'death by a thousand cuts,' so to speak.

Perhaps the most stunning picture in all this is that of Saul, persecutor of the faith and strict and rigid Pharisee. Part of him must have been satisfied to see Stephen meet what would have been seen as his rightful end, but note that it was not long after this event that Saul, later Paul, met his own Waterloo on the road to Damascus. I remain convinced that much of the impetus for that event near Damascus emanated from right here.

Psalm

I suspect that if you think things through as you read this, that what the psalmist is looking for is not so much a right outcome for all his troubles, but rather he looked for the vindication of God and His truth. When that happens, the benefit arrives, not for the psalmist, but for all those who were part of the conflict whatever it was. I find it far more important that God's truth be upheld, rather than my little soul and status - don't you?

Epistle

It would seem to the more cynical amongst us that these words were penned reasonably early in the first century of the Christian era. This must have been either before Nero's inglorious reign, or perhaps from somewhere rather distant from Rome. If you find difficulty with that, may I suggest that you read the New Testament epistles in order of the date of their writing, and note the gradual development and evolution on the subject first of response to rulers and other high and important ones; and then – noticeable especially in Paul's writing, about what we tend to call the Second Coming, the Parousia. In the former matter, there is a gradual development from this irenic view of political control to the more resistant Revelation of St. John. And still there are people who see Scripture as resistant to variation as the Law of the Medes and the Persians. That view will not compute with Biblical reality.

GOSPEL

For some reason this passage is often used (in Anglican liturgy at least) at funerals. That is not entirely odd, but please note that the real *sitz im leben* was when Jesus was preparing His disciples for His own departure from the scene, His crucifixion, *His 'exodus'* as the Gospel has it in the original.

John's Gospel in particular reports the increasing pressure under which Jesus laboured, to get His far-from-with-it Twelve to get in step with Him. It would seem that the men were far more prepared to rest in the glow of being disciples, blissfully unaware of the real agenda; they were happy with warm fuzzies and undisturbed sleep. John makes it quite clear the Jesus set the pace and the agenda, determined to make those men enter the real world. It was not all doom and gloom of course; but it set an huge challenge.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It is not easy for me to select what sort of sermon to offer for today, as my general aim is to proffer something that gives room for thought and particularly room for growth and development in people's Christian

pilgrimage. In the light of this, an issue has somewhat forced itself upon me as I ponder today's readings. And that issue ties in with the Sentence for today where Jesus proclaimed Himself as 'Way, Truth and Life.'

However, I suspect that what follows will be – for some – very much a hard hat and seat belt area as it may well place in front of us a difficult wall to climb. On the other hand, I suspect it may well be such 'old hat' that some may wonder why I hesitate.

So here we go

I mentioned in the Notes on the Readings something that raises its head for anyone who reads the New Testament (Old one, too, come to that) with the now-discarded view that Scripture is to be believed literally and with the clear perception that if God said something way back in the dim mists then it remains unchanged and unchangeable. I guess this is a perception that comes from the also long-discredited view that inspiration worked something like a fax machine or email, and that prophets wrote at the receiving end of the computer. (Way back when I was a kid, the parallel was neither of these 'modern' inventions but was rather that older technology – the teletype - remember punched paper tape coming out of a receiver? What will it be in centuries to come?)

Getting our feet back onto real ground, I refer to the passage in 1 Peter today where the author requires people to 'honour the Emperor' and remain as slaves.' Certainly it took Christians 18 centuries to remove slavery as a permissible way of operating, (and even more to get the gender balance corrected.) And I drew attention in the notes to the clear development of thought, conscience and conviction even during the period that saw the completion of the New Testament as we have it. As mentioned, John in *Revelation* was not afraid to draw **very** different conclusions and views of Empire and even the Parousia.³ And if you go to the trouble of reading Paul's Epistles in order of the date of their having been written, you will see very clear evidence that Paul's expectation of that event moving from the almost immediate future to quite some years, decades ahead.

So that brings me to an important issue for modern Christians who are two millennia removed from the events recorded in the New Testament. It is one of needing to see that we search the Scriptures constantly, for it is in that way that we catch rather clearer sight of what those ancient worthies were on about, understand them better, and follow them in a rather more balanced way. It is a process that I found was forced on me, not because 'times have changed,' but because as I experienced life, faith and Scripture, **my understanding of what was being conveyed made me change**. Oddly enough, on occasion it was people in congregations who got me thinking as they raised issues that – at that point – I had not even considered.

