

All Saints' Day

Sunday 2nd November, 2008

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, οι αγιοι, the holy ones, the different ones. ¹ And their recognition exists because they stood out from hoi polloi (the rest, the many) by remaining true to the Gospel values in spite of contrary pressure. Here are no yes-men (yes-people? 'hollow men?') but people of integrity in a world that has forgotten the meaning and value of 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 as 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.

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 those fifty –odd years.

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. That is a path that many younger Christians have yet to make. 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.

And this 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 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.**

¹ For those unfamiliar with Revelation, it is worth noticing that this 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!

Sunday 9th November, 2008

Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday between 6th and 12th November

Sentence

Watch and be ready for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

Matt. 24:42

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 the blessed hope of everlasting life, which You have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Joshua 24:1 – 3 and 14 – 25

PSALM

78:1-7

EPISTLE

1 Thessalonians 4: 9 – 18

GOSPEL

Matthew 25: 1 – 13

NOTES ON THE READINGS

There is little difficulty observing the challenge that is offered by today's series of readings. Whilst it may seem a little naïve to try and relate Joshua's time to today, a little thought will make it clear that although the particular idols are different, the real challenge is nothing of the sort.

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

When I was young it was almost obligatory to look over the tops of one's glasses, so to speak, in utter superiority at the people of Joshua's time. Who ever could be so stupid as to worship idols? And the answer, these days in our culture, is almost anybody.

It is a mark of understanding the challenge of Joshua's day to stop and realize that, in spite of a dozen or more generations from Joseph's time, there was still the nostalgia for 'the gods of your forefathers.' It takes a long time and serious commitment for a people to leave even a dead past behind them, as a residual fear may well encourage the hedging of bets so to speak. (Remember the Abraham sagas where Isaac's wife had brought family gods with her.)

So this incident is well worth pondering, especially these days as such matters as New Age become most attractive for Generations X and Y. Idolatry is not dead, nor is ever likely to be. So Joshua challenged Israel to be loyal to the God Who brought them out of the land of slavery to freedom.

PSALM

What a simple yet potent Psalm. If parents of children conveyed their experience of God to the next generation, then life would be rather simpler. But it needs to be in ways relevant to kids, does it not! And never lose sight of the fact that part of the business of being a kid is to challenge the older ones. Without that there is little progress!

EPISTLE

And even the opening paragraph of the Epistle is simple and straightforward, live quietly has always been a focus of mine, but today's world promotes far more belligerent responses to life and to others.

When it comes to Paul's view of what is often called the 'Second Coming,' it is well worth taking the trouble to read his epistles in order of date of their having been written. To do so is to notice a gradual and then more strong move away from the immediacy of the Parousia, ... which would have taken some doing even in the First Century Church. In fact, by the time that John wrote Revelation, the generally accepted view of the Parousia was that it was well into the future. John's image of 1,000 years is strong evidence of that.

GOSPEL

So when it comes to the Gospel and Jesus' own words on the subject, it is important and interesting to see His own emphasis. You may well disagree with me on this subject, but it strikes me that the emphasis our Lord had was to underline the importance of being responsible. To be ready was to be responsible. To be lax was to fail.

My dear old Mum always had great difficulty with this parable, especially for the foolish girls. 'Why could not the others share?' was her constant plea. And while, in the overall scheme of things, Mum's complaint was valid, the issue that Jesus underlined was the need to be ready. That need was not a matter of saving one's own skin, but rather living life in the full knowledge that I am responsible for all of my actions, all of my attitudes, and all of my loyalties. To be operating with divided loyalties was to be letting down both the side and myself.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It is funny – for an old bloke like me – to see how often old and strongly held views about things have to subside under the weight of further information. When I was a kid, aborigines were regarded as primitives and without culture, but the more that Europeans (including myself) learnt about them, the less primitive they were seen. In fact, it is impossible to imagine that Europeans could have even survived in those indigenous circumstances .

