

Sentence

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. Jesus said, 'This is the great commandment, and a second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

Collect

O God, Whom to follow is to risk our whole lives, as Ruth and Naomi loved and held to one another, abandoning the past, so may we also not be divided, and travel together into that land where You will lead us, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Ruth 1: 1 - 18

PSALM

146

EPISTLE

Hebrews 9: 11-15

GOSPEL

Mark 12: 13 – 34 (pt)

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

In one of the most moving incidents recorded in the Old Testament, this tale of Naomi and Ruth rates as one of the best. Not only does it portray an example of faithfulness in the extreme, but it illustrates something that tends to be forgotten in the annals of religious development.

On top of that, there is the quiet but persistent OT evidence of the contribution made by women in the overall scheme of things. One tends to get the picture that Hebrew culture was male-dominated, and that was the way many males preferred it to be. However, in the face of patriarchal dominance, we have stories such as this arise. See also the Book of Esther. And I dare you to see that the second Creation story (Genesis 2) was written around this period of Jewish history or somewhat later, and constituted the attempt by that author to make it clear that he (she?) saw the relationship of the sexes very differently. Few people over the centuries have noticed the quiet attempt to express 'difference and equality' in 'bone of my bone' and of the rib.

Psalms

Almost as if to underline one of the comments above, this Psalm illustrates a quantum leap from the traditional view of religion, to where the Hebrew faith stood. Most contemporary religion tended to see worship in terms of forcing the hands of the gods, by means of ritual and action, to get whatever it was they wanted: good crops, fertile wives, or whatever. This Psalm may sound a little naïve, but please notice that the author saw the need for human response to God to be in terms of expressing in their life the characteristics of Yahweh. Notice the emphasis on justice and faithfulness, and the care and concern of those who were seen to be alien. (One can hear an echo of the situation in which Ruth found herself.)

Epistle

It would appear, to my small mind, that today's Epistle is more a matter of a passage from Hebrews than for any particular link with the rest of the readings. This is not to denigrate the reading at all, of course. Mind you, modern Christians may find it a little hard to get a handle on it, especially as the emphasis tends to focus more on heaven than on earth. After all is said and done, this passage does of course, underline the superiority of Jesus' High Priesthood and validate it as of eternal significance. That is pretty powerful stuff!

Gospel

After the comments on the Epistle, it may be necessary to moderate those thoughts a little. This well-known incident of paying taxes to Caesar does itself offer something of a significant link between what we may call 'heaven and earth.' As mentioned above, quite something of the genius of Hebrew faith was its enormous contribution in making us all see that a real response to God calls for a real response to life and the present realities.

In this first incident, Jesus was not simply requiring people to pay their taxes. He was, in fact, calling for responsibility to be shown in their involvement in ordinary society. Any government, any 'powers that be,' have both to rely on the support of the community at large, and respond seriously to that particular role that it theirs. In other words, we of the world need each other. And if I am going to be part of the community, then I have to pay my share of the cost of it. I use the roads; I use electricity and water. And my rubbish is picked up each week and my mail manages to arrive in reasonable time. To refuse to be part of that community is to play my part in bringing down the effectiveness of that community. If I follow Christ, I cannot be part of that collapse.

Clearly, Jesus takes ordinary and normal life quite seriously – and so should we.

The second snapshot in this passage is not all that dissimilar. The *Shema Isarel* is the simplest and yet most significant of creeds, emphasizing as it does both our response to God and to each other. And the two are interconnected, and cannot be divided. If I am what may be called a 'true believer,' then there is no way that I can turn my back on you, wherever you are. Neighbour you are, and neighbour you will always remain.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It was many years ago now, but the story will bear retelling.. A discussion was raging between a young man who had decided to step outside normal society because he classified it as effete and not worthy of his attention or involvement. He was convinced of the veracity of his stand against the rest of us, and determined to have nothing to do with us. I have no great fight with anyone who thinks that way, and said so. However, I had some difficulty with the stance of this young man - and had the hide to say so.

"How do you manage to survive financially?" I asked the young Turk, knowing the answer already, but wanting his answer. 'I am on the dole!' he answered – tho' even in those distant days it would have been far too little to live on, so Mum and Dad had to make up the shortfall. 'Dole?' I responded, 'from an effete society?' How can you possibly be at all honest in rejecting the very society on which you depend like a parasite?' It was a little strong language I suspect, but it did the required job of getting under the skin of the young rebel. He was rather angry with me initially, as well he might have been. His house of cards had been brought tumbling down.

To his credit, I have to close the story by reporting his fairly rapid change of direction. It is almost comic to report that the said gentleman is now quite something of a notable person in the very society he abhorred, and you may well find his name in national newspapers these days. And he is no fool!

I often refer to my growing age, not to apply for some sort of attention, but to draw attention to some not-very-pleasant changes to the very society referred to above. I can recall a time when the story of Naomi and Ruth was regarded as 'the way it should have been' rather than some sort of extraordinary example. People back in those years valued honesty and commitment, and most people showed it within family and community. Nowadays things have moved away from that to 'what's in it for me?' And the disintegration of relationships tend to illustrate the downward spiral of life.

