

**Sentence**

Today salvation has come to this house, for the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.

*Luke 19:10*

**Collect**

God our Father, Whose will it is to bring all things in order and unity in our Lord Jesus Christ, may all the peoples of the world, now divided and torn apart by sin be brought together under His sovereign rule of love, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Habakkuk 1: 1 – 4 and 2: 1 – 4**

**PSALM**

**119: 137 – 144**

**EPISTLE**

**2 Thessalonians 1:1 – 4 & 11 – 12**

**GOSPEL**

**Luke 19: 1 – 10**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

*You may notice that I have included all of the Epistle reading. I nearly did the same with the Habakkuk reading, and may even reinsert the left out bit. Methinks that the Lectionary author decided to leave out the heavy judgement bits, and that strikes me as a pity. One of the things we need to note and be very clear about is the development – dare I say evolution – of the Faith in the First Century AD has some interesting and valuable repercussions. More of that anon*

**Old Testament**

If we lived in the Middle East<sup>1</sup> these days, we may well feel that Habakkuk was talking to us NOW. Although this minor prophet may be almost totally unknown to you, he really does have some important things to say. Most important of all, to my small mind, is the subtle difference made by the **Revised English Bible** which translation I have used and its predecessor before it.<sup>2</sup>

The issue that was engaging the mind and heart of this prophet was the preponderance of violence and evil even in his world that could have done far better without it. On top of that, there was the eternally relevant question of why, if God is against violence and evil, the people of God seem ever to have to push wind uphill against such damaging and dangerous folly. Now notice how Habakkuk saw that the need was and remains for the People of God to stand firm against all violence, and that their role is ever to bear witness to the far better, more constructive and very much more creative path that the Faith, **(Hebrew and Christian)**, offers to humanity.

*'The just shall live by faith'* has been the mantra for so much of the Protestant and charismatic Church for as long as I have been around. And that expression allows for the 'faith' bit to be somewhat invisible. In fact the distortion ride roughshod over much of the Gospel. Notice the REB translation – *the righteous will live by being faithful*. Do not have willies thinking that this returns us to justification by works. That thought is likewise rubbish. The challenge Habakkuk offers – as does the entire Old and New Testament, is to be true to the direction that the Biblical faith has always pointed people. Life is to be lived out in justice, truth, integrity, love and compassion. The hard thing is to operate like that in a world that tends to despise such values.

Now stop and listen to what the psalmist has to say .....

**PSALM**

*Before anyone rises in great ire and disturbance, please do stop and see that Paul's constant tirade against the (Jewish) Law was really against those who abused the Law by considering it justified them in following a rather wayward path. It is not theological mistake that right up to this day, we have the option of Decalogue or Shemah<sup>3</sup> in the Communion Service. Where am I asking you to come?*

As you read and ponder today's Psalm, stop and realize the reasons for the delight of the author in the fact of the Torah. What he is really excited about are the elements of truth and justice<sup>4</sup> there in the Torah. In fact, in

<sup>1</sup> Why do Australians call it the 'Middle East?' It is the Far East from here!

<sup>2</sup> I have never understood why the NEB did not take off and become the major translation for the English-speaking world. It is far more accurate and very much more readable, even if the REB has a few typos that need attention

<sup>3</sup> The Two Great Commandments of course – remembering that much of this comes from Deuteronomy!

<sup>4</sup> Recognize always that 'righteousness' in the Greek NT always translates 'justice.' It is not about being squeaky clean – it is about being absolutely fair dinkum with each other, and that calls for a far greater commitment, does it not!

earlier centuries, Judaism was recognised as the most just and honest religion. Other religions were little more than self-seeking cliques, seeing violence and lies as the means of gaining ends.

Now stop and see how so many of today's human beings have a huge sense of lostness, in direction and purpose, for they can see nothing ahead of them *whatever*. Remove trust, remove justice, remove integrity and replace them with violence and control freakery, and you can understand, can you not? Both the lostness of today, and the enormous value *in ordinary life*, of the timeless, everlasting, worth of those ancient and valuable concepts.

### **EPISTLE**

Once again, the emphasis in this snippet returns to the business of being loyal to God-in-Christ, which also means being loyal to the ancient Biblical virtues. This is not 'justification by works.' This is being true to God, to Gospel and to *faithfulness*.

You may realize that the reason for including those otherwise-excluded verses is to show something that Paul may well have regretted after his letter circulated. Remember, Thessalonians is one of the earliest epistles. Paul was still caught up in the concept of the God Who punishes, in spite of the fact that the Cross illustrated, *par excellence*, that God has NEVER been in that league. Humans thought He was; Jesus underlined that He is NOT.