Also, when I was young, the business of idolatry was regarded as so far buried in the past that even to ponder the possibility was to be pathetic. No one with any sense would begin to consider the worship of idols as a legitimate path to travel. But look at it now ??????????????????

Someone wrote, some years ago now, that when people stop believing in God, they do not believe in *nothing*. In fact they will believe in anything. And whoever wrote that really knew what he or she was talking about. If there is one thing that strikes me about so much of modern people in our culture it is the strange and convoluted naivety that seems to rule what passes for their minds. Even late night, recently, I was watching an ABC TV documentary on the 'Cars that ate China,' appalled to find that the pathetic western view of vehicle ownership is apparent and widespread in that country. When will we ever learn?

If you wonder where all this has come from, I simply report that my response to those who denigrate anyone who still believes in God ... is one of wonderment why such people do not think at all. They who are so critical of anyone who (they say) holds to outdated dogma strike me as strange that they do exactly what they complain of others. And the point is that dogma is not the issue, but the realities.

It was really remarkable of dear old (young?) Joshua to have raised the challenge to his fellows to make a clear commitment to the God Whom they had experienced over the previous generation and then some. As far as Joshua could see, the people of Israel had both the choice and responsibility of what view of life, if you will, to follow. And the choices then are not all that dissimilar to the choices now.

On the one hand, they had the choice of not much else than superstition, or this comparatively recent faith, far more tenable and tangible. Superstition is pretty much that business of assuming that the gods (or whatever else there is up there somewhere) can be manipulated to provide the goodies that people hold dear. It was a sort of cargo-cult concept that tends to be fairly clearly illustrated by TVs 'Deal or No Deal.' Or, if you are game to follow me, it is just as vividly evident in the back pages of most women's magazines. If you think me sexist, I simply report that I have not bothered to examine the girlie magazines on the basis of their sheer boredom.

This cargo-cult and totally unrealistic approach to life has as much substance to it as the proverbial castles in the air. Fortunately, the old Hebrew faith began to get its feet more solidly on the ground as time went by. Hebrew people were the first, I suspect, to see the great connection between 'religion' and justice in relationships. That must have been an enormous leap forward, and thank God for the ancient prophets from that part of the world. Little or nothing like it has ever emerged from any other source.

Sunday 16th November, 2008

Twenty-Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday between 13th & 19th November

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. It must have been a bit like the British experience of Churchill in the Second World War. 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 then 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 to 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 23rd November, 2008

Christ the King

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 short 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 the 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 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 were 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 Isaiah 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 is 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 k 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 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.

Sunday 30th November, 2008

First Sunday in Advent - Year B

Sentence

‘Heaven and earth will pass away,’ says the Lord, ‘but My words will not pass away.’

Mark 13:31

Collect

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which Your Son, Jesus Christ, came to visit us in great humility, than on the last day, when He shall come again in His glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal through Him Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 64: 1 – 9

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins.

Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, O LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people.

Psalm

80:1-7 & 17-19

Hear, O shepherd of Israel, You Who led Joseph like a flock: You that are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine out in glory

Before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh: stir up Your power and come and save us.

Restore us again, O Lord of Hosts: show us the light of Your countenance and we shall be saved

O Lord God of Hosts: how long will You be angry at Your people’s prayer?

You have fed them with the bread of tears: and given them tears to drink in good measure

You have made us the victims of our neighbours: and our enemies laugh us to scorn.