You may be somewhat like me in what follows: it annoys me intensely when people have shots at 'religion' especially when they regard it as quite stupid to believe in things that are regarded as invisible and therefore as invalid. In all honesty it has to be said that the Church and its members bear quite something of the marks of the relational breakdowns just referred to, and sometimes that is expressed in quite hideous

ways. But the Faith has never been a matter of believing in the incredible, or crossing one's fingers and hoping in the intangible. \It is far more significant than that.

From that OT Lesson today we have that remarkable tale of Naomi and Ruth. Who knows to what extent Ruth's response expressed profound gratitude for the constancy and affection of the mother-in-law? Whatever produced that lovely response, the actions of Ruth in her persistence resulted in all sorts of ramifications for the future. Ruth is one of the significant – if Gentile! – forebears of Jesus. Just ponder a moment what would have happened if Ruth decided to go along with Orpah!

Oddly enough, for me to whom Psalms often have little contribution to make, today's Psalm underlines the real nature of religion as understood by those ancient Hebrews. (Pity more of the present-day ones don't see things similarly.) One of the things that many *Christians* do not catch sight of is the necessity of reflecting the characteristics of the Father. In this Psalm, the author not only saw but rejoiced in the religion or faith that attempted to do just that. If one says that God is like such and such, it can be put in another and perhaps more forceful way: that such issues are always humanly and eternally important. Keeping faith is as important a human issue as it is Divine. Only so can I be sure of you, only so can I trust you. Justice is ever an important issue in human relationships, though when we talk 'justice' we need to ensure that we are not really saying 'vengeance.' Those two are worlds apart. Sharing necessities is something that may well be forced on us in decades to come; caring about people from different and alien cultures is something today's people are struggling with. But it will have to happen in this world which is fast becoming a global village. And there is a lot more in that Psalm to ponder And follow.

We have yet to touch on the Gospel, and there is a world of exploration there, too. We are part of a community and need to see the need to live as such. Who said it was some sort of escape from reality if one is going to be a follower of Jesus

Sunday 1st November, 2009

All Saints' Day

Sentence

A great multitude from every nation and tribe and people and language cried with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God Who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb." **Revelation 7: 10**

Collect

Eternal God, neither death nor life 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.
Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Isaiah 25: 6 – 9

PSALM

24

Epistle

Revelation 21: 1 – 6a

GOSPEL

John 11: 32 – 44

NOTES ON THE READINGS.....

Old Testament

It strikes me as rather sad that so many Christians seem to have a distinct myopia when it comes to reading and understanding the Scriptures, either Old Testament or New. Not only did Isaiah anticipate life to come, but he also looked for the reign of God on earth. Now I suspect that a closer and clearer reading of the Scriptures will indicate quite clearly, that the Faith is about the redemption of all creation from the terrible capacity of humans to be evil, self-centred and isolated from God. The Shema Israel posits the issue, about loving God and your neighbour. This is the goal and aim of Judaic-Christian faith, and at this stage it must be seen that heaven is a sort of hope and goal, both for God and for us. It is about gathering like-minded people who long for truth, justice, compassion and love – people who have the same passion as God has. More on this anon.

Psalm

For people who have been brought up on the view of salvation that – as mentioned above -tends to be so general, But look at that Psalm again, and see that the direction that the Faith – Old Testament certainly – takes people is in the direction of integrity and truth. Call 'salvation by works' **if you dare, but it is nothing of the sort.** It is rather pointing in the opposite direction to much of today's Western culture at least, where greed and dishonesty is the preferred goal. Small wonder that life is disintegrating! Smaller wonder that the Faith points to a far more creative and caring goal.

For the Epistle

You have picked the wrong person if you are expecting me to talk some 'end of the world' scenario. That was not John's picture at all, and anyone who dares to tread in that foolish direction misses the point entirely. John was not pointing to the end of the world, but in fact, at the same issue mentioned above, in that recurring human idiocy that chooses self-aggrandizement to service. Without space to fill in the picture here, John's goal in writing this fascinating book was to encourage those Christians who were finding it increasingly difficult to live and preach that 'Christ is Lord,' (χριστος κυριος) when the only real evidence was that Caesar was Lord. John was encouraging his people to see and think deeper, to see that the direction Caesar was taking them was towards the destruction of life and community by the chase for wealth and luxury.

John was making it clear that (a) the whole Faith was designed to show the falsity of popular directions and that (b) God Himself is the guarantor of the true values of life

GOSPEL

I confess to being quite bemused by the choice of Gospel for this particular day. The story of the raising of Lazarus is formative in Jesus' preparation of His disciples for His coming death – and resurrection, but any connection to saints and sainthood really does bypass me.

As to the story itself, its real impact was on trying to take off the blinkers from Mary and Martha, and even Lazarus come to that. It was an exercise in being involved in an encounter with death, the loss of a loved one, and the remarkable recovery from that loss. In fact, it was Jesus indicating that He is Lord even over death, and that is something that takes more than a little grabbing hold.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It strikes me that we have been experiencing, in recent decades, something of an invasion from the US of A, with its widespread celebration of All Saints' – and more, All Souls' Day. Halloween by its other name. And I guess that my bias shows when I wonder at the need of giving much attention to either. Part of the problem, when it comes to saints, is the way in which even the wider Church has distorted sainthood out of all proportion.