Anyhow the challenge of this passage is to remain true to Gospel, faith and Lord, in spite of living in a situation where all the pressure is contrary. Now that faithfulness IS hard work.

### **GOSPEL**

It is worth stopping a moment or two and entering into something of the effect that Jesus had on this well-known but otherwise unremarkable human being. I find it fascinating that here was a little man without the usual small man syndrome, or at least the usual expression of it.

Those who are small may well let you know that it is not easy being built that way. All manner of methods are employed by such people to compensate for the apparent disaster. Some make lots of noise, others will try to be control freaks. Here was a guy who seemed to overcompensate by making sure he was noticed, *and noticed well indeed*.

If ever you wish to be at some centre of attention, try being a tax man in Jesus' day. You were well-known all right, but you were also hated. You were traitor to the cause. But you were also sufficiently well off, to be able to snub almost anyone who had lousy things to say about you. Zacchaeus was centre of attention all right, but had absolutely no one to talk to, except other tax collectors.

So when Jesus broke that cycle of isolation, it must have stunned this little bloke. No one had ever tried to cultivate his friendship for reasons sheerly altruistic. There is no record of any conversation between Jesus and Zach, but one can safely assume that the simple matter of acceptance lay at the core of it. No standing in judgement; no turning up of the nose at a traitor. Just the simple recognition of another hurting, vulnerable human being. Funny, that. The small tax collector had his life turned upside down by a simple human gesture. *A simple human gesture*.

The outcome of this conversion lies remarkably in the area of 'works,' but yet Jesus made it clear that salvation<sup>5</sup> had come to this person. And the result of that was what well may have been an almost total impoverishment of the man – who by now had realized that mega dollars does not make up for lack of size, status or acceptance. He responded to his circumstances in a totally self-giving way, just like His Lord.

### **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

Isn't it funny how Christians can be so totally disagreeing with other Christians over some point of dogma or doctrine. Sadly, it seems, people of other faiths have similar internal problems, and all have these issues with those of other faiths, or none. So the factor most designed to draw people together manages to be prostituted into some fatally divisive. Small wonder that people of no faith 'look back in anger.' How could anyone take us at all seriously? It is, as politicians know well, if there is dissension in the party, then there is no chance of election.

What is most tragic is the capacity of peoples of all religions to separate and splinter and spend so much effort at tearing each others' throats out, that there is complete and utter failure to see that those courses of actions are, in reality, a complete and utter denial of their Faith. For Christians it really does amount to blasphemy. This

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<sup>5</sup> Greek 'soteria' σωτηρια - means 'salvation, health, and wholeness.' And salvation for the ancient Jew meant simply room to move, the opportunity to reach towards maturity.

does not mean that understanding life, Scripture and God are not important. It does mean that if some issue of doctrine or dogma drives us apart, then there needs to be a far closer look at what we are on about.

One of the tragedies that I have observed over my now rather many years, is the fact that there are far more significant issues of faith that draw us together, than the rather less significant ones that have us seeing things differently. First and foremost, it needs to be seen that the Christian Faith, amongst others, is concerned to deal with the very issues that separate people, to encourage them to a point of reconciliation and growth. 'How these Christians love one another' was the primal witness that drew people to Christ. And that was in a world where society was striated into a great range of levels of status and importance. Often Paul reiterated his view that there are no divisions in Christ; we are all one.

Much of that tirade stemmed from something that, to my mind, has been a bone of contention between denominations and Christians for rather too long. Much of the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century stemmed from Martin Luther's huge discovery of what came to be termed 'justification by faith.' In his day and age, the difference was staggering, but I would not be surprised if rather too many Christians have seen that one side of the coin and missed the reverse. As I mentioned in the notes above, the New English Bible and its successor translate the verse from Habakkuk as 'the righteous will live by being faithful.' There is a world of difference, although it does not minimise Luther's emphasis. Actually it widens it out.

Back when I was a young Christian, and probably somewhat naive, I remember being cornered by a rather conservative gentleman and being asked if I was saved. By that, the fellow wanted to know if I was forgiven. If I was, I was on my way to heaven; if not, my destination was in the nether regions. I still find that rather too many very keen and forceful Christians preach a Gospel of escape from sin and its punishment. With all due respect, if a person becomes a Christian out of fear of some future denouement, then it is a matter of self-interest is it not, and rather removed from the Biblical faith and challenge.