Now, if you are getting hot under the collar, may I take a pause at this stage, and underline something that is really quite critical to the discussion. That is to look at the way ancient Israel made its discoveries about God, life and existence. As Abraham made his discoveries about God only as he lived and moved and questioned and experienced, so the whole Jewish genius for understanding God and life stemmed from the same process. When one asks questions and searches for answers that stand up to the test of time, then one has a chance of discovering the truth in increasingly large proportions. *Have I told you of the time when as a young teenager, I questioned my local Rector about something not particularly important, and was told to 'shut up and just believe.' Questioning was, to that priest, a threat to his authority, which I did not realize until quite some years later. That dogmatic approach has led to the alienation of far too many people. It is not even honest.*

Now, if you are game to see the reality of all this, you will understand why those who complain about the earlier history of Israel as being far too bloody and violent **are quite right**. And Israel itself moved, if ever so slowly, away from that misperception of God and His demands. Before you get too harsh in condemning old Israel, stop and realize that even Abraham in all his glory would have left Ur of the Chaldees with all manner of baggage, religious and cultural, which he would have had to deal with as time went by. *And I dare to suggest that you, too, modern as you are, may have quite similar issues. My old Bishop from nearly 50 years ago refused to preach on 'Our Father' on the grounds that even then there were people whose experience of their fathers would have turned their insides out – do you see!*

Oddly enough, even those who are very strong on retaining their conservative views of Scripture often miss the most significant (to me at least) issues that old Israel dealt with very early in the piece. That Book of Job deals with the question that bothered the hearts and minds of people from earliest of times. Why do bad things happen to

³ The Second Coming, of course

good people? Or, is illness a punishment from God. Not too many people have taken a lot of notice of that huge debate, and even in Jesus' own time, the disciples wanted to know whose sin was responsible for that poor man being born blind. Jesus refuted that view right on the spot, did He not! The Faith had not changed, but people's perceptions were still on some side-track, unaware or unwilling to move where people had gone long before.

I have to say that one of the areas of Hebrew faith that has long delighted, even empowered my ministry, is that most remarkable of emergences, and it is that of the line of Old Testament **prophets**. My reading may not be wide enough, but I am not aware of any phenomenon like it in any other religion, philosophy or ism. How, in the name of fortune was it, that of all contemporary religions, none saw the slightest connection between their gods and goddesses and issues of truth, justice –(not revenge note!) – equity, and compassion? It astounds me to discover that people like Amos, so early in Israel's history, saw the potential for damage when people became affluent, and selfish and ugly.

It is not clear, to me at least, when the emergence of the Creation Stories came to light, but several matters in those most glorious of documents indicate similar and powerful perceptions. Israel was never a nation for what we call science; people then were content with ordinary observation even if over a long period of time. But as the justice thing was showing up with prophets, the perception of a beneficent Creator was in the viewfinder. Not only so, but those ancient worthies also saw clearly that 'ish' and ishshah' = adam, removing the slighted view of the fairer sex and seeing their equality with difference to the male of the species. That meant the end of paternalistic males, --- and we have yet to catch up with that in our own days and ages, *n'est ce pas?*

For those who may not have encountered me previously, I offer some respite. I do not require people to believe what I am saying: I ask them to **think about it**, and explore the vision. Failure to do such in any human endeavour is actually a failure to be human. Neither faith nor life is about comfort zones, eh!

Sunday 29th May, 2011

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Sentence

Jesus said 'Those who love Me will keep My word, and My Father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them.'

John 114:23

Collect

O God, You have promised for those who love You joys beyond our understanding: pour into our hearts such love for You that, loving You above all else, we may obtain Your promises that exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who is alive and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen

First Lesson

Acts 17: 22 – 31

Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him--though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

Psalm

66: 7 – 19

O bless our God, you peoples: and cause His praises to resound
Who has held our souls in life: Who has not suffered our feet to slip.
For You have proved us, O God: You have tried us as silver is tried.
You brought us into the net: You laid sharp torment on our loins.
You let our enemies ride over our heads, we went through fire and water: but You brought us into a place of liberty.
I will come into Your house with burnt-offerings: and I will pay You my vows
The vows that opened my lips: that my mouth uttered when I was in trouble.
I will offer You burnt-offerings of fattened beasts, with the sweet smoke of rams: I will sacrifice a bull and the flesh of goats
Come then and hear, all you that fear God: and I will tell you what He has done for me
I called to Him with my mouth: and His praise was on my tongue
If I had cherished wickedness in my heart: the Lord would not have heard me
But God heard me: He has heeded the voice of my prayer
Praise be to God: Who has not turned back my prayer or His steadfast love from me.

Epistle

1 Peter 3: 8 – 22

Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called-- that you might inherit a blessing. For "Those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit; let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in

you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you--not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

GOSPEL

John 14: 15 – 21

Jesus said "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

First Lesson

Dear old St. Paul has always been quite something of a mentor for me, especially when it comes to his preaching of the Gospel. One factor that has always stood out for me is the manner in which he always met his audience where they were, not where he wished them to be. And it has to be said that Greeks would have constituted no easy audience. It seems that their approach was to delight in debate and argument, but to be put off totally by any expectation of reaching a serious conclusion. It seems to be rather like our modern philosophers and debaters, who enjoy the debate but seem loath to reach a conclusion from which they must decide a course of action.

It may well be in this instance, Paul chose the path of the 'God of the gaps,' but it seems more likely that the gap he really touched with that in the hearts of the men there on the Areopagus. Notice that as soon as Paul reached a conclusion to be acted from, there was the general retreat sounded, "we must listen to you again." That was the great 'put off.'