My point is simple: look back over the Biblical saints and what do you see? The answer is just as simple: an almost singular involvement of what we may well call 'little people' who had been true to their sense of calling, and were loyal and committed regardless of the contrary circumstances. No great noise and blah: no great 'look at me' like some movie star. Just ordinary people doing what they saw was their job and calling. And what has it changed to? All the fuss and bother and blather about miracles, about so much untruth, and raising some of the so-called saints almost to demigod proportion. The appeal of Mary – from where I sit – is that rather simple, even naive young lady was prepared to be the mother of Jesus! When she is turned into something more, she is placed so far beyond our own reach and expectation that surely we are left with the clear perception that anything like that is so far beyond me **that it is impossible to contemplate that God may be calling me to anything.**

It is rather like the high awards that countries like ours award to the great ones: OAM and OBE are handed out to 'important ones,' and in my considered opinion, the very ones who should be awarded are the ones who never receive the slightest recognition. No, this is not sour grapes: it is simply that I have seen so many genuine and constant givers of themselves never even considered because they have never been noticed.

Not much of a sermon on All Saint's Day is it. You are one of the saints, one of God's people, and He at least takes good and solid notice of His loving ones. And I suspect that you are not all that interested in gongs, awards, or even much in the way of recognition.

Sunday 8th November, 2009
Pentecost.

Twenty-Third Sunday after

Sentence

Give and it will be given to you, a good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over. It will be put in your lap. And the measure you give will be the measure you get back. *Luke 6:38*

Collect

O God Whose blessed Son came into the world that He might destroy the works of evil and make us Your children and heirs of eternal life; grant that, having this hope, we may purify ourselves as He is pure, that when He comes again with power and great glory, we may be made like Him in His eternal and glorious kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Ruth 3:1 – 5 and 4:3 – 17

Psalm

127

Epistle

Hebrews 9: 23 – 28

GOSPEL

Mark 12: 38 – 44

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

It may all sound a little olde worlde or twee, but themes were the patterns of life in that distant past, and like all good old stories, it had a happy ending. While the customs may seem a little dated and outlandish, all needs were met in the process of what happened, but never forget that (a) it was a matter of women at work here in God's vineyard, and (b) it was a Gentile woman who turned out to be a progenitor of our Lord. If God is not an exclusivist, then there is no point in us being so.

Psalm

I guess in a way that this sums up all that precedes it in today's Readings. Both in the process and in the outcome, those involved put their lives and futures in God's hands, and although it worked out through human involvement, it still reached its point and purpose in God's design. Mind you, as in most such cases, we can only be sure of that as we look back,

Epistle

I suspect that many people find considerable confusion in the writings of this author. Part of the reason lies in the fact that you may not have a lot of Hebrew in your heritage. We tend to think and express things differently in our culture, but other ways of doing and thinking are not thus rendered invalid.

There is an interesting way of connecting heavenly and earthly events and views here. St. John shows up similar means of expression in Revelation where what happens in heaven is echoed on earth. Perhaps it is another way of saying what is of permanent and eternal importance (the heavenly thing) needs to be done and stated in the realm of our own experience and existence. The final outcome of what the author is on about is clear really; so do not get hung up on the way that he says it.

GOSPEL

I find it fascinating to realize that human beings do not change all that much in spite of historical and cultural differences. There are always peacock people with us, and always the ordinary, no-fuss variety. And for reasons best known to themselves, the former consider themselves superior. Our Lord was never taken in by such folk or their pretensions.

On the other hand, what I call 'the little people' simply get on with their lives, usually far more generous than those with all the pomp and wealth. Jesus was never in the slightest doubt as to whom He related best, and for good reason.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

There is often a fairly strong reason why Christians are often charged with being 'against the world' and somewhat troglodytic. I have mentioned elsewhere something of the struggle even with my children, as they tend to belong to a later generation, not quite up to X. However, there has been some rethink by younger people as the World Financial Crisis has done its job in bringing some factors back to balance, and Global Warming perhaps adding to the rethink.

If there is one aspect of life that tends to be reflected in almost all cultures and countries, it is the determination of the powerful ones to advertise both their power and wealth and demanding all the best that the country has to give. Even some religious people fall victim (or demand the position) and become very much a part of the problem. As the Gospel reminds us, in Jesus' day the practice was rampant. Today's world tends to have it in terms of salaries and perks of CEOs, where the matter is totally beyond reality.

Contrast that, if you will, with the story of Ruth and Naomi, a beautiful and moving tale of tragedy and ill fortune, made remarkably more touching by the commitment of daughter-in-law (of a different race!) to a mother of her late husband. There is a story of quite lovely proportion, of self-giving quite beyond the norm. It was a most moving moment when, at our youngest daughter's wedding, this passage was chosen as one of the readings. 'There was hardly a dry eye in the house.'

