

**Sentence**

The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone: this was the Lord's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes.

*Philippians 3:13*

**Collect**

Generous God, Whose hand is open to fill all things living with plenteousness: make us ever thankful for Your goodness, and grant that we, remembering the account that we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of Your bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12 –20**

God spoke all these words: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work,

Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour."

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die." Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."

*This is the Word of the Lord      Thanks be to God*

**PSALM**

**19**

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament declares His handiwork

One day tells it to another: and night to night communicates knowledge

There is no speech or language: nor are their voices heard

Yet their sound has gone out through all the world: and their words to the ends of the earth

There He has pitched a tent for the sun: which comes out as a bridegroom from his chamber, and rejoices as a strong man to run his course

Its rising is at one end of the heavens, and its circuit to their farthest bound: and nothing is hid from its heat

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul: the command of the Lord is true, and makes wise the simple

The precepts of the LORD are right, and rejoice the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, and gives light to the eyes

The fear of the LORD is clean, and endures forever: the judgements of the Lord are unchanging and righteous every one.

More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold: sweeter also than honey, than the honey that drips from the honeycomb

Moreover, by them is your servant taught: and in keeping them there is great reward.

Who can know their own unwitting sins?: O cleanse me from my secret faults.

Keep your servant also from presumptuous sins: lest they get the mastery over me: so I shall be clean and innocent of great offence.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight: O LORD, my

strength and my Redeemer.

## **EPISTLE**

## **Philippians 3**

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained all this or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

*This is the Word of the Lord      Thanks be to God*

## **GOSPEL**

## **Matthew 21: 33-46**

### *Glory to You, Lord Jesus Christ*

*Jesus said* “Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

“He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.” Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone: the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes’ Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

*This is the Gospel of the Lord  
Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ*

## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### *But first .....*

This may sound a little dated, but if any reader would like to have a refreshing view of the Ten Commandments, then try and get hold of a book written by Joy Davidman, (sometime wife of C.S.Lewis.) Her book, *Smoke on the Mountain*, is easily read and very well done.. What adds to the interest of her perceptions is that Joy began life as a Jew, who rejected Judaism in favour of Marxism, and then became Christian. That wide experience of life and thought makes for fascinating insights. I hope you can find a copy.

## OLD TESTAMENT

### The Ten Commandments

One of the difficulties for moderns is the perception that the Commandments are so dated as to be useless in today's world. However I would make a couple of strong suggestions to widen the vision of such view-holders.

Life today is fast losing shape, direction and value. In a society where anything goes, freedom is said to be the name of the game. However the opposite tends to be the outcome. When talking to young people, for many years now, I have asked them about the sports they play, and ask how things would go without umpires, rules and set fields. Their reactions are immediate and singular. Sports and games would become chaotic! So it needs to be said that the Commandments are not there to make you feel pure, but to give a series of boundaries in our relationships with others, that enables life to be rather more creative and effective for everyone.

It may well be said that the Decalogue<sup>1</sup> holds many keys to life values that need to be rediscovered and re-acted upon if the present slide into chaos is to be reversed. So much may sound old hat, even wowseryish, but the real point of the Decalogue is that it stresses the value of the individual person. If I steal from you, lie to you, seduce you, or even covet whatever you have, I am treating you as inferior to me, and you of very small value. Perhaps we need reminding that the *Shema Israel* means what it says: that the point and purpose of life is to love God, and love neighbour. If the former sounds all too heavy, please do see that in today's heavily secular world, one could even point to issues like love, compassion, integrity and justice to realize again something of the importance of God. As I repeat constantly, the Faith is not essentially religious – it is essentially a response to truth, or where truth is to be found. I am not reducing God to some manageable human set of values; rather I am doing the opposite.

## PSALM

I really do not understand why so many moderns are afraid of the concept of God. There are, in the final analysis, only two possible responses to the universe and cosmos in which we live. The **first** is that it is an outcome of a vast random accident, chaotic, meaningless. Therefore it reduces everything including us to valueless ciphers. The **second** response is that there is too much evidence around us to discount the random theory - look closely at your own body, for instance, and its similarity to every other human. The lack of chaos has to point to design, designer, and *raison d'etre*.

That is the conviction of the Psalmist, who is making two significant statements of his/her conviction. The first is against randomness; the second is that the very cosmos<sup>2</sup> speaks to us about its point, purpose and value. Jews were not scientists at all, but simply observed things and thought about it ---- a valuable direction for moderns to go.

For those who dare follow the author, the same person is aware of the extent to which sheer human selfishness and sin (basically the same thing) stand behind much of the enigma of life.

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<sup>1</sup> For the unaware, Decalogue is another word for the Ten Words, the Ten Commandments – and it is rather quicker to write!

<sup>2</sup> And you know what *cosmos* means, don't you! If not, search a Greek dictionary! *Cosmetics* are what bring good order to a person's face, I understand.