So don't be put off yourself, but realize that, as Camus is reputed to have said some time ago, '*not to decide is to decide.*'

Psalm

It is very difficult, as a rule, to determine quite when various psalms were written, but I take a punt that this one emanated from around the time of the Exile in Babylon. Mind you, there were many periods of stress for Israel both before and long after the Exile. However here is a psalm of confidence in God Who provides the oomph to keep going in the face of trials and tribulations. And so we can make such experiences our own as well.

Epistle

As Peter himself would have said, there really can be no argument against those that do good, though human nature will still call the bluff on this one if there is pressure enough. However the dictum remains, for the very reason of upholding truth and goodness, and more particularly because this is the path that Jesus Himself has to tread even at the cost of His own life.

If that passage about Jesus preaching to those 'in prison,' bemuses or beguiles you, it is really more a matter – I suspect – of the Apostle trying to express the conviction that the effects of the atonement are as effective *before* the period of time 2,000 years ago, as it will be for the period of time *after*. It is a sort of statement that has baffled commentators for many a long year.

GOSPEL

And the spirit and sense of love persists through this rather lovely and piquant passage. In other words, wherever and whenever the Gospel is preached and spread, the focus must always be on **love**. That does not make it weak, for love still tends to be misunderstood somewhat. Love cares, and so should we – difficulty though that may be sometimes.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

This may not be the easiest of paths to follow, but I ask you to stick with it if you can. From the readings today it is quite clear that the great item for exploration is **love**, but like a lot of things it is easier said than done.

Before we start exploring love, may I divert to something that has bugged me for quite some time. A silly illustration points the way I am heading, and underlines my issues somewhat. As it is close to tea-time at our house, we may well be watching ‘Deal or No Deal’ as the meal cooks. Quite a lot of the sort of stuff said by contestants and master of ceremonies gets my goat sometimes. ‘Good work!’ Ian will cackle, when it is not work at all, unless you call it guesswork, and that is an oxymoron is it not? Or ‘what do you think you have?’ is a guess, is it not, and has nothing to do with the business of thought. The real reason for all this is ‘what do you feel you have?’ would have about as much connection with reality as a dream or a wish. What you **feel** will have connection with the reality only by sheer chance.

So what really worries me is the apparent capacity of so many people these days to live on or bounce off their emotions, which is a rather short step from reality into cloud cuckoo land. *If you think I am being silly, then switch off now.* However, I do recall spending many happy hours with a great friend of ours who lived almost totally off her emotions, which led her into the most damaging decisions and outcomes over and over again. It was years before she was prepared to use her grey matter more, which has brought her out of mists into far more satisfying areas of life. And, if you will pardon me, it took a lot of loving that person – and not all of that love was perceived as such even by her. (She may tell you some stories one day!)

When most people talk about love, they expect something soft and gentle, undisturbing and comforting, and that may not always be the case by any means. I recall another parishioner – who has since died – whose self-pity after the loss of her husband made life excruciatingly difficult for her family. After putting up with it for quite some time, as she had been an only child and had manoeuvred her husband into complying with her every whim, in the end I had to suggest very strongly that it was about time she grew up and stopped draining the very lifeblood from her children. I indicated why I spoke thus, and said I would let her think about it all and come back after a while. When I returned, she expressed surprise. ‘I thought you hated me!’ she remarked. So it was a matter of explaining that if that supposition was true, I would never have bothered to raise the issue at all. I could have simply passed her by. It was only then that she began to see that love is not a pandering, but a sharing of the load and caring no matter what. *And it is often no easy path. And it has nothing to do with feelings or emotions.*

When it was first explained to me, I was profoundly enlightened. When I was studying Greek for our New Testament studies, some of the poverty of the English language was pointed out to the class. English has but one word, really, for love; Greek has three at least. And they are quite specific.

First there is **eros** – **ερος** – and it takes little imagination to see where this takes us. Eros is love from an ‘erotic’ point of view, quite important and necessary, for without it you would not be reading this or I writing it. So don’t knock it; except in its abuse. *I love you for what you do to me.*

Second there is philadelphia - **φιλαδελφια** – name of that American city or the one near the Aegean Sea long ago. Love of brother, family, country or clan. Necessary again, for without loyalty such as this, very little in life and relationships can happen. *I love you because of who you are.*

And then there is agape - **αγαπη** - a word which Paul resurrected from then ancient Greek which he used to convey the nature of God’s love. (It was the name given to the Eucharist in the early days; and it is a name which has been distorted out of shape, if newspaper reports are true, when a sect named themselves after this, yet displays remarkably unloving directions and abuses.) The reality of this love runs something like *I love you in spite of who you are* indicative of the nature of God’s love for people. And not even God could operate at that depth from mere human emotions. This is determinative stuff; I **choose** to love, regardless of any other factor, because it is My nature. *And that makes it totally dependable.*

So much of the Christian's response to the Gospel should stem not from emotions but from determination. It is a matter of will, not the crossing of fingers or the taking a punt. It is not warm fuzzy stuff, nor is it comfort – zone material.

As that rather odd AFL character used to say in his adverts, 'You know it makes sense.'