I wonder whether the rich and powerful ever stop to ponder what is important in life, and what is marginal. I have to say that my experience of 'pretty people' is that such a title is a misnomer of the first order, and selfishness and refusal of ordinary human responses is obligatory. On the other hand, ordinary little people seem to have a far more balanced perception of what is important and what is not. And are not the basics of life really quite simple and uncomplicated? Or am I fooling myself?

The reason that Christians tend to be so against today's life-style of self-aggrandizement is that it leaves almost every other person right out of the equation. Bugger you Jack, I am all right. And it does not need to be the 'high and holy ones' who have such a blind stare. Do you not meet, constantly, even little people who demand their priority with great rudeness and pomposity?

Life's reality does have a habit of blowing down our proud houses of cards every now and again. And it all comes back to the business of what is true and just, for those capacities have a habit of returning from the dead. It is not all that long ago that the film 'Greed' was greeted with yells of delight. And it did not take long for the outcome of that pattern to blow up in everyone's faces.

Life is for everyone, not just a favoured few. Faith is for everyone too, though there seem to be rather fewer takers, for some reason. Peace and even prosperity is far more likely to ensue when the gentler path is chosen by all. And there can be little fight against that!

Sunday 15th November 2009
Pentecost

Twenty fourth Sunday after

Sentence

The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; He will give strength to His king, and exalt the power of His anointed

1 Sam. 2.20

Collect

Almighty God, Whose sovereign 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

1 Samuel 1:4 – 20

PSALM

The Song of Hannah

EPISTLE

Hebrews 10: 11-14 & 19 – 25

GOSPEL

MARK 13: 1 – 11

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament and Psalm

The story of Hannah and Samuel is closely related to that of Mary, mother of our Lord. Even today's 'Psalm' is Hannah's song and an earlier prototype for the *Magnificat*. You will notice the similarities of course, as you read it through.

Whilst the story of Hannah is well-known (or I hope it is) there is still room to catch sight of the picture of the underdog being brought to the fore by God. It is worth remembering that, as the Biblical tale unfolds, it is more often than not the little but faithful person who becomes the instrument of God in the real world. Where would Hebrew history be without Samuel? (And not what his name means)

Epistle

If you find the Hebrews reading a little hard to follow, it may help to realize that the author of this epistle was writing and thinking from a not dissimilar standpoint as Ezekiel centuries before him. Ezekiel was the priest, or potential priest, and saw the experience of the Exile through the eyes of one who was trained to be priest. So the picture he presented was highly coloured. So too, it seems to me, is this book. If, then, you are not very aware of the workings of priesthood, you may well be bemused by the references to it.

However the real point is clear: that in Christ the way has been made open to the highest tribunal, and that makes for greater clarity about what is important. The author's stress on worshipping together is not just a matter of having a good sized mob in Church. It is the recognition, rather lost on today's view of things, of the need of **community. God always works through community, Israel and then the Church.** And the belonging together and the learning from each other is an essential we all need. As I said to someone quite recently, I am totally unable to be me without you; and vice versa.

Gospel

I say it each year: whenever we come across the apocalyptic passages in the Gospels for Sunday, you can bet your sweet life that Advent is just around the corner. Mind you, far too many people get far too excited with such passages as this because they really do miss the point. Sadly, many people seem to love doomsday stuff, and point to wars and earthquakes as signs of the End. By 'End,' of course, those people

tend to mean the Second Coming of Jesus. That is not the issue here in this passage or in similar apocalyptic ones.

To put it most simply, such passages point to the *telos* (τέλος) which is not the end but the goal, in this case, of life and history. The goal then has far more to do with the conflict between good and evil, and the defeat of the latter. This, of course, is a constant, not a final experience. The Cross is ‘telos,’ and so it would be for the Twelve as they came to terms with a rather different outcome than expected.

As a sort of side issue, when one encounters debate on the more recent translation of the Lord’s Prayer and its (proper) translation of ‘save us from the time of trial,’ it is making the point that when the People of God, individual or corporate, come up against the pressure to turn away from the faith and choose evil, then they (we!!!) need the constant reminder of the conflict and the powerful presence of the Christ.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I guess this is as good a time as any to explore this fascinating passage from Mark, as we live in a day and age when so much rather silly and misleading material circulates on what was once fondly called ‘The Second Coming of Christ.’ It is all tied up with the doomsday sort of material that many people other than believers love to dawdle with, as so many films of recent decades emphasise. There, it seems, is the chance to be titillated without risk, sitting in the protected comfort of the cinema. And there lies a great danger, really – the issue is raised and the point avoided.

Here towards the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry, with the crisis of the Cross coming up fast, Jesus had the problem of the hayseed disciples from the bush, so to speak, being bemused – as traditionally – with the wonders of the Big Smoke. Tales abound in Aussie history of bushmen in the city gazing skywards at tall buildings, and that was at a time when 10 or 12 storeys was the norm. The point is really that for the Twelve, all those buildings represented, as they are supposed to represent, the power and permanence of human skill and control. *Jesus was aware, painfully, of their temporary nature.*

As the disciples were so bemused, Jesus made it clear that they needed to look closer, see further, and have a far wider perspective on life and history and direction and purpose. If I depend on the stability of the dollar, then I am being remarkably foolish and naïve. There is no such thing. And that was what Jesus emphasised in this incident recorded by Mark. ‘Watch it,’ Jesus was saying very forcefully, and very Jewishly, ‘things are far from what they seem, and you need to separate the propaganda from the reality.’

