

Sentence

Blessed are those who persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:10

Collect

Eternal God, neither life nor death can separate us from Your love, grant that we may serve You faithfully here on earth, and in heaven rejoice with all Your saints, who ceaselessly proclaim Your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen**

First Lesson

Revelation 7: 9 – 17

Psalm

34: 1 – 10, 22

Epistle

1 John 3: 1 – 3

Gospel

Matthew 5: 1 – 12

Notes on the Readings

Perhaps a prior note may indicate something of my direction in all this. It may be a reflection on me (in which case I am happy to bear it!) but I have long had great difficulty with the whole business of saints and such. This view is epitomised by the recent rush to canonize the previous Pope. This - in current arrangements – requires the search for a miracle or two, which will hold things up I suspect.

And that is the issue. As in most other matters in our world, the people who obtain the recognition are, very often, the people who should not even be in line. Almost invariably, there are many many other people who have done more in that field or in others, and have done so quite simply because they saw the necessity and got on with it. They neither looked for nor received recognition except perhaps from the people they served. And that is the way it should be – as Jesus put, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing!

FIRST READING

Now who could have done it better? My affection for John's *Revelation* may be obvious to some, but here he is making it quite clear that, even if you think you are alone and unnoticed, John indicated otherwise. Although they may be somewhat invisible to an unseeing world there are mobs and mobs and mobs of people, simple faithful people, being obedient to their Lord and being servants to their fellow-humans. And these are the saints, the hagioi, οἱ ἅγιοι, the holy ones, the different ones.¹ And their recognition exists because they stood out from hoi polloi (the rest) by remaining true to the Gospel values in spite of contrary pressure. Here are no yes-men (yes-people?) but people of integrity in a world that has forgotten the word.

Psalm

It may be a little passé, this Psalm from such a distant past, but I suspect life is beginning to teach a lot of people that what has been seen a freedom to do whatever you @#\$%^ well want, turns out to be little more than a refined form of slavery.

Here this ancient writer or singer rejoiced in the fact that JHWH provided His people with a valid and valuable way to operate as humans, even if they started off as rather damaged stock. In giving a sense of direction and purpose, God is One in Whom all humans can rejoice.

Epistle

Dear old John again. And it is all so simple and yet so profound. Love. And although our sight of God-in-Christ is yet far from complete, it remains true, does it not, that the clearer the picture we obtain of Jesus, the clearer the picture we get of where to head.

¹ For those unfamiliar with Revelation, it is worth noticing that is passage follows reference to the 144,000. They are of Israel, and this countless lot are those who are not Jews. Always read the fine print!

Gospel

For many people, much of the Gospel sounds so ‘Irish’² that it is rejected out of hand. How can mourning be a valid direction for living? However, as one begins to see that the generally-accepted (does that make this non-Irish?) way of thinking requires us to put all thoughts of other people out of our minds and hearts, and get on with self-assertion and self-obsession. As mentioned earlier, people are beginning to see that this is a very false road to follow.

So where is Jesus taking us? To be concerned not for ourselves but for others, to be concerned for the damage that people wreak on themselves, and to see that to follow Christ in all this is to discover a life of integrity, justice and compassion. It hardly needs saying that a little of this, in our world, will go a long way indeed.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I can never read the Sermon on the Mount without vivid recall of ones of the songs from the musical, ‘Camelot.’ It is Dinedan, I think, the evil knight, who sings out his despite on all things good and pure. In part of that song he quotes or misquotes from today’s Gospel.

It is not the earth the meek inherit, it’s the DIRT!

It must have been over 50 years ago, pre-television, at the cinema. And I still recall the belly laughs and guffaws from the crowd. They knew, did they not, that Dinedan was right. And that, strange as it may seem, is how life and ‘culture’ in this land of ours has tended to develop. As the years went by, the baby boomers, Generations X and Y have added their impetus and emphasis and while the ‘good old days’ presents a very false image, it has to be said that there has been considerable degeneration over the fifty.

I remember feeling embarrassed back then at that cinema. Embarrassed for Jesus in a way, for they were making fools of Him. I was aligned with Jesus then too, and felt the slight. However I had neither the wit nor the wisdom to identify what was happening and why. That changed soon after.

Like most aged Christians, I had grown up with a healthy view of sin, but managed to see it only in terms of blotting my copybook and keeping me out of heaven. It was a while longer before I realized that the real problem with human sin is the damage it causes to other humans. As a measure of contemporary blindness then, it must be reported that the Holocaust was only a decade or so previous, as was Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

So where am I heading?