## EPISTLE

It is very difficult for us to see the point of much of the many arguments of St. Paul, and much of the reason for that is that we (or I anyhow) am not Jewish. Taking up the last statement in my comment on the Psalm, Paul is pointing up the ugliness of the great human competition that wants to prove me as right and superior, and you as way down there somewhere. In that instance, the matter was circumcision, the rite of initiation for Jews that – in the mind of those holding the view – made Jews superior to any other race of people. In the second paragraph Paul makes an interesting observation. He has all the necessary (?) qualifications for such superiority, but considers it ‘rubbish’<sup>3</sup> compared to what he now understands in Christ.

Paul is not into religious argument here. What he is saying is that any pretence at superiority is simply that – pretence. In Christ, pretence is done away, and you do not have to try and prove yourself to anyone. You are as much a gift of God, and an unique gift at that, and that is your real value. What God Has offered us in Christ is not some sort of ephemeral or spiritual aura. It is the true sense of value of each human being, indestructible and eternal. *I must take you seriously. And you, me.*

As time passes in our own culture<sup>4</sup> and history, the description of people’s attitude described in the last stanza of this Epistle really does have all sorts of echoes in what real people today think, and the same real people behave.

## GOSPEL

Those who know their Bibles well will be aware of the extent and number of times – in OT and NT – Israel was described or epitomised as a vineyard. Perhaps the most expressive of those parables comes in Isaiah 5. A more passionate poem would be hard to find. Isaiah, in his day and age, was profoundly concerned at the capacity of the Chosen People to miss the very point of their existence, avoiding the responsibility of their gift. There were remarkably few communities or nations that held justice as a critical issue. Far easier to avoid such realities and cover them over with either blandishments or outright evil.

That is the perception Jesus had, both of His own time and people, and of His call to correct the imbalance, or at least to highlight it. And the measure of the enemies of Jesus was marked by their unwillingness to respond to the truth, and their willingness to kill to cover their tracks. Small wonder that, even after their exposure, the ‘chief priests and the Pharisees’ were still prepared to go underground. There really is nothing new about the inordinate untruthfulness of religious fundamentalists and bigots.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON .....

I have lost count of the times that people have asked me where, I think, the world is heading, where I think it will get, and when present apparent disintegration of values will end. The answer to such a question is as elusive as any forecasting of history can be. But there is one thing that can fairly be stated with some certainty. Disintegration will continue unless and until people regain some sense of values, of justice and integrity.

It has been an interesting experience to live through the past 70 years or so. I was born as the Great Depression was moving to its end, and was quite young when World War II broke out. That was a period in history marred by many ghastly events and disasters, but it has to be said that – in my experience at least – people generally retained the important values of honesty, integrity, and justice. One could walk down the streets in Sydney at any time of day or night, and feel secure. Suburban train travel was without any sort of danger from thugs, though no doubt you could find them if you looked. Homes were not locked up even at night, and car-theft or any other theft was a rarity. Life was far from perfect, but you could trust people, and they could trust you.

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<sup>3</sup> You will not be very happy about this, but the Greek word behind ‘rubbish’ is excrement (if you are squeamish) or shit if you are not.

<sup>4</sup> Pardon my sarcasm, but that may be rather too grand a word to describe where we are at these days.

As time went by, the old verities were threatened. People began to challenge the old values, and replace them with a less-than-refined form of selfishness. The Ten Commandments were regarded as old hat and passé – an infringement upon inalienable human rights and all that jazz. But the pendulum may swing slowly, as pendulums do in human development and change, and it may well be seen that what has been regarded as ‘no longer valid’ has, in fact, been valid all along.

From one point of view, it can be seen that the disregard of the ancient verities has led to no utopia but rather to a distinctly down-graded level of life, with human beings taking a singularly second- or third-rate place in the pecking order, if you like to put it that way. If the question is about the value of something, the measure is in dollars, not in lives. Lip service may be paid to the latter, but that is all it is.

Mind you, there are vivid and enormously valuable instances where the old values emerge, and they are hugely encouraging. I remember being so proud to be Australian when following the tsunami last December, the outpouring of support was overwhelming. So too after the bushfires in southern Eyre Peninsula. No one needs any more proof of the value of the old verities than such events as those.

Why is it, however, that almost as soon as the crises are over, that the old ugly default patterns emerge? We know, we humans, whether we are believers or not, which way is REALLY up; so why in the name of all that is wonderful, do we lapse back into complete selfishness?

One can almost rest the case right there. Don't you think so?

**Sentence**

This is our God for Whom we have waited: let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation.

*Isaiah 25:9*

**Collect**

Almighty God, in Your wisdom You have so ordered our earthly life that we must walk by faith and not by sight: give us such trust in Your fatherly care that, in the face of all perplexities, we may give proof of our faith by the courage of our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Exodus 32:1-14**

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."