Faithfulness. Even Habakkuk was aware of the enormous pressures on somewhat unsophisticated and probably ill-educated people of his time, to 'go with the strength' and become pawns of the powerful. How few Russian Christians were there who – at huge cost to themselves and their families – refused to bow the knee or tug the forelock to their political overlords? I am certain that I would rather deal with a Christian under such pressure than someone else who was 'in it' for his own benefit!

Habakkuk, small and minor prophet though he may well have been, was well aware of the need for faithful people to remain faithful to the faith which called them to operate with justice, truth and integrity regardless of pressure to the contrary. It is no easy thing for any human to go against the stream of popular views, attitudes and actions. Notice how painfully often, young people will do anything to conform to the patterns of dress, attitude and action. Peer pressure they call it, even when it is really peer utter baloney. I am thankful that I lived in the days before all that garbage, and that my own children seemed to manage to work through the pressure to conform. Largely.

The Psalmist was singing the same song, do you notice? He – or was it she? – was so utterly thankful that not only did people have clear and constructive directions about living, but that they made sense, clearly had enormous value, would outlast any mere human kingdom or tyranny, and that provided enormous strength for the one – or group – choosing to follow the Hebrew Faith. Here is no shallow or narrow religion; here is the challenge to live life in a direction and manner that provided all manner of benefits to anyone within range and effect. *What a contrast to today's lost generation who seem to have not the foggiest about point, purpose and direction, and choose the most dangerous – even lethal – patterns of what passes for life, And that does not last very long.*

Now where does all this get us? I remain somewhat bemused that the 'faith once delivered' does not resonate with people of any and all days and ages. So I am left with the positions that either, what is being offered in the name of Christianity has rather little to do with the Biblical reality; or, that modern humans are rather too self-centred to consider the faith. Whilst I have no illusions about the capacity of us humans to delude ourselves, I have also the certainty that, as in Jesus' day, something so life-giving, relevant and valuable, has been reduced to religion, whatever that devaluing means.

To the extent that the latter is the problem, I can only point to today's Gospel, as a stunning cameo of the effect this Jesus can have on ordinary selfish human beings. The tale about Zacchaeus should be well-enough known. It is an almost humorous picture of a small man who, one might surmise with a certain amount of accuracy, may well have suffered from being overlooked from childhood. Little kids do not attract a lot of attention unless they draw it to themselves. Carrying the picture further, one may even guess that he determined to 'bore it up' his contemporaries, and find a way to make people take notice. On the way he would make a more-than-comfortable living, an indulge in luxuries unavailable to lesser people. Tax collecting would ensure everyone knew him, could not fail to notice him, and would provide the best house in the best street.

There must have been an underlying honesty in this funny little man, for he was ‘eager to see Jesus’ – and that possibly because he may well have been sick and tired of his scheme to get noticed, and even the inordinate wealth that it produced. When you boil it all down, all that Jesus did for this bloke was to accept him as he was, warts and all. No one before had ever treated him thus. The action of Zacchaeus in giving away the greater portion of all he had is a measure of the extent to which this change of direction affected him. It was life-changing. He had become a faithful person. Here was no internalised faith; **here was a life-changing way to go. *The righteous shall live by their faithfulness.*** Small wonder that Jesus looked out for such people: He was able to offer something that met them right where they lived. *Gospel still can, of course.*

Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> November, 2007

Twenty Fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
*Remembrance Day*

**Sentence**

‘I am the resurrection and the life,’ says the Lord, ‘whoever believes in Me, even though they die, shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.’  
*John 11: 25 – 6*

**Collect**

Blessed Lord, You have caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast to the blessed hope of everlasting life, which You have given us in Your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.  
**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Haggai 1:15 – 2:9**

**Psalm**

**145: 1 – 5 & 17 – 21**

**Epistle**

**2 Thessalonians 2: 1- 5 & 13 – 17**

**GOSPEL**

**Luke 20: 27 – 40**

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

*If the inclusion of that passage from Haggai confuses you, then I wonder if it is any help to ponder something: when some of the other readings emphasise resurrection, Haggai points to something just as important in his own day and age. That was not quite life after death – but something closely approximating it. Haggai’s ‘resurrection’ was the restoration of Israel, Jerusalem and Temple after the Exile – very much the matter of hope for the future, a purpose, a goal, something to aim for. I hope you catch the nuance, and the value of it.*

**Old Testament Lesson**

I have often referred to the fact that the prophets never made much sense to me until I was taught to see into what sort of historical and even political situation the old prophets spoke. Here were no stargazers, but people who understood the realities of life and even politics, and the need for people to have ‘a future and a hope.’