One of the aspects of life and Christianity that has been underlined by life and ministry is the extent to which humans will go to turn their backs on issues important, on values valuable, and do it all in the name of progress and ‘maturity.’ So much so, that the gap between those you can trust and those you cannot is widening. Recently, that divide has been growing at quite something of an alarming rate. Honesty is sufficiently rare these days as to have attention drawn to an incident the other day when a young man handed in \$10,000 in cash he found in the street. It raised debate for days as people asked whether they would have handed it in or kept it. I suspect it was significant that the young man who found the cash was Indian, not Australian.

It is that growing divide that is illustrating quite something of the ‘problem,’ if we can call it that, for the Christian, the saint, the holy one. I suspect it is increasingly difficult for the disciple to retain integrity in a world that despises such an attitude. But it is the saint, the holy one, who will persist in the face of pressure to conform to the non-values of the rejecter of such values. As an added pointer in all this, I wonder if all are aware of the fact that ‘holy,’ as a root value of the word in Greek, has ‘difference’ as a factor. Polloi refers to the mob; Hagioi refers to those who are different, standing somewhat alone.

Which brings me back to the basic issue about Saints. If there is anything special about saints, it is that they are really quite unremarkable, noticeable perhaps only when they are not around. There is no grandstanding on their part, but rather humility. This is not grovelling, but simply a sort of invisibility. They do not draw attention to

² If such expressions are permitted these days – if this offends, try upside down or apparently contradictory

themselves, but simply respond honestly and humanely to whatever need faces them. So you will never find a roll of their names, you will rarely find reference to what they do, but you will be painfully aware of their absence if that is the case.

Mind you, I am not into the business of shooting down St. Francis of Assisi and certainly not St. Matthew or even St. Peter. However, what I am trying to do is to point out that you, who may well feel left out of the race of importance and value, are not left out in the eyes of Him with Whom we have to do. He will look over you, as someone said donkey's years ago, not for medals, **but for scars.**

Sentence

God has destined us, not for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord, Jesus Christ. Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other.

1 Thess. 5.9

Collect

Everliving God, before the earth was formed and even after it shall cease to be, You are God: break into our short span of life and show us those things that are eternal, that we may serve Your purpose in all that we do, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Judges 4: 1-10

PSALM

123

EPISTLE

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

GOSPEL

Matthew 25: 14 – 30

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

The Book of Judges is full of blood-thirsty stories and this one of Deborah is perhaps one of the most vivid. It would be worth reading the whole story through if you are not familiar with it.

Having done so, you may well be repelled at the ferocity and duplicity of some of the early Old Testament characters, but you may also need reminding that – like the rest of it – it took a long time for the ordinary person to get a better and balanced view of God, and value for life.

The whole point of the book of Judges is to relate how important and capable leaders arose in response to crises in early Hebrew history. And there we have to agree even when it comes to rather more recent history. Winston Churchill certainly had his down-sides, but it is questionable whether England would have survived WWII without him.

Now please notice that this Judge was a woman. Note also that Barak was not prepared to face the challenge without her. Now, then you may need to revise your view that the Old Testament belonged to the men, with women hiding behind the blokes. Little could be further from the truth.

Psalm

Here is a tiny but passionate Psalm, which has a simple yet powerful message to convey. When things get tough, this Psalmist suggests, then turn your eyes upon God, not as some sort of messianic rescuer, but rather as a solid rock to stand on in troubled times. Such an approach offers a clearer picture of the reality, if you stop and think.

Epistle

It is always made obvious that the Season of Advent is closing in, when the readings make reference to what many call the Second Coming of Christ. The Parousia. It was one of the foci of the Infant Church, when most believers somehow assumed that Jesus' Return would be in the quite near future. It produced a series of different responses in the Church of the time, ranging from a lazy 'sit down and wait for it,' to an increasing disaffection and rejection of the pressure. Much of the problems of the time show up in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians. These are amongst the earliest of Paul's writings.

It is sad to me that there are parts of the Christian Church that make the parousia a huge focus, and while that sense of urgency generated is valuable, the myopia produced manages to limit both the point and the preaching of the wider Gospel. One really does need to read the NT writings in the order of date of their writing to see the development of that theology and the movement made over the decades prior to the turn of the first century.

Gospel

Almost as if to balance the impact of the Epistle, one has this challenging Gospel of the Talents – or, better, the proper use of them. For one thing, it is an important factor to note that Jesus was underlining the present use of gifts and abilities, as opposed to the hiding or burying of them. It is clear that Jesus was pointing up the importance of living out the Gospel in the here-and-now.