When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD." So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' "I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."

But Moses sought the favour of the LORD his God. "O LORD," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'" Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

*This is the Word of the Lord      Thanks be to God*

**PSALM**

**106:1-6 & 20 – 24**

Praise the Lord; O give thanks to the Lord for He is good: and His mercy endures for ever

Who can express the mighty acts of the Lord: or fully voice His praise?

Blessed are those who act according to justice: who at all times do the right

Remember me O Lord, when You visit Your people with Your favour: and come to me also with Your salvation

That I may see the prosperity of Your chosen: that I may rejoice with the rejoicing of Your people, and exult with those who are Your own.

We have sinned like our ancestors: we have acted perversely and done wrong

At Horeb they made themselves a calf: and bowed down in worship to an image

And so they exchanged the glory of God: for the likeness of an ox that eats hay

They forgot God Who was their saviour: that had done such great things in Egypt

Who had worked His wonders in the Land of Ham: and His terrible deeds at the Red Sea

Therefore He thought to destroy them: had not Moses His servant stood before Him in the breach, to turn away His wrath from destroying them.

## EPISTLE

## Philippians 4: 1 – 9

Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends! I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

*This is the Word of the Lord      Thanks be to God*

## GOSPEL

## Matthew 22: 1 – 14

### *Glory to You, Lord Jesus Christ*

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. Then he sent some more servants and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.’ But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are invited, but few are chosen.”

*This is the Gospel of the Lord  
Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ*

## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### Old Testament

These old sagas are meant to be both the story of Israel’s spiritual development, as well as rather cautionary tales for future generations. In this cameo at the foot of Mt. Sinai<sup>5</sup> we encounter something of what has become an epidemic in our own day and age. Israel had grown impatient, and like most or many mortals, wanted things happening NOW and in a dramatic and uninvolved way. It is not a pretty picture any more than today’s instantism and messiahism is pretty. Press a button and solve the problem, at no expense and at no other cost – that seems to be today’s catch-cry. And it is highly destructive of people, who have come to expect easy answers and trite responses.

Many moderns do have some difficulty with the sort of emotions attributed to God, and particularly the apparent willingness to belt the living daylights out of recalcitrants. It has long struck me that reality lies elsewhere. It is most likely that these attributed emotions were actually those of the human participants, and it is only as clearer perception and more advanced theology developed, that people saw God as having rather more mature reactions than mere human ones.

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<sup>5</sup> Just in case you are not aware, ‘Sinai’ and ‘Horeb’ are the same mountain at the foot of the Sinai Peninsula

It may be worth pursuing this further. As an older person these days, I remember back to the human pattern of cranky grandparents or parents who did not spare the rod and so spoil the child. It was seen as a reflection of God, as portrayed by most preachers. God is a God of vengeance, as if that was the way to overcome evil or at least control it. Time has shown that such an approach – the punitive one! – is counter-productive, though there are still quite some ‘born agains’ who follow the pattern. However, a clearer and more realistic approach to Scripture, Old Testament and New, shows the development of a theology that chooses compassion and justice over the imposition of values by force.

## **PSALM**

Rather too often, the Psalms do not seem to add much to our understanding either of God or of life. However, although it may look like a small point, I delight in a rather powerful statement made by this ancient writer.

Towards the end of the Psalm, there is reference to the incident described in the First Lesson. This is the business of the golden calf, - in fact the whole business of idols. Notice how the Psalmist makes the point that the idol ‘*exchanged the glory of God for an ox that eats hay.*’ There are two fascinating aspects of the folly of idolatry. The first point is that idols reduce, minimise and otherwise limit the perception one has of God, and that is a disastrous path to travel. It leads a person well and truly astray. Also, as the Psalmist notes, the idiocy of the minimising is surely obvious to anyone who thinks just a moment about what is being done. With what may well be the best will in the world, the person’s picture of what is important is reduced to the ridiculous. How in the name of all that is wonderful can an ox (or anyone or anything else) even begin to stand in the place of the Creator of the Universe? It is the equivalent of saying that fame, fortune, status, or even a dollar, is capable of saving a person .....*from anything!*

## **EPISTLE**

Again, any real reading of the epistles shows up the tensions that obtained in the Infant Church. An old and now sadly deceased New Testament lecturer of 50 years ago, used to comment constantly: ‘Beware of clothing the infant Church in light.’ People then were as human as we are now.

However, in spite of the problems, joy was still very much part of the agenda – for the New Way<sup>6</sup> is, different from that old punitive way, very much a hugely more effective *modus operandi* for all humans.

In that final paragraph, there is something well worth remembering and acting on always. It was a passage learnt from memory by one of our oldest parishioners who would leap to her feet whenever this part of the epistle was read out.