When our Lord anticipated the destruction of the city – which as you will know, occurred in 70 AD, - he was not pointing to the ‘End’ but to something rather more immediate and more threatening. It was the disciples who decided that He was talking about the end of the world! And He was not. So what was His emphasis?

Maybe you need to read between the lines, or maybe it would help to be more familiar with the really quite common Biblical use of apocalyptic writings and sayings. Whenever this style of language was used, it had particular and yet somewhat limited focus and emphasis. Earthquakes and stars falling – in this imagery – have nothing to do with natural disasters, but everything to do with what we may call political ones. Daniel uses this form as does Ezekiel, and other of the Old Testament prophets, as of course does John in *Revelation*.

Sunday 22nd November, 2009

Last Sunday after Pentecost
Christ the King

Sentence

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing.
Rev'n 5:12

Collect

Everlasting God, Whose will it is to restore all things in Your beloved Son, our Lord and King; grant that the people of the earth, now divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under His gentle and loving rule, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever **Amen**

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

2 Samuel 23: 1 – 7

PSALM

132:1 – 12

FOR THE EPISTLE

Revelation 1: 4b – 8

GOSPEL

John 18: 33 – 37

NOTES ON THE READINGS

This may well seem a matter of 'apropos of nothing,' but I had, recently, a rather strong and vehement discussion with a parishioner about the 'irrelevance of the Faith,' or of some expressions and references of it. That debate had to do with 'body and blood' and this week the issue, surely is about the nature of 'Kingship. Whilst it can well be said that kings and their ilk are all quite somewhat passé, the reality of leadership is far from dead, irrelevant or unimportant.

True, we need to do some Biblical and mental translations from OT times especially, but unless we do, we are so far from the Biblical (and very human) reality as to miss out entirely on what is being said. Hopefully, in the following sections, something of that translation will become perfectly obvious, though I suspect it is clear to you already.

Old Testament Lesson

The modern reader may well disagree somewhat with David's self-assessment here, but the direction he was pointing was, and remains completely valid. Whenever Kingship is properly looked at in the OT, you will find reiterated, constantly, the focus on justice, truth and honesty. This is well recognised as a prerequisite in any leader, Jewish or Gentile, Old Testament or New, modern or ancient. It is and will be always, the way life is designed, and any variation from that will bring about the collapse of a country, culture or civilisation that turns its back on the ancient verities. History itself teaches you that, and even those who most vehemently preach their 'Christianity' these days seem to be the very ones that have refused to respond to the Biblical imperatives. No names; no pack drills.

Do not see this so much as God's judgement on people. It is rather the almost certain outcome of peoples, races and cultures making false and self-directed decisions.

Psalms

Once again, the words of the Psalm and the reality of Davidic history tend to leave one wondering if this is not just some sort of propaganda about David. Even if it is, there is the clear call to the basics of life and leadership with the emphasis on the Divine at the centre after which other issues should fall into line. It is rather interesting to note that the failure in the prospect expressed in the last two verses of today's Psalm spelt out the collapse of the Hebrew kingdom(s) for the very reason promulgated here.

Epistle

Of all the Biblical books most misunderstood, Revelation has to take the cake. And that is a very great pity as its message is not all that different to all that has been mentioned so far. Here in the prologue, so

to speak, John points up, as he emphasised more fully later in the book, quite something of the nature of Jesus' Kingship. (If 'King' bothers you, feel perfectly free to replace it with 'Leader.')

Although at this point in his book, John does not spell out the nature of that leadership, he has already given clear clues in the Gospel.¹ What is more, John makes it clear here, from previous Biblical emphasis² that the People of God have the same role and pattern of leadership as does God Himself. That 'coming with the clouds' is not promise of a visual nature, but rather the statement that, sooner or later, all humanity is going to have to recognize the validity of the Gospel, especially in terms of leadership in justice, truth, integrity, and compassion. 'Clouds' tends to be Hebrew euphemism for Divine authority. Look up the use of that imagery in OT and New.

It is John, incidentally, who makes it clear that Jesus is most clearly King when He enthroned on the Cross.

Gospel

Not only does Pilate cop a little more flak that he should, but also millions of followers over the years have misunderstood Jesus' words about 'not of this world.' Poor old Pilate was too afraid for his own skin to follow his intuition and that of his wife. Pilate's subsequent history was to be as a discard even from Empire.

When Jesus spoke about 'not of this world,' He was not suggesting unearthly, but rather vastly different. Power and kingship in ordinary human terms has to do with control, force, and usually results in all manner of falsehood and impoverishment to reach, and to maintain its end. As in warfare, truth is the first casualty, and justice tends to be the next drop. Keen observers will notice that even modern leaders who attempt to 'spin' out of such obvious expressions of power, resort to force – and all the talk of democracy is little more than propaganda.