There is an important and really quite normal point underlined here: if one has a gift, then use it, for if you do not use it you will lose it. There is nothing terribly holy about such an observation; it applies (as does most of the Faith) right across the board of human experience.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I will often ask a congregation, after the readings have been read and listened to, whether there is anything or nothing that sticks out for them in those readings. In our part of the world there is a tendency to reckon that, as people are not very literate when it comes to Scripture, then it is OK for the readings to go in one ear and out of the other. It is always rather more valuable to look for links with one's own experience. It is better to ponder readings, pull them apart, and search for something new out of familiar or even unfamiliar passages.

For instance: it is doubtful if lots of people are familiar with the story of Deborah, one of the more vivid and even vicious of the Judges. She would have been a most formidable woman. For people who like a bit of 'blood and guts' in their Bible reading, it would be worth reading on in Judges, and find out about tent-pegs. Blood and gore aside, there is another point to ponder, especially by those who hold to the myth that in the OT, women were supposed to keep their place. Barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen, so to speak.

Although we are left without the gory details, it is instructive to notice that Barak, bronzed 'Australian bloke, was too scared go *anywhere* without the Judge. This may well require something of a rethink by people of very conservative mien.

However, I suspect that what sticks out for me the most, in today's readings, (if I avoid the temptation to spend time on the Second Coming,) is the parable in today's Gospel. This is all about gifts, talents, skills, and the wise and beneficial use of them.

A word of warning first of all. There is always a danger, in my experience, when Christians make the assumption that Biblical or spiritual principles have to do only with matters 'spiritual.' The facts speak powerfully otherwise. As common parlance has it, with many things in life, '*use it, or lose it!*'

For instance: many, many moons ago, I had to attend even Tech College in the attempt to gain what these days is called the HSC. The lecturer of one of the subjects was a stunning teacher, in spite of a very heavy German accent. We were doing Maths I and Maths II as the subjects were called in those days. My story in maths in High School was a disaster – yet he was a man who lived and breathed his subject, and instilled a love of it all in this young person at least. I wondered about doing a University maths subject alongside theology the following year. Stupidly, I did nothing of the sort, and whilst book-keeping still rates a strong interest in me, almost all of the other parts of the discipline are no longer part of my knowledge. Use it, or lose it.

One of the important things that we humans need to realize is that none of us has all the skills, all the gifts, all the abilities. In fact, there are some of us who seem certain that we have nothing in the way of gifts and skills, and sadly it is a sense of inferiority that leads us to such a view. What is worse, those unused, unrealised gifts impoverish the community, let alone ourselves.

Sunday 20th November, 2005

Christ the King
Sunday next before Advent

Sentence

O shout to the Lord in triumph all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness and come before His face with songs of joy.
Psalm 100:1

Collect

Stir up, we pray You, Lord, the wills of Your faithful people, that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruits of good works, may by You be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Ezekiel 34:11--24

PSALM

100

EPISTLE

Ephesians 1: 15 – 23

GOSPEL

Matthew 25:31-46

NOTES ON THE READINGS

This Sunday is the last one in Year A, being the Sunday before the changeover to the new Church Year. The Season of Advent begins next Sunday and the series of readings change to Year B. This is part of the three-year cycle, in use in most of the mainline Churches, giving a wide coverage of Scripture over that period of three years.

Old Testament Lesson

Ever since my infancy really, I have been told of the strange capacity of old Israel to be looking for a whiz-bang messiah, who would solve all problems and set things to rights. The perception was that this messiah would have all the power necessary to correct injustices and punish the evildoers, although Israel assumed that being the People of God, they would be immune from any punitive actions.

All of the above was apparently the perception, in spite of a Bible full of evidence to the contrary. It is not only Ezekiel who expected a shepherd for a messiah, and that God would behave like a shepherd, and Isaiah is just as adamant that the Suffering Servant would be the one who ministers God's will and plan. Why, then, the disparity between expectation and reality?

The answer is sadly simple and stark. There remain not all that many Christians these days who see God's way of doing things as parallel to shepherd or a suffering servant. And we have four Gospels to make the portrayal clear enough. Is this blindness a result of what we HOPE would happen as opposed to the real challenge that Gospel and Lord put in front of us?

Psalm

This Psalm takes me back to my youth also, for as a young chorister at Church we often used to sing *Jubilate Deo*, this 100th Psalm. Although sort and simple this Psalm underlines the calling of God's people to reflect God's characteristics. And to see the great joy in that. Please do see that the fact of God underlines the point and purpose of existence – we are not flotsam and jetsam in an idiotic and meaningless world.