## **GOSPEL**

One of the huge ironies of the Gospel of Christ lies in the fact that, whilst the Gospel contains what all people need, there is a vast resistance to it. And the reason for that resistance tends to be little other than sheer human pigheadedness.

Last week, the Parable of the Vineyard; this week the Wedding Feast. And in both instances, the refusal of the invitation was total. It is a telling and powerful image, and needs to be taken seriously. And when you stop and think about it, the story offers a reversal of the usual human response to invitations. Invitations are often seen as the inviter recognising the status of the invitee; in this instance, status is a non-issue. Simply being human is.

## **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

Those who know well know that I am not all that prepared to follow the crowd, especially when it comes to spending my hard-earned cash. For lots of years now, I have been using somewhat lined boots during winter, in order to keep my old feet warm. The local shoe shop was having a sale and as my old boots were nearing the end of their useful life, I went to have a look. Certainly, I could replace my boots at greatly reduced price, and I was shown a number of alternatives. There was one set of boots normally priced at \$250

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<sup>6</sup> ... which, if we are honest, was always there....

which I could have for \$50 off. Or if that was a bit much, I could have brand-name boots, normally \$150 for \$100. I was about to leave, but asked the assistant if there was anything priced sensibly. There was – and to cut a long story short, I left the store with just what I wanted, and the pair cost me \$45.00 including GST.

I have long been utterly surprised at the capacity of otherwise normal and wise human beings to be led up the most silly of ‘garden paths,’ simply because of advertising, peer pressure or even because a lot of other people seem to hold to the idea. Some people will pay \$800 for a pair of ‘name’ jeans, when anyone sensible will buy exactly the same thing for 10% of that price. The dear ones are not often better, but the name brand is enough to gain attention and kudos for the wearer. Sorry, I can only offer such a person the shake of a head for their stupidity. My great dismay stems from the fact that the particular product does not, cannot, is utterly unable to fulfil the promise it offers.

That, do you see, is where idolatry leads, These days it has nothing to do with ‘graven images,’ but only with the falsity of advertising by others who covet your dollars ..... in very large lumps. If it is not dollars said people are after, it is your loyalty, your support, your almost anything, and they will go to all sorts of extremes to get it. In the process, these days, there are other people who are elevated to another false pinnacle and are paid all sorts of vast amounts to be the headline for the product: Nike, Reebok, all sorts of things. And people get sucked in, almost without thinking.

Idolatry. It is not something from a distant, naïve past! One can understand in a way how people of Aaron’s day somehow hoped that the golden calf could and would do what Moses could not and did not. They had become impatient with the old bloke, and decided that there has to be an easier way, even if it cost them all the gold they had on them. You know, and I know, and I’ll bet even Aaron knew that there was Buckley’s chance that things would get any better. It was nothing other than smokescreen, because anyone with any sense was aware of the fact that there was no quick answer to the situation that they were in, but it was going to be long hard slog all the way. How else could anyone travel from Goshen in Egypt, avoiding desert bandits and other hassles, than via Horeb (Sinai) and east of the Jordan and into Canaan? On foot, one step after the other. No aircraft; not even a bus or a dray. One step after the other, and any other suggestion was baloney.

Idolatry, like any other sin, is the attempt to get to the goal via some easy, uninvolved, uncommitting way. The cutting of corners, the refusal of reality. As someone said not all that long ago, *if something is too good to be true, then it probably IS.*

**Sentence**

Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

*Matthew 22:21*

**Collect**

Almighty God, Your Son has opened for us a new and living way into Your presence: give us pure hearts and steadfast wills, to worship You in spirit and in truth, through the same Jesus, Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Exodus 33:12 – 23**

Moses said to the LORD, "You have been telling me, 'Lead these people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, 'I know you by name and you have found favour with me.' If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favour with you. Remember that this nation is your people." The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?"

And the LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name." Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory." And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," he said, "You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."

*This is the Word of the Lord      Thanks be to God*

**PSALM**

**99**

The Lord is King, let the nations tremble: He is enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake

The Lord is great in Zion: He is high above all nations

Let them praise Your great and terrible Name: for holy is the Lord

The Mighty One is King, and loves justice: You have established equity, You have dealt righteousness and justice in Jacob.

*O exalt the Lord our God: and bow down before His footstool for He is holy*

Moses and Aaron among His priests, and Samuel among those who call upon His name: they called to the Lord and He answered.

He spoke to them from the pillar of cloud: they kept His teaching and the law that He gave them

You answered them, O Lord our God: You were a forgiving God to them, and pardoned their wrongdoing.

*O exalt the Lord our God: and bow down towards His holy hill, for the Lord our God is holy.*

**EPISTLE**

**1 Thessalonians 1: 1 – 10**

Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you.

We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

*This is the Word of the Lord      Thanks be to God*

*Glory to You, Lord Jesus Christ*

The Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap Jesus in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, “Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. Then he said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. “Teacher,” they said, “Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and have children for him. Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. Finally, the woman died. Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?”