Jesus' view of leadership is vastly different, and calls on no military means to gain progress. As one looks more closely to the pattern Jesus set, the old verities of justice, truth and integrity emerge along with the high importance placed on humans, individual and corporate. In His view of leading, love and compassion, forgiveness and repentance, responding to the total picture, and providing room to move for each person is the imperative.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It is funny how all things change yet somehow remain the same. Today we go on quite a journey if you will come, but it is one that may help to widen horizons and check the validity of Gospel and Faith.

As mentioned earlier, John's *Revelation* tends to be seen as a scary, 'end-of-the-world' doomsday thing, when little could be further from the truth. The reality is far more down-to-earth, and something from which we can well learn.

John was writing towards the end of the first century, when (you may be surprised) the third-generation Church was, he felt, tending to lose its way. As the aged Evangelist and elder statesman of the Church was exiled on Patmos he had the time and the opportunity to put down on paper what – I more than suspect – he had been considering for decades. It would seem that there were many in the Church who were losing direction somewhat because, although the Christian conviction that Christ is Lord (Χριστός Κύριος) there was little evidence to establish anything like the veracity of that credo. If anyone was Caesar, it was the Roman Emperor and in spite of wide evidence of the insanity of some, there was no doubting the power, control, military might and financial strength of Empire. (What's new, pussycat?) John's conviction was that the Church needed to stop and look again at where realities were, and to respond to them properly and significantly.

His problem, obviously, was to get people to see something they had probably never stopped to consider. That is, the real and true nature of kingship, leadership, and where the lasting values lie.

Put simply, John had become aware, painfully almost certainly, that the human view of strong leadership has nothing to do with the lasting and real nature of the same. We humans, in ancient and Adamic

¹ Some debate rages about the authorship of Gospel and Revelation – I remain stuck with the conviction that the Apostle wrote both.

² Exodus 19 just prior to the Decalogue being given

pattern, look for strong leaders, and when we do, we surrender, sometimes without being aware, our hold on either leaders or on integrity. This is the process that enabled the emergence of Adolph Hitler, in a country *longing* for a strong leader – which they got, with bells on. The damage caused in those decades reverberate still. More recent history shows that we have learnt sweet absolute nothing from even recent past history, and so the mistakes and disasters of the past return to haunt us all.

So human concepts of leadership tend, terribly easily, to revert to little more than vast ego-trips, self-obsessed people demanding total allegiance to one person's vision, however distorted. It is not only political leadership where this crack emerges, but almost anywhere that self-obsession holds sway: watch the film and TV world, sport, too these days, and in areas of music, the arts. Obviously not all areas are self-ridden, but more and more people are encouraged to demand whatever they want, in spite of the ill-effects on others. *Or they will provide some sort of spin that is designed to put people off seeing the realities so they can continue with the damage.*

Contrast all that with the sort of leadership, kingship if you like, image and reality that Jesus has been offering for millennia, and in fact Judaism has been heralding for centuries before that. From the prophets before the Exile, to those involved in that huge event for Israel, there has been seen the clear factors that human leadership needs to have what we may describe as a divine or holy³ factor that responds far more truly to the given situation, in terms of the total reality, the complete truth, and the necessary justice that takes into account the effect on all those involved in the given situation. No spin, no bluff, no propaganda, no baloney.⁴

³ No, I am not off with the fairies. Are you aware of the connection between 'holy' and 'different'?

⁴ Modesty forbids me from using the great Australian adjective that seems to say it all!

Sentence

Stand up and raise your heads; your redemption is drawing near.

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, that 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

Jeremiah 33:14 –16

The days are coming, says the Lord, when I shall bestow on Israel and Judah all the blessings I have promised them. In those days, at that time, I shall make a righteous Branch spring from David's line; he will maintain law and justice in the land. In those days Judah will be kept safe and Jerusalem will live undisturbed. This will be the name given to him: The Lord our Righteousness.

PSALM

25:1 – 10

In You O Lord my God, have I put my hope: in You have I trusted, let me not be ashamed, not let my enemies triumph over me.

Let none who wait for You be put to shame: let those that break faith be confounded and gain nothing.

Show me Your ways O Lord: and teach me Your paths

Lead me in the way of Your truth and teach me: for You are the God of my salvation

In You have I hoped all the day long: because of Your goodness O Lord.

Call to mind Your compassion and Your loving-kindness: for they are from of old

Remember not the sins of my youth: nor my transgressions: but according to Your mercy, think on me

Good and upright is the Lord: therefore will He direct sinners in the way

The meek He will guide in the path of justice: and teach the humble His ways

EPISTLE

1 Thessalonians 3: 9 – 13

What thanks can we give to God in return for you? What thanks for all the joy you have brought us, making us rejoice before our God while we pray most earnestly night and day to be allowed to see you again and to make good whatever is lacking in your faith? May our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, open the way for us to come to you; and may the Lord make your love increase and overflow to one another and to everyone, as our love does to you. May he make your hearts firm, so that you may stand before our God and Father holy and faultless when our Lord Jesus comes with all those who are his own.