Restore us again, O Lord of Hosts: show us the light of Your countenance and we shall be saved

Let Your power rest upon the man at Your right hand: on that son of man whom You made so strong for Yourself

And so we shall not turn back from You: give us life and we shall call upon Your Name

Restore us again, O Lord of Hosts: show us the light of Your countenance and we shall be saved

Epistle

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge—because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you ea-

gerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

GOSPEL

Mark 13: 24 – 37

Jesus said “In those days, following that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

It has been mentioned before, but it bears repeating: there is nothing in religious history of any country or culture that even begins to parallel the Jewish line of prophets and their writings. Mind you, any reader needs to understand that Hebrew prophecy is no star-gazing future-predicting stuff, except in a strong but minor way. It is perhaps understood best when seen in terms the attempt to understand what God is saying to Israel in its history, and where God is aiming to take Israel – at the point at which the prophet was speaking. The whole business is essentially down-to-earth, and focusses on matters of justice and compassion. My best description of Hebrew prophecy is the activity of the various authors to look back to see where Israel has come from, and what has happened, to see where God is going with them from there.

In this particular and vivid passage, it might be easy to assume that Isaiah is looking for some sort of miraculous Divine intervention to provide solutions to all of Israel’s problems, political and social. At the time of writing, Israel would have been in exile in Babylon, or on its way back from there: and the huge issue would have been of reconstruction of nation, faith and temple. In the wake of the Indonesian and Sri Lankan tsunami of late 2004, or the hurricanes in the Gulf States of the USA, the enormous task of rebuilding can be visualised even by those not in the thick of it. It is all so heart-breaking and vast.

One of the magnificent insights into the whole ‘God’ business shows up in this brief passage, where Isaiah writes of *no God besides You, Who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him*. In most religions, past and sometimes present, God is perceived of as both utterly distant and completely disengaged from the usual daily grind of life. Israel had never seen God in that way, and could point to all manner of events and situation where God ‘got His hands dirty.’

So Isaiah – like us in the Season of Advent – should look for some sort of coming of God into our midst, to point the way, once again, to where real and lasting life and values are to be found. That is big enough agenda for anyone these days, is it not?

Psalm

This Psalm would appear to be either Exilic or post-Exilic, a time of great stress for Israel which was recovering from the harsh experience of first losing their homes and land, and then returning 70 years later to rebuild. The whole business was traumatic as you might imagine, and quite something of a learning curve. It was from the Exile that the synagogue arose, as an alternative to Temple for worship. And much of our modern approach to worship, with hymns, readings, prayers and sermons, stems from that harsh experience.

Epistle

It may well be a sign of my cynicism, but I implore those who would go off with the fairies here, that, after reading this intro to the Corinthians, that you also read on. This flowery language sits rather strangely with the hugely important issues that Paul deals with, in writing to this Church. In other words, it needs to be said that, whilst this may be the language of hope, there needs also to be an air of reality as well.

Please notice the important thing: that discipleship of Christ is designed to lead to a maturity of personhood. This maturity is not for the individual but for the group, the congregation, the community, the Church. One of the narrowing things that may ensue from *blameless* is that it may be taken somewhat personally and individually. Once again, the important outcome is maturity.

GOSPEL

There is a strange capacity of Christians to somehow manage to fail to see the wood by missing the trees. Some denominations seem to focus almost exclusively on what we call the Second Coming, whereas I have a more than sneaky suspicion that the Biblical emphasis lies quite elsewhere.

When Jesus required His followers to observe the situations surrounding them, was it a question of ‘keeping their noses clean’ or was it for something more significant? It strikes me that, in **this gigantic struggle between truth and falsehood that the People of God need first of all to recognize and follow truth**. At whatever cost. For that is the real issue. In other words, Jesus was – in a quite typical Hebrew manner – making sure that His followers understood that in front of them lay a period of great turmoil, as evil battled with good, and that they needed to understand very clearly where the right and true priorities lay. *It is by the silence of good people that evil triumphs*. God is involved in the struggle, as the Cross indicated. And God’s method of dealing with that issue is illustrated in that Cross. But He does not solve all the issues and problems for us, otherwise we would remain as ineffective incompetents! Nor does He ‘defeat’ evil by destroying its perpetrators.