Jesus replied, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”

When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.

*This is the Gospel of the Lord  
Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ*

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

If you find this to be an extraordinarily difficult passage to understand, do not be surprised. I doubt if there are many people who would see clearly what is being conveyed.

On the one hand, remember that Hebrew ways of expressing things are very different indeed from today’s means and expressions. Realize also that one of the things that held sway over most of the then population would have been a view of divinity that would have come from something of a shaman tradition. Most uneducated people were kept in thrall largely through fear engendered by their shamans. ‘Shut up and believe’ was still echoed in the spiritual upbringing of people who are your grand- and great-grandparents.

Here, it seems to me, is a passage indicating that people like Moses were not prepared to be reduced to some sort of cipher. He wanted answers that stood up! He wanted clear direction (and less responsibility) and I sense a hesitation in the story on the part of God, for, as time passed and people’s experience of God grew, it was precisely because God expected them to take responsibility for their actions. Only in that way can people move to adulthood.

Somehow right in the middle of this enigmatic passage is that remarkable insight that is often referred to. ‘I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy....’ Spend some time pondering this statement and insight – and realize that what is being said here is, basically, ‘I am God and you are not.’ Some things in life remain inexplicable, and we ought never to be surprised by that.

**PSALM**

If ever you wonder, in your finer moments, whatever could the nations tremble about when it comes to God, then the answer is remarkably simple. It is found in verse 4: *He loves justice*. In fact, God is the guarantor of justice and equity. That may not sound like a lot to be afraid of, but it must be said that most empires and other human arrangements are NOT set up with justice as the forefront. Empires, countries and companies may lay claim to upholding justice, but the politics of most organisations tend to operate without much reference to important issues.

If that still does not appear fearful, it needs to be said that nothing built on other than justice (and all its components) will not last for very long at all. Just look back over history to see the truth of that.

## **EPISTLE**

If you stop reading this letter at this point, you would come away with the idea that the Thessalonian Church was without fault, even was perfect. Little could be further from the truth, as further reading will illustrate.

My point in this is not to denigrate those believers; it is to relax and rejoice in the fact that this little imperfect Church could still, to quite some degree, realize its reason for existence. God can and does work through imperfect people, and thank heaven for that!

## **GOSPEL**

I often wonder how Jesus must have felt, being so constantly under attack and interrogation. Whilst some of the questioning was valid and honest, much of it was not. (Little has changed over 2,000 years!)

The question of paying taxes was answered in a stunning and potent manner. In effect Jesus was making it quite clear that everyone had responsibility for supporting government (of whatever sort!) if only on the basis that 'the powers that be' as Paul called them, played their part in holding back the forces of chaos. Life would become unliveable if there was nobody anywhere taking responsibility. In other words, Jesus was saying that Jew may well hate their Roman overlords, but life would be rather worse without them. If I use the roads, I have the responsibility of sharing in the cost of them.

The second and really quite idiotic question about marriage in heaven simply underlines the ridiculous nature of trying to argue something significant from something theoretical. The possibility of the situation outlined by the Sadducees was so remote as to be ridiculous. On top of that, they seemed to have no real idea of life, let alone of life's goals. Jesus' answer both cut the ground from under their feet, and opened up a rather broader view of the life to come.

It is interesting to notice how Jesus proposed an answer to the future with a look back over the shoulder to the past. If God were God of the dead, there would be little or no reference to whatever lay behind. However, as Jesus indicated, God is and remains the God of (past) Abraham Isaac and Jacob.

Perhaps it may be helpful to underline how Jesus saw all of life with its history and relationships is the arena where God is to be found, recognized and responded to. If a person is of real faith, then it will affect the complete range of life issues. In other words, being faithful does not mean being ephemeral (or off with the fairies.) It is a practical response to everything here and now.

## **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

*What a strange Gospel, and what a series of ridiculous questions that Jesus' antagonists fired at Him! When we were young we may have felt that Jesus was remarkably quick on His feet, so to speak. But the older I get, the more I encounter very similar and short-sighted stupidity really, from people who want to knock whatever displeases them. So it seems to me that this is as good a time as any to stop and ponder such silliness and wonder about a remedy.*

Whenever I encounter the same sort of narrow-viewed complaints about anything or anyone, the question of how many people think stands up in front of me. How, in the name of all that is wonderful, did that groups of Pharisees that day, think for one minute that they had a case that would stand up to a reality check?

Certainly, one can understand the extent to which the Jews would have hated being under the powerful heel of Rome. No one that I know of ever likes being oppressed. On the other hand, Jews of all people were powerfully aware of their theology that God is One Who brings order out of chaos, so they should have recognized the extent to which Rome was something of a means whereby God was at work in that process. Mind you, one of the great sad things about religious people (of whatever faith or sort) is that

there is far too often an enclosed mind, a radically limited view of life and of people, and an even more jaundiced view of anyone who disagrees with them. (I know, because I have been there!!!)