Haggai was active in an extraordinarily difficult time in Israel’s chequered history. Some of the people had returned from exile, to find their homeland in an advanced state of ruin. That would be enough to break hearts, but there was also huge resistance to rebuilding by people opposed to them. Talk about pushing wind uphill! But Haggai’s message was – quite simply – get on with it; God is supporting and encouraging you. It would have been a message of enormous help to the struggling returnees, in spite of the vast task that faced them. Never underestimate the power of a solid and tangible reason for existence.

**Psalm**

And, of course, the Psalmist, speaking into a very different (and possibly much earlier) time, has a similar confidence in his future, on the basis of the character of God. I confess to having great difficulty with many of today’s moderns who chatter on about being *positive* even when they have nothing solid about which to be positive. That is ‘castles in the air’ stuff, and about as realistic as Britain’s assurances of its place in the world leading up to the fall of Singapore during WWII. On the other hand, the psalmist has very solid grounds for confidence: Israel’s centuries of experience of a God Who was – and remains – a God of justice and faithfulness. He was aware of the huge value of those things, and to this day that value remains.

**Epistle**

*I am cooking my cabbages twice, as my old Mum would have said, but implore you to take note of the slow but inexorable change in Paul’s theology of the second coming of Christ. In this perhaps earliest of his writings, he expressed the confidence that the return would be soon. However, the further Paul went, and the more time went by, his views changed. That ‘parousia’ was seen increasingly as rather further off! In fact John, writing Revelation, posits the view that such an event is likely to be ‘a thousand years’ away. Before anyone gets too literal, stop and see that – in John’s view of things, a thousand is 10 (quite a lot) times 10 (a huge lot) times 10 – which makes for*

*an enormous number. Where we talk billions, these days<sup>6</sup> we think that a huge number. John may well have used the same sort of thing had he been around nowadays.*

I would ask you to note something that, amongst the idiot fringe, does not seem to have changed one iota. When it comes to apparently dramatic things like the so-called Second Coming, some people have always gone quite bonkers. Even in the early period of Paul's ministry, there were those who seemed to like to take the matter so out of context as to promote the idea that Jesus had, even then, **already returned**. Mind you, it seems that people then had confused the Parousia with the OT concept of the Day of the Lord. To unpack the Biblical picture of that 'day' would take a complete article if not an entire book! Briefly, the 'day of the Lord' is always seen as a time when God acts clearly and decisively, such as in the Cross, and the Incarnation, whilst yet there was no final *denouement*. Even so, Paul was expecting some sort of final human utter rebellion against God – and truth and justice – after which God would act finally and totally. I suspect that Paul misunderstood the process at this point in his ministry<sup>7</sup> - as his later writings attest in spades. However, here Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to get on with the job of being the People of God, in spite of contrary pressure, for the final outcome was certain. Truth would prevail.

### Gospel

This passage has always been something of a mystery to me: not that it happened nor Jesus' response to it, but rather that anyone could be so caught up in their theory about something as not to be able to see the stupidity and futility of their position. Never – never – argue from some hypothetical position! It was an odd and shallow position that the Sadducees took in their argument with our Lord. Those people managed to take what some might describe as a 'modernist' position, being tied down by their ideology so much they could not see past their noses. Rather too many 'wise' people still take similar and remote positions. However, Jesus' response to those men was simple and really quite potent. He simply showed up that they were arguing apples against oranges, so to speak. Incompatible comparisons never provide much sense.

Jesus' final word on the subject was simple and potent, too. It evoked quite some admiration even from some of His antagonists. Funny business, that.

### NOTES FOR A SERMON

This may or may not be of any help to readers, but it is a direction that I ask people to travel, if only to enable the old blinkers to be removed. As I say to local folk when I preach on matters controversial, this is seat belt and crash hat time, for some of you perhaps.

I happen to know some folk, good hearted and loving the Lord, who seem to have spent an enormous amount of money and energy trying to bring about the Parousia, the Second Coming of Christ. From their reading of Scripture, they are convinced that the Bible indicates that when all the Jews return to Israel, then the Lord will return. So they have been doing their little darnedest to convince Russian Jews that their call is to return. To some degree they have been successful in their venture with peoplereturning, though others suggest that they see how many Russians Jews, after travelling to Israel, decide that their future is back where they came from. Not only is this whole strange business a total misreading of Scripture, it is also totally out of step with the Biblical picture of Who God is and what He is on about!