Epistle

The Apostle Paul is well known for his flowery language and expansive writing. Often, modern Christians imitate to florid stuff without really getting the point, and go on to miss the impact of what Paul says in the other bits. Please take time to see what Paul is saying about Jesus, and then go on to see why. I am probably a little out into left field, but I do ask you to ponder why Paul says what he does of Jesus. Whilst it may be easy for a Christian to see Jesus in wide importance, it would be harder for someone not of the Faith. So is Paul just 'fishing?' It strikes me that the powerful things Paul has to say about Jesus can be seen more widely when we all realize that Jesus is shown as the guarantor of truth, of justice, of compassion and love. Put another way, it is saying that these ultimates are illustrative of Jesus. In that case, all Paul has to say about Jesus is not only true, but also is clear and almost tangible.

Gospel

This passage ought to be seen as standing on the shoulders of the Epistle, if you like to put it that way. The New Testament does not see, if you put it this way, any sort of ultimate dualism, but it anticipates the victory of good over evil. It also sees that humanity carries the responsibilities for its choices. (It is no accident, seems to my small mind, that 'God' is connected with 'good,' and 'devil' with 'evil.')

What could be surprising is the way in which Jesus sees failure of humanity not so much in terms of clear and virulent evil, but rather in less blatant terms of the quiet ignoring of another human in need. Notice that in neither case, the people concerned saw the good or evil that they did or did not commit. In each case, however, it was a simple matter of basic approach to life and to other people. The self-centred person did not even *see* the needy other. The self-giving person did not see their actions as at all remarkable or even laudable. They simply saw it as quite natural. 'It is the sort of thing that *anyone* would do,' they might have said. In that, they were wrong, but nicely so.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

We have travelled this way before, but it is a path that bears going over again and again. Here we have, as usual at the end of each Church's Year, the exploration of the nature of kingship that Jesus presented, lived and posited for all people. It is almost a reversal of the expected, but an important and significant reversal.

One of the things that many humans find hard to cope with, is a leader who is not strong, decisive, even overpowering. Even in a country such as ours, people seem to look for political leaders who can get the better of their opposition. It is not only capability that people look for, it is evidence of such strength as can demolish or undermine the other. This is the way it has always been with kings, lords and even presidents. Any sign of weakness becomes the grounds for replacing the weak with someone stronger. This is why such leaders, political and otherwise, are expected to demand (and get) the very best of anything and everything.

With that sort of expectation, it is small wonder, surely, that someone like Jesus is met with a certain amount of disbelief. He did not fit the bill in any real way at all. In fact, He made it quite clear that 'lording it over' people was not on His agenda. He saw such an approach as quite invalid. And He had sound reason for that view.

It is not only Jesus Who was aware of the necessity of being a 'servant king.' Many of the prophets before Him had become very much aware of the validity of such an approach, even if they were also aware of the difficulty of such an image becoming acceptable to the wider public so to speak. Look at a couple.

The Prophet Isaiah³ wrote his series of Servant Songs as we describe them, anticipating the One Who should come, and the task in front of Him. No great Messianic fanfares, but a quiet, self-effacing approach to the whole necessary business of reconciliation. Most normal Kings give little credence to the need for reconciliation – all they demand is loyalty and conformity. Anything less is a threat. And there lies the basic problem – the widening of gulfs between people, the increase of tensions and hatreds (or even simple dislike.) The more paranoid the leader, the harsher the response to any refusal to conform.

Here, the Servant of the Lord – as Isaiah pictured Him – was light-years removed from the traditional picture, not in order to be 'nice' or acceptable, but to be effective. It is only in self-giving that any form of conciliation is possible. The exploration of the Servant Songs is worthy of far more attention than is possible here, but it is to be noted that Isaiah was well aware of the threat it offered to a self-driven leader.

There is no mistake in the fact that today's Old Testament Lesson offers a long hard look at Ezekiel's vision of the Shepherd Leader. While city-bred folk may see a shepherd as having some sort of soft or cushy job, anyone who knew the role in days gone by would be very well aware of the difficulties of the task. Sheep, like people, are not the most sensible of animals, and care of them is fulltime and demanding. The outcome, however, is to the benefit of the sheep, not to the benefit of the shepherd.

So there, in Servant and Shepherd, we have images of Jesus' view of the nature of true and valuable leadership. This is the sort of small king He is. And that means He is accessible to all, even the most humble of His followers, not living in splendid isolation. Nor does He invoke all sorts of outside agencies to do things for His

³ Second Isaiah to the purists

people, but encourages them to take responsibility, and follow Him in the same pattern of life and leadership. Whilst it may be said that the outcomes of fairness, justice and reconciliation may take rather longer, they will also be far more lasting and genuine, because (in today's parlance) His followers will own His leadership, process and direction.