In the debate that followed this question, please notice at Jesus was not just finding a suitable escape route in the debate. It is quite clear that He was trying, as was His wont, to raise people's horizons, open people's minds, and get them thinking outside of the square, and face realities. That business about the inscription on the coin was a very firm reminder to His antagonists of the debt Israel owed even to those hated oppressors. Never, *never* lose sight of the fact that it was because of the Pax Romana that life then had many advantages. Without the Empire, the spread of the Faith a decade or two later would hardly have been possible. One could go on about Romans roads and communications, relative safety in travel and all manner of other benefits. And if I am gaining some benefit, then I am under quite some obligation.

*An illustration if I may. It was many years ago now, and the son of one of my colleagues was following the pattern of the day, in those distant 'seventies, of deciding that the culture of which he was part was decadent and fading, and that he would not have any part of it. So he opted out, but not entirely. He was still very angry that his unemployment benefit was insufficient to allow him to do all that he would like. One day, he had the hide to berate me about the situation, demanding that I do something about his dilemma.*

*My response was not what he wanted. What I suggested to him was that if he wished to isolate himself from the decadent society he so obviously hated, then he surely had to break his links with the dole that he received. To do otherwise was simply to be totally dishonest to the stance he was taking.*

*No one had ever required him to be honest about his stance – it was usual then to cope with all sorts of stupidity from people. He was not impressed with my suggestion, but to give him the credit, he faced his dishonesty and moved on from his sycophantic position.*

The second incident in today's Gospel is just about as ridiculous. It is never a safe process to argue from some hypothetical position, especially one that is most highly unlikely ever to occur. On top of that, the huge blank leaps in the argument must have rung foolishly in the minds of those proposing the argument. Jesus' answer to this one was – like the previous one – designed to make the interrogators face their follies.

And that is the point, surely. Almost all of the arguments I have been faced with, against the Faith or even about mundane matters. Have within then the seeds of their own debilitation if not destruction. It would seem to me that the reason for such shallow thinking lies in the unwillingness of the arguer to face the truth of the situation. Here lies the very key of the matter. If I am trying to argue about something, wanting my own way, and try to do so by avoiding the very truth of the situation, then I have only myself to blame for the failure of the argument. I am sure that, whenever I attempt such a subterfuge, I am aware of my dishonesty and have only myself to blame.

So if there is one thing that sticks out for me in this rather interesting excerpt from the Gospel, it is the way in which it lays me bare to see my own folly. I may not like the exercise, but I suspect that I **need it!**

**Sentence**

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind; and you shall love your neighbour as yourself. *Matthew 22: 37*

**Collect**

Almighty and everlasting God, give us the increase of faith, hope and love; and that we may obtain what You promise, make us to love what You command, through Jesus Christ our Lord **Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the LORD showed him the whole land—from Gilead to Dan, all of Naphtali, the territory of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, the Negev and the whole region from the alley of Jericho, the City of Palms, as far as Zoar. Then the LORD said to him, “This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it.”

And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in Moab, as the LORD had said. He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is. Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone. The Israelites grieved for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days, until the time of weeping and mourning was over.

Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the LORD had commanded Moses. Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, who did all those signs and wonders the LORD sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.

*This is the Word of the Lord      Thanks be to God*

**PSALM**

**90:1-6 & 13 -17**

Lord, You have been our refuge: from one generation to another  
Before the mountains were born, or the earth or the world were brought to be: from eternity to eternity, You are God  
You turn us back into dust: saying, ‘Return to dust, O children of Adam.’  
For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday passing: or like one watch in the night  
You cut them short like a dream: like the fresh grass of the morning  
In the morning it is green and flourishes: at evening it is withered and dried up

Relent, O Lord, How long will You be angry?: take pity on Your servants.  
O satisfy us early with Your mercy: that all our days we may rejoice and sing.  
Give us joy for all the days You have afflicted us: for the years we have suffered adversity  
Show Your servants Your work: and let their children see Your glory.  
May the gracious favour of the Lord our God be upon us: prosper the work of our hands, O prosper the work of our hands

**EPISTLE**

**1 Thessalonians 2:1-13**

You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else.

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother

caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

*This is the Word of the Lord      Thanks be to God*

## **GOSPEL**

**Matthew 22: 34 – 46**

*Glory to You, Lord Jesus Christ*

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, “What do you think about the Christ. Whose son is he?” “The son of David,” they replied. He said to them, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? For he says, ”“The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.”” If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

*This is the Gospel of the Lord      Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ*

## **NOTES ON THE READINGS**

### **Old Testament Lesson**

The fate of Moses has always seemed somewhat unfair to me; the poor old so-and-so had led and put up with the ungrateful and ungracious Israelites for more than a generation. Certainly he had exploded at them and – in a way – assumed the role of God at them, so he lost the chance to enter the land. Mind you, Moses’ place as never been in dispute and perhaps was never outshone. Note the interesting comment that ‘no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses.’ We regard him as Law Giver; Israel sees him as prophet.