For those who are so focussed on the Second Coming of Christ, I ask you to look away a moment to understand what it I all about. For the sake of simple clarity, I point you to the two most-used Creeds of the Church where they talk about "*He will come again to judge the living and the dead.*" For most people the sort of picture that they get is of John's Great White Throne and of all of us standing in line waiting to be stripped bare of all pretence and having all our sins underlined in red. On the other hand, what the Creed (and Scripture of course,) is really conveying is the solid, down to earth business of the fact the life is designed to make us see that we all carry the **responsibility for our actions, and sooner or later, will be confronted by that fact.**

What is resurrection showing us and teaching us? The real point, at this stage in human life and history, is that truth, love, justice, integrity and compassion may be **suppressed** for a time, but none of these vitally important aspects of life can ever be **killed and more than Jesus could stay dead**. And thank God for that. And the whole business of Parousia, the Second Coming, the Judgement at the end of the world, is making it just as clear that

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<sup>6</sup> Quite incorrectly I might add. A billion was always a million times a million. These days it is reduced to a million times a thousand. .... still a lot, but not the mega-figure!

<sup>7</sup> Don't be too shocked about such a statement – have you not grown somewhat in your understanding of the faith and of God since you were younger? If you have **not**, then you are in trouble.

responsibility for our actions will come right back and confront us, some time or other. I am human: I am responsible,

The fact that a large proportion of the world's population is tending, increasingly, to operate as if that is a whole lot of balderdash seems to make it a bit harder for Christians. What we tend to lack is not some sort of demand for punitive judgement, but a greater awareness of human history. History tends to unfold rather slower than we may like, but in terms of the old (and probably forgotten saying) 'the mills of God grind exceeding slow, but they grind exceeding small.' If I reject my responsibility as a human, it will blow up in my face some time or other, and is just as likely to blow up in yours as well. We are community, not the sum of little individuals.

Now all this seems, to me at least, to point to some hugely significant directions. Just as Israel, was back in the post-exilic period, faced apparently insurmountable problems in rebuilding faith and community, that nation was also encouraged and strengthened by the fact that their understanding of God and His call to them empowered them to see past the difficulties to the apparently impossible outcome. It was not only Haggai who saw the hope, the future, the direction and the impetus, but it was the other and major prophets as well. History shows that enough of the faithful were committed and very active in moving towards that future, even if the hope seemed rather futile. And that is the point – parousia and resurrection are constants of life here and now if only we take off our blinkers and see it.

The message for today's people and People of God? There is a future and there is a hope. Beyond the strained mess that is today, God is at work, and usually among the little people, not the Big Ones. There is resurrection possible even now for our countries, our cultures, our humanity. And we need to be taking our part in the rebuilding of our communities, our Church, our country, our world. God is not dead, nor is hope, future, .... Or truth.

**Sentence**

May the Lord of peace Himself give you peace, at all times and in all ways *2 Thess 3:16*

**Collect**

Almighty God, Whose purpose none can make void; give us faith to be steadfast amid the tumults of this world, knowing that Your Kingdom *shall* come, and Your will *be* done to Your eternal glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Isaiah 65: 17 - 25**

**For the Psalm**

**Song of Isaiah**

**Epistle**

**2 Thessalonians 3: 6 – 13**

**Gospel**

**Luke 21: 5 - 19**

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

*As I mention year after year, as you see reference to the Second Coming or the apocalyptic passages of the Gospels you can rest assured that Advent draweth nigh! And so it is – just a couple of weeks away. So be prepared.*

**Old Testament**

Is there or is there not quite something of a gulf between Isaiah's stunning picture, and life's realities! That is not a question as much as a statement. Nor is this some sort of failed hope, nor lost chance. Two things need to be said as we consider this passage.

The first is that Isaiah was writing for his own people of his own time. This highly picturesque image of what may be called the New Jerusalem of the late 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC was an imaginative cast at what might possibly be if and when the People of God respond to God and life in a real and true manner. Now, please, - this is not literal, this is figurative, imaginative. Life was designed to be far less damaging and stressful than we experience it.

The second is nearer to where we are: the goal of life, God's goal for humans, is not some sort of final whimper that opens into a void. Whatever the circumstances, and Isaiah had some horrifying ones in his own day and age, God still leads His people as they attempt to show, to others, something of what life is meant to be by Him Who created it in hope. That wolf and lamb bit, I repeat, is not literal: you know people who are wolves, and others who are lambs. This image expresses the hope for reconciliation even between people that far apart.