GOSPEL

Luke 21: 25 – 38

Jesus said, "Portents will appear in sun and moon and stars. On earth nations will stand helpless, not knowing which way to turn from the roar and surge of the sea. People will faint with terror at the thought of all that is coming upon the world; for the celestial powers will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When all this begins to happen, stand upright and hold your heads high, because your liberation is near."

He told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, or at any other tree. As soon as it buds, you can see for yourselves that summer is near. In the same way, when you see all this happening, you may know that the kingdom of God is near. "Truly I tell you: the present generation will live to see it all. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. Be on your guard; do not let your minds be dulled by dissipation and drunkenness and worldly cares so that the great day catches you suddenly like a trap; for that day will come on everyone, the whole world over. Be on the alert, praying at all times for strength to pass safely through all that is coming and to stand in the presence of the Son of Man."

His days were given to teaching in the temple; every evening he would leave the city and spend the night on the hill called Olivet. And in the early morning the people flocked to listen to him in the temple.

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Advent often seems to have some strange effects on people, and for some of them the end of the world is their theme. It may come as some surprise that it is neither the Biblical nor the Prayer Book emphasis. It is often good counsel to read the fine print, and not just see what we think we want to see. There is certainly a strong challenge to be true to Christ and to have a strong air of realism about you, but that does not give any reason to race off after the fairies. Feet need to be kept very much on the ground. The following notes may offer some direction to head

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

It is very sad to find how few people either understand the OT prophets properly and/or go off with some wild fantasy about the ‘times of the end’ or such. Please look closely at the direction that Jeremiah points, and the emphasis he lays. It is about the promise of real leadership in life, from the Scion of David. From the Christian’s perspective, this is pointing to Jesus, of course, and note that Jeremiah writes about law and justice in the land. For some obscure and probably very selfish reason, the Biblical Faith has been turned into an escape from present reality. Historically, since the time of the Old Testament prophets, the Faith has focussed almost exclusively on the issues always current and immediate for ordinary human beings.

The genius of the Old Testament prophets lies in the fact that they were no star-gazers into some uncertain future, but rather spokespersons for God, which meant ‘telling it like it is’ into their own day and age and culture. Dispute this with me if you will, but before you do, spend quite some time reading through the Old Testament prophets, major and minor, and then read the Gospels as if you had not read them before.

Psalm

If you spend a few moments stopping to see the emphasis of the ancient psalmist, you will find it just as mentioned above relative to the prophets.

Epistle

I guess it has been all rather too easy (and somewhat destructive at that) for Christians to see that the goal of their believing is to be ‘pure, holy and faultless’ when Christ comes, in order to be accepted into paradise. The real reason for living at the Christ level is, (read the Scriptures again) is *so to reflect the character of the Father that (a) others may see God clearly and respond to Him, and (b) that others’ lives may be affected positively by those who follow Christ and live for others*.

GOSPEL

Ever since my youth, I have been implored to be expectant of our Lord’s return and live today as if it is my last. In a way there is nothing wrong with that, **except** that my focus would then be almost entirely on myself. When Scripture presents in apocalyptic language, please stop and realize what is being focussed. For some reason, few people seem to understand the point, purpose and useage of apocalyptic language. It has never been ‘end of the world’ stuff, but rather the call to respond to cultures and attitudes that militate against truth, justice and integrity.

E.g., Daniel’s apocalyptic section is a sort of history written backwards.⁴ There the author points up the damage and destruction of people and societies wrought by the ancient kingdoms and empires. The author also points to the eternal value of the kingdom of the Son of Man, where those ancient verities are focal. Those who follow that Son of Man are expected to express their adherence to the values of the Ancient of Days.⁴

So here is no end of world scenario: the focus is on remaining true to Gospel in the various crises of evil versus good which arise in most of not all generations. That period following the Crucifixion of Christ was an especially challenging time, as Jesus’ followers were under extreme pressure to recant their new allegiances. That is very difficult, at a time when one has had little time to explore the realities of the Gospel, so fresh in their minds.

Notes for a sermon

The commencement of the Season of Advent may well go un-noticed by many Christians, even Anglicans. And that is a pity, because the whole idea of the Church Year and Seasons and all that stuff is designed to present the congregation with the Faith in all its breadth of vision. In fact it is designed to avoid the possibility of the clergy pumping their own brand of rather limited faith-vision. And it is not only to Church people that this widening of vision needs to come, it seems. The more I look at magazines in doctors' surgeries and the like, the more I am astounded at the strange focus lots of people seem to have on 'end of the world' scenarios. Films on the subject seem to gain the same attention, and even video offerings on the internet seem to offer nerve-tingling stuff.

Lots of people seem to assume that the source of such material is the Bible, and in particular that most misunderstood of books, John's *Revelation*. I dare to take the start of Advent, and the readings today in particular, to have a wide-ranging look at where the real emphasis lies in that apocalyptic writing. Hope you have the time to come along.