But his place was taken by a younger man, and one who certainly did make his mark on Israel’s history. Joshua the son of Nun, It was a smooth transition of power, so to speak.

Life has to go on even after the loss of such a one as Moses.

### **Psalm**

*The days of our life are three-score years* has been omitted from this well-known Psalm, that is embedded in part of our Funeral Services. It is a reminder to us of our mortality and that is something that we need to face periodically.

There is an interesting passage, the impact of which may well pass by many readers. Verse 3 has the phrase ‘*return to dust, O children of Adam.*’ I am led to believe that the Genesis story ‘names’ the ‘first man’ adam – and Westerners miss a powerful point. *Adam* is not a name but rather a generic term. *Adam* means human, and is not gender-specific to use modern (but somewhat obtuse) jargon. What is more interesting is that *adam* consists of *ish* and *ishshah* as I have mentioned elsewhere, and *ish* and *ishshah* are gender specific. The former translates ‘man’ or male; the latter ‘woman’ or female. And one does not get *adam* without first having *ish* and *ishshah*. However what is more interesting is this: that *adam* stems from the term *adamah* – which in the Creation story is translated as ‘made from the earth, of the dust.’ This is not all that is said of we humans, but it is a mark of our being very much part of the environment. *Aboriginal folk are as keenly aware of this situation, too, finding dust and dirt inoffensive and an essential part of life.* Western people try to wash it all away, and so lose the intimate connection.

## Epistle

If someone was to write to you in the terms that Paul used when writing to the Thessalonians, you would feel that he was trying to justify himself, and provide grounds for whatever else he was going to tell you about. The real issue, strange to us at this distance in time, was that Paul leadership and authority was in jeopardy, a factor far more evident then as it is now. His leadership was often in question, particularly (as seen here) as he did not either demand or require his 'rights' in terms of remuneration or other benefit. Now while Paul's approach may well be seen as generous and perhaps even essential to us, now, it must have appeared as a sign of weakness then. In that day and age (and increasingly now) those in position of leadership tend to demand all the signs of power and strength. What is more, people get sucked in by that display of power and pomp, and even Christians easily miss the point that their Lord was one Who, like Paul, 'took the form of a servant.' Never, never miss the point of that approach of our Lord. To do so is to miss the point of much of the Gospel.

In fact, as this Epistle moves on, there were some significant issues that Paul needed to face with the people of Thessalonica, and he needed them to be able to hear and act on what he needed to say.

## GOSPEL

Whilst the first paragraph of today's Gospel is rather obvious, the second is rather more obscure.

One of the great challenges raised against Jesus and the Infant Church is that they were said to have ignored or down-graded much of the Mosaic Law. Modern Christians tend to have over-reacted against 'the Law' too, because of Paul's great polemic against Law and for grace. However, the issues of law and grace are not mutually exclusive. In Paul's case, he was arguing against the Pharisaic tendency to see the keeping of the Law as a means of proving superiority and inferiority, as well as establishing their 'right' to all the benefits of the faith. However, the real role of law – or rules if you like – are to point to order and away from chaos, in order to give shape and value to life and to people.

The *Shema Israel*<sup>7</sup> - always used in the opening few minutes of the Eucharist in APBA, is a short and powerful summary of what the Faith, Hebrew and Christian, is really all about. Love of God and care of neighbours. While it may not be all that easy to observe, it is simple to understand and take note of. As the ancient Jews might have said, 'all else is commentary.'

The second part of this passage is rather more enigmatic. What on earth is Jesus on about?

It is really yet another attempt on the part of our Lord to raise people's horizons beyond the traditional and minimal, towards something more real. Much of Israel's hopes and expectations were based on messianic issues, and most of those were based on King David of happy and distant memory. During David's time, Israel's borders had stretched to their greatest limits, and the Kingdom achieved an apogee not often reached thereafter. So David became the icon of messiahship.

However, like most mere human icons, this one included the expectation of someone powerful bringing other nations to their knees, and proving Israel's superiority. The nation awaited this superhuman figure and sat on its hands somewhat. Besides that, in spite of the OT prophets trying to dislodge the imagery, people still held to their myopia, as people often do.

In this passage of today's Gospel, Jesus made it clear that whoever was not only 'son of David' but also rather superior (in another sense) to the ancient King. The Christ (Greek for Messiah) would also David's lord (with or without capital) – and that alone required a huge rethink for Israel and its leadership.