**For the Psalm**

There are those who see 'religion' as something like whistling in the wind! A nothing going nowhere, or at best an attempt to escape reality, which is too harsh. Both the Hebrew and the Christian faiths are far more virile and real than that. Basically, Judaism is the faith that has grown and deepened quite simply on the basis of Israel's long experience of JHWH among them. It is faith based on real-life experience. It is, if you like, faith based on the encountered nature of God. There is a solid foundation to it all. And here the song of Isaiah expresses that. Never lose sight of that fact.

**Epistle**

If you think it is difficult coping with Christians, wayward and otherwise in this day and age, do stop and take some thought for poor old Paul. There are always people ready to misunderstand, take the blessings and advantages of faith, and make an absolute mess of it all. Even Paul had that problem.

One of the dangers, then, of preaching Parousia was that some people would decide to sit on their proverbials and wait for the day to come. No point working if Jesus is about to appear out of the clouds. Lazy sods. Paul's directive is quite clear: no work = no tucker. Get off your proverbial and be an active and valuable part of the community. In other words, do not get the story wrong. Mind you, Paul was rather more gentle with the Thessalonians than I suspect I would have been.

**Gospel**

Once again, people are far more interested in spine-tingling end-of-the-world stuff than facing the realities. Notice how Jesus diverted attention away from doom and gloom to the very realities people wished to avoid. They

wanted the Day of the Lord stuff, convinced that Messiah would solve all problems without any effort on their part. *That's what messiahs are for, are they not? Well, no!!!!!!*

### NOTES FOR A SERMON

Surely I have told the story before, of the ructions that followed on the release of the first draft of liturgical reform in the early 1960s. Not only was the dropping of 'Thee' and 'Thou' met with unmitigated horror, but the changes to the Lord's Prayer were met with explosive response. How dare anyone translate 'give us this day our daily bread' and turn it into 'give us today our bread for tomorrow?' Worse still was the response to 'save us from the time of trial!' Most people seemed to prefer the somewhat odd 'lead us not into temptation,' as if God would be party to such an action.

However, the reality is that the original Greek in the New Testament requires (and always DID) those apparently unpopular words. Who knows who watered it all down in the previous translation. *Save us from the time of trial. Phew.*

It is not until the People of God stop to realize that the reason for the existence of Israel was to be a light to the nations, a nation of priests, (Exodus 19: 3ff.) A priest cannot be a priest unless there are people to whom he or she priests. Israel's calling, reiterating the Abrahamic call, was to the rest of the world, their world, there and then. Israel was to be outward looking, evangelistic if you dare, an icon for anyone looking for meaning, value and purpose in life. That was Israel's calling, and remains the Church's calling. And that was to be expressed – almost invariably – to a world that considered that faith once delivered to be a lot of hogwash.

So can you catch sight of the rather wonderful description that Isaiah offered in today's OT lesson? God's longing is for His People to offer the world population a vision of what life is meant to be like. So it is no escapism here, but the offering of an enormous challenge to people to see where lies the solution of all their bad issues. However, as most Christians are seeing now, tis is a matter of trying to push wind uphill, and answer all manner of opposition and derision.

There is nothing at all new about this – read your history, and in particular, read your Bible. So this '*save us from the time of trial*' is a prayer that we are not aught up in such crises of history and faith as to have our loyalty and faith tested and questioned. It is a serious matter. And it will always be so. Our time in history, with its enormous challenges to Church and Faith are nothing new. We are actually emerging from a remarkable time in history when such challenges were rare and somewhat ineffective.

Now you can see clearly why Jesus, when the question arose for the Twelve, diverted their attention from any 'end of the world' scenario to the not-quite-but-almost immediate present. 'You will be all sorts of pressure to renege, you will have all manner of pressure to waver, and you will have all sorts of idiots wanting to lead you down all manner of unproductive garden paths.'

This pressure to relinquish the Faith comes in all manner of guises. Simple questions about the Faith are likely, and issues that some Christians see differently are others. Sadly, many of the issues raised will seem unanswerable by Christians unprepared or unaware of the realities.

My email inbox tends to get overloaded by people who have – sadly indeed – responded to these threats of agnostics and atheists by getting back behind what seem to them to be impenetrable walls. That retreat into fundamentalism. It appears the safest path for far too many, 'But the Bible says' is no answer to those antagonists, especially when the proffered argument from Scripture betrays little more than evidence of a misunderstanding of what Scripture says. It does not even begin to meet the challenges that are offered, and make not the slightest sense to those antagonists. Retreat into some dark and hopefully safe past does nothing for either side of the debate.