For starters, interestingly, the Greek word *αποκαλυψις* (Apocalypse) does not mean some explosive ending but rather means 'something once hidden now revealed.' Even then it is not so much an immediate thing, as the Jews had been using this rather unusual style of writing for several centuries before Jesus. Next it is important to note, that this style was used to alert people to present danger, as assessed by the authors, to ponder what was being conveyed, and to respond positively to the dangers that were revealed in the writings. And without exception, from the Book of Daniel and Ezekiel on, it was to the people of those times that the authors addressed themselves. John, centuries later, was no different.

Without exception, the various authors in their various periods of time, were drawing the attention of believers of their own day to the threats being posed, *not by the end of the world*, but by cultures, kingdoms, empires and civilisations whose religious views, or lack of them, posed severe threat to the nation and Hebrew (later Christian) culture, synagogue and Church. It may come as some surprise that the real threat as understood was the downgrading on faith and loyalty and the upgrading on selfish affluence and power. **Even John, in particular, saw the real threat of Rome as the source and influence affluence, luxury and power.** If you have not understood that, then you have not understood John.

Spend a moment or two pondering these verses: *for the celestial powers will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.* Now to a lot of people, that sounds like the end of the world stuff. But stop for a moment or two. That cloud business for starters. In Biblical terms, clouds are interesting: spoken of at Sinai, at the Transfiguration and Ascension, apart from here.

Please stop thinking about those fluffy things that float around the sky; think Biblically. On Mount Sinai, Moses, as it were, saw God as He really is, not literally of course, but rather more significantly that literal or physical. At the Transfiguration, Peter, James and John caught a glimpse of Who Jesus really is, and that blew them out of the water, so to speak. And the Ascension was not a matter of Jesus 'going to the Father' as it was of those at the time catching sight of the huge significance of Jesus. Where clouds are described in situations like this, it is not a literal statement but 'God being seen for Who He is.' Truth become clear, the real issues can be focussed upon, lesser matters fall back to their proper position.

And celestial powers? Here is another rather interesting thing to grab hold of. All that talk about earthquakes and famines and 'celestial powers' have nothing to do with literal physical events, but rather about other 'earth-shattering things' happening. Things like the Global Financial Crisis of recent months and years. Things like the breakdown of society and civilization that, fortunately, are rarer events.

One of the catastrophes that both Old Testament and Revelation appeared to fear most was the destruction of order and the coming of chaos. (Even Genesis has reference to that!) Chaos represents the complete breakdown of law and order, and the reversion to almost brute-life. This occurs when the forces of evil⁴ overcome, when truth and justice, integrity and compassion are submerged in an ocean of human evil – which John sees as coming from the demand for luxury and self-aggrandizement. Not a pretty sight.

So you see, this is no end time scenario⁴ but the sort of thing that is likely to occur periodically in ordinary human history. For instance, England got very close to this position around the time of the Wesleys and Wilberforce. (Learn history, so you do not repeat the very common mistakes in history.)

From the period of Jesus' Temptations, He was aware of the need for simple, straightforward leadership without fashion or falsity, with a focus on doing what was needed and avoiding that which was not. No miracles, no 'bread and circuses,' no turning the truth into a lie and vice versa. That – as Isaiah understood – involved being not Boss but Servant. No panoply of power, but intimacy with the little and ordinary people. Not demanding control but giving, totally, of Himself.

*I shall never forget a raging argument at a meeting some years ago, when a blustering Chairman who was clearly in the wrong and not prepared to admit it, **demand**ed that people give him what he called 'integrity.' It was a most foolish demand, for he should well have known that integrity is not something that I give you, but it is something that you reflect (if you have any trace of it,) towards others. That man may have 'won the day' at that meeting, but he lost any respect whatever of those people at the meeting or the rest of the parish afterwards.*

Once we start thinking of Jesus and His ministry in this way, a lot of revision needs to take place. Self-giving does not easily engage on the human agenda, and our day and age is remarkable for its rejection of anything and anyone that gets in the way of my progress. Here lies one very sound reason why Christians are finding it hard to make a lot of impact in society these days. Do not be surprised at that, but be well aware of the huge gulf between the ordinary human conception of life, and the Christian one. Also it calls for us to be rather more aware of the fact that there are lots of people out there, not professing the Christian or any other faith, who are just as aware of what we might call Biblical realities, and they see them as simple human ones. Truth is truth where ever it is found, and that needs to be acknowledged with gratitude.

Much more could be said and written here, and maybe one day more will be said. Meanwhile, I simply ask you all to stop and ponder the increasing gulf between faith and lack of it, and understand the need, as John saw it them, to be aware of the vita realities of life so that, if and when cultural collapse comes, as John expected with the collapse of the Roman Empire (not the world,) you and all the People of God can be useful for those who have no idea where to go from there, whilst you should!

Now back to the beginning.

This Season of Advent, like the Season of Lent, is not designed to drag us to our knees in dour repentance, unless you see repentance as stopping to see what is important in life and what is not. It is a call to basics, to the old verities of truth and love, of integrity and honesty, of justice (real justice not revenge!) and compassion. And there ain't a lot of it around these days, now is there?