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<sup>7</sup> *Shema Israel* is the opening phrase of the Two great commandments 'Hear, O Israel ....' And the Shema is first found in Deuteronomy

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

I am always rather painfully aware of the tendency of some Christians to be quite critical about anyone who dares to produce sermons that are not 'the Gospel!' It is a critique fairly often laid at my feet, but that is because I tend to see Gospel in terms wider than some. The Faith has far more to do with the issues of ordinary life than it does about getting me to heaven. This Sunday's Readings encourage me in that wider scope .... And I hope that you can see that too.

If there is one particular issue that stands out for me in today's readings, it has to do with the passing of responsibility from Moses to Joshua. I find echoes of that movement forward in the other readings as well. And it is an important issue, especially in this day and age where so many of the older Christians wonder quite what lies in front of faith and Church when we are pushing up daisies.

There is always a sense of loss and of disconnection when someone in leadership hands over the reins to a lesser light, a younger person, someone apparently inexperienced. If someone well-loved has been leading the show for a long time, there will always be those who try to hold on to the comfort of known directions and familiar patterns. Anything different is felt to be threatening. So the feet go to the brakes, and hesitancy tends to become the order of the day. As we express it these days, our comfort zone has become threatened and we like that NOT.

Try being a Joshua! You would know that you have huge shoes to fill, as the saying goes, and you will be painfully aware of resistance from all sorts of directions. But you will also be aware of the size of the task, and will almost certainly have some ideas that you would wish to pursue. Any young priest, or any new priest in a parish will know all about that.

I am fairly certain that I am glad not to be in that same situation again. Old age does have *some* advantages. I am also aware of the fact that so-called new ideas can be of valuable ..... or useless. I am also painfully aware of the fact that simply because something has been sanctified by long practice, it does not mean that they need to be continued without variation. Or rejection.

I suspect that the point and purpose of this soliloquy is to encourage younger people in exploring quite where it is that God is leading us as we move into another century and into new territory. There is also a great sense that, while we need to move ahead, we need also to be VERY aware of the basic realities of the Faith. Retain what is important; let go of what is not. Remember, though, that individual visions of what is important may well be rather myopic ..... limited and narrow.

As a final and parting shot in all this, I find myself being hauled back to that quite ancient of expressions of the Faith, the *Shema Israel*. When all is boiled down, the Faith, Hebrew *and* Christian, is expressed in the *Shema*. Love God, love your neighbour, --- without losing sight of the need to love yourself, oddly enough. As we realize these days, if I despise my self I will, ipso facto, despise you, too.

**Sentence**

The greatest among you will be your servant; all who exalt themselves will be humbled; and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

*Matthew 23:11*

**Collect**

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

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Joshua 3:7 – 17**

The LORD said to Joshua, “Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses. Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant: ‘When you reach the edge of the Jordan’s waters, go and stand in the river.’” Joshua said to the Israelites, “Come here and listen to the words of the LORD your God. This is how you will know that the living God is among you and that he will certainly drive out before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites. See, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth will go into the Jordan ahead of you. Now then, choose twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. And as soon as the priests who carry the ark of the LORD—the Lord of all the earth—set foot in the Jordan, its waters flowing downstream will be cut off and stand up in a heap.”

So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant went ahead of them. Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water’s edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (the Salt Sea) was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho. The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground.

*This is the Word of the Lord      Thanks be to God*

**PSALM**

**107:1-7 & 33-37**

O give thanks to the Lord for He is good: for His loving mercy is for ever  
Let the Lord’s redeemed say so: whom He has redeemed from the hand of the enemy  
And gathered in from every land, from the east and from the west: from the north and from the south  
Some went astray in the wilderness and in the desert: and found no path to an inhabited city  
They were hungry and thirsty: and their heart fainted in them  
Then they cried to the Lord in their distress: and He took them out of their trouble  
He led them by the right path: till they came to an inhabited city

He turns the rivers into desert: and the springs of water into thirsty ground  
He makes of a fruitful land a salty waste: because its inhabitants are evil  
He turns the wilderness into a pool of water: and parched ground into flowing springs  
And there He settles the hungry: and they build a city to live in.  
They sow fields and plant vineyards: which give them a fruitful harvest

**EPISTLE**

**1 Thessalonians 3:5 – 13**

For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless. But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we

may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

*This is the Word of the Lord      Thanks be to God*

## **GOSPEL**

**Matthew 23: 1 – 12 & 37-39**

*Glory to You, Lord Jesus Christ*

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi.’ But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called ‘teacher,’ for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’

*This is the Gospel of the Lord      Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ*

## **NOTES ON THE READINGS**

### **Old Testament Lesson**

The saga of the rise and rise of Joshua, son of Nun, continues, and while the tale does not contain a great deal of information of great and present interest, it is helpful to see the story emphasising the need for back up for the somewhat junior leader. This is done in a rather interesting if ritual act. In a way it is a re-enactment, 40 years later, of the crossing of the sea that led to Israel’s escape from Egypt.

This may be of small interest to most, but for a clan