I recall reading of the kerfuffle caused by Darwin's theories over 150 years ago. It still amazes me to find people of today hiding behind a refusal to face possible issues. Those Bishops of old were reported as saying that they preferred to Biblical view to the concept of being related to monkeys. Then I read Griffith Thomas' commentary on Genesis, written around 1904, getting people to stop and realize that truth is truth wherever it comes from and to begin to understand the Creation Stories the way that most Jews had always done. There is no huge chasm between science and religion. But olde worlde Christians need to come to terms with life's realities. It is a matter of understanding God through experiences of life, rather than limiting Him to what are after all only man-made doctrines, tenets and theories.

Perhaps the most fundamental means whereby the Christian needs face contemporary society with the value and purpose of the Faith is to underline and point to the various aspects of life that are least evident in today's

world. If we can get past the tunnel vision of olde worlde faith, we should be able to see that the reason Israel was to be a light to nations, is because for the first time in history, the Faith was seen to focus on human relationship issues of justice, truth, integrity, love and compassion. I continue to punch this drum, in spite of its apparent unpopularity even among Christians. Stop and see how often Scripture itself, Jesus Himself, pointed in this direction, and while we need to face the fact that the crucifixion of Jesus had a great deal to do with the refusal of His contemporaries to want to know, both He and we can offer the world what it needs, if not wants.

Save us from the time of trial has to do with the almost certainty that in our own day and age the struggle will not be about faith and unfaith, but about truth and untruth; justice and injustice, selfgiving and selfishness.

**Sentence**

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud O daughter of Jerusalem. Lo your King comes to you, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. *Zechariah 9:9*

**Collect**

Eternal God, You exalted Jesus Christ to rule over all things, and have made us instruments of His kingdom; by Your Spirit empower us to love the unloved, and to minister to all in need, then at the last bring us to Your eternal realm, where we may worship and adore You for ever, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Jeremiah 23: 1 – 6**

**FOR THE PSALM**

**Song of Zechariah**

**EPISTLE**

**Colossians 1: 11 – 20**

**GOSPEL**

**Luke 23: 33 – 43**

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

*May I offer a few words to encourage you to explore these passages – and the theme – a little further than tends to be the case with some folk. We Westerners tend to be rather wooden and literal in our reading and understanding of Scripture, and thus we either miss the point or focus somewhat short-sightedly.*

*In our day and age, as in most others, we tend to look for strong leadership and powerful outcomes. This is so particularly if we feel ourselves to be rather impotent. However, that is ‘seeing how humans see, not how God sees.’ When I first read G.B.Caird’s Commentary on John’s Revelation, he provided solid grounds for a total rethink when he commented that the point at which **Jesus’ kingdom is most clear is when the Lord is on the Cross**. That is the throne of His kingdom. Ponder that a while if you are game.*

**Old Testament Lesson**

One of the great tragedies of human nature is illustrated here right in the middle of Hebrew history. In the ordinary run of human life and community, the very persons charged with the responsibility of leading Israel, serving as shepherds and providing fodder for the flock, were the very ones who turned their service into a means of control and profit – benefitting not the flock but themselves. In spite of the lessons of history, this distortion of real leadership still runs, whether we look at the political, commercial or ecclesiastical scene. Each area produces its own tragedies and disasters.

Aware of that horrid factor, the Prophet looked for God Himself to intervene, as the only really trustworthy candidate for such leadership.

**For the Psalm**

Whilst we are able to lay the responsibility of poor leadership at the feet of many humans who aspire to govern, there is also a fault that lies that closer to home than we may not wish to acknowledge. How often it is our own myopia that takes us down all manner of garden paths, many of which are little more than refined forms of selfishness. Just look again at this song of Zechariah.

Please see, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest, that here is something far broader than the provision of your eternal security. This is far more immediate and challenging. Instead of ‘holy and righteous’ – with its internalised and ‘religious’ overtones, please translate (and quite correctly,) as different or true, and just. When I was young it was fashionable to decry what was called the ‘social gospel,’ as something quite inferior to the real one. The truth lies otherwise. This faith is ever about bringing fullness of life to all human beings, and that requires justice and integrity on the part of all God’s people. This is no easy nor simple path.

**Epistle.**

**Now**, have another read of this passage and see what is being said. Here is either the most outrageous and egotistic claim on the part of Jesus, or a statement of utterly staggering proportions. Read it yet again if you do not catch sight of it all.