Notes for a Sermon

If I had five dollars for every time someone, worried about the ‘way things are heading,’ asked me what I thought of the likely outcome for people, expressed their wishes that something or Someone somewhere would shake the living daylights out of everything, and bring more than a little peace and sense into life, I would be rather wealthy! As I rework this material (April 08) the Adventists are offering what they consider to be the Biblical approach to the huge issue, and the Christadelphians seem rarely to consider any *other* matter. Where does the truth lie? When we are faced by crises, big and small, we humans do long for some sort of suitable closure or resolution do we not? You could probably add a huge and long list to the sorts of situations in your life where you would love to have some fulfilment. You may well dispute the perception that force and war solves no issues at all but rather escalates them.

Can you now better understand the longings and yearnings of the prophet when he put the

words together that are our OT Lesson today. Isaiah was possibly in Babylon, expecting a return to Israel even if it meant one hell of a lot of hard work. ***He longed for a beginning to the action.*** He was aware of the fact that God was perfectly capable of bringing it all about, for had not JHWH brought Israel out of certain slavery and annihilation back in Moses' time, with a strong right hand and an outstretched arm? Isaiah – it has to be said – was right in the middle of a huge crisis for Israel, and had been for 60 years or more. When will it ever end?

The Gospel for today is looking in a very similar direction. In this apocalyptic section of Mark's Gospel – interesting to have it here in Advent, before Christmas! – there is another taste of a sense of doomsday and crisis, and shivers down spines. It is the sort of attitude that comes to the surface whenever people face an uncertain future. I have found it rather interesting to see how, for two or three decades now, the movie industry has produced quite a number of scary-scenario films. This is because the subject is a live one for many, many people; and it also provides something of a vicarious thrill where the audience can feel involved in something scary, and still go out from the cinema and have a nice hot coffee before going home to their warm and safe bed. But real life is not like that, for real life produces some real challenges.

There lies quite some of the unreality that underlines so much of today's view of life. It is a push-button one, where huge problems are expected to be erased simply by pressing the delete key. In the past few days, the US President has allocated a vast sum to 'rescue' the financial 'industry' from its self-made and self-driven calamity. I suspect that much of the coming angst will result from the refusal of financial giants to be affected by the utterly unjust and usurious outcomes of its actions. So nobody will ever learn.

Notice in that OT lesson that Isaiah saw some of the genesis of such times as being the responsibility of ordinary humans. *'No one calls on Your name or strives to lay hold on You, You have hidden Your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins.'* Here is no breast-beating exercise, but a challenge to face life's realities head on.

It may sound all far too old-fashioned to talk of sins these days, but I reckon we need to have a whole new and fresh look at what the old Bible has to say on this subject. It is not a matter of me having dirtied my pure soul by sinning. It is very much a matter that ***if I disregard and turn my back on the old verities of justice, truth, compassion, integrity and love, then I am disconnecting myself not only from reality but also from YOU. And the more I do that, the more relationships disintegrate, personal, social, national and even international.*** And the answer to the huge problems is NOT to look for some small or big 'm' Messiah who will do it all for me. The answer to the issue begins with me, and you, and each other individual person, to make the move back to truth. The reason for the shift back is not in order to avoid repercussions; rather, it is so that life can become significant and valuable once again.

When Isaiah (or anyone else in Old Testament or New) looked to the God Who rescues His people from the folly of their own making, they did not expect some BIG GURU to come and do it for them. In fact, Isaiah himself, in his absolutely remarkable series of Servant Songs, saw ever so clearly that, when God is at work, it is invariably with human input. There is ever the Abraham, the Moses, the David, Mary, Jesus, Peter and Paul.

So do not go looking for an escape route. Start wondering how and what the change can begin with you.

As we celebrate Advent, celebrating the Lord Who comes among us, please stop long enough to see that when He does come, it is not with some sort of whirlwind, whiz-bang answer to amaze everyone and take their breath away. He comes in the quiet stillness of our conviction to follow Him into the enormous challenge that He puts in front of us. *This is one of the reasons why Jesus disappointed the Jews of His own day, and continues to disappoint others.*