Here is no No 42 for the ‘meaning of life.’ Here is the real one. And it is Jesus. Some astounding and profound statements are made about Jesus, and they need to be understood properly too. Apart from anything else, these stunning statements lift Christian Faith way above the personal and private, but on the other and there is great need to understand WHY Paul makes such claims. This is not just some sort of artificial elevation of Jesus – it is the statement that everything that Jesus stands for is and always will be the final and ultimate standard of what is true and lasting.

### **Gospel**

Now comes the conundrum on top of all the powerful statements made in the Epistle. How can it be that the Point and Purpose of life can be reduced to a criminal on a scaffold? Ironically, the first thing to repeat is, as GB Caird notes, *Jesus on the Cross is the Lord of Life on His throne*. But that is no mere pious platitude. Two things require noting, underling, pondering and proceeding.

Point One. That criminal on the scaffold is, in His own flesh and blood, pointing up the fact that it is this world of humans that has reversed its values, so that evil becomes accepted as good, and good as evil. This, if you dare, is what we mean by ‘sin.’

Point Two. Whereas humans may well have expected a violent and overthrowing response from Jesus – revenge instead of crucifixion, - they were confronted, not by the punishment of evil, but by the absorption of it. If that sounds odd, just ponder. Had Jesus responded **punitively** on those who made themselves His enemies, then the evil of that would have doubled, not removed. Evil is not overcome with evil; it is overcome with good.<sup>8</sup> So now can you see how Jesus’ kingship is so clearly expressed even when He was on the Cross.

### **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

### **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

I dare to wonder if you are aware of the fact that much of the reason that led to ‘St; John the Divine’ writing his *Revelation*, was because he was deeply concerned that – in the face of the powerful political and commercial pressures of his day, it seemed almost impossible for people then to even begin to see that **Jesus is Lord** when all around them was the contrary creed that *Caesar is Lord*. One of the annual requirements for Roman citizens, faithful or otherwise, was to tug their forelock in nominated temples and recite that latter creed, so that their future – economic and otherwise – was assured for another year.

Part of the difficulty for believers in that day and age was that it seemed an almost impossible credo to utter. How could Jesus begin to be king when all the evidence around them appeared to prove the opposite. On top of that, to refuse to offer that pinch of incense on pagan altars would mean their reduction to second-class citizens at the very best.

Christos Kurios? Not Pygmalion likely, one might have said, in the face of the power and control of the then largest Empire the world had ever known. So how did John even begin to convince his reads that not only was the Christian *credo* true, but that it would also bring that Empire to its knees in due course? It must have seemed an impossible task. *For increasing numbers of people today, that same challenge exists, and a similar impossibility looms.*

In his writing, John was not predicting the end of the world at all, in spite of so many commentators’ attempts to show otherwise. In fact, John was making sure that his readers understood that the Parousia, the Return of Christ was a very long way off indeed. But most of all, John portrayed in that wonderful and remarkable book written in apocalyptic style, that the Kingship, the Lordship of Jesus operated and will always operate on a very different wave-length from the mode of usual human basis. Empires tend to be based on economic and very selfish approaches to life; the Kingdom of Christ works from the process of love, justice, forgiveness and self-giving.

There is another very interesting side to John’s assessment of the situation of his time. Not to put too fine a point on it, John was convinced that all human empire – of whatever time or nature – is bound to collapse from within, for as he puts it a number of times, evil turns out to be the cause of its own downfall. John’s writing is powerful stuff, and its impact is reduced only by the propensity of many Christians misunderstand what he was saying and how he was saying it.

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<sup>8</sup> At the time of writing these notes (7.07) George W Bush is being required by his Congress to do a long and hard rethink of the Iraq issue. Never, even in politics, does evil overcome evil. It only **multiplies it**.

One of the comments I make frequently, to people deeply concerned about ‘the way things are going’ is to remind them of much of what John (in fact the entire Bible) has to say on this subject, and to draw their attention to the fact that the very sight of our culture sinking into the quagmire of its own making is strong evidence indeed of the truth of the Gospel. John has expected the collapse of Empire long before it actually occurred, but his perception remains true. Rome has long gone, but Jesus remains. Modern empires<sup>9</sup> will bring themselves down in exactly the same way as Rome, purely and simply because they ignore the most basic of real human issues. Your Lord has never been guilty of that, nor should His people even contemplate the possibility of acting like empire.

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<sup>9</sup> Do not miss the fact that the USA thinks and acts like empire, and will go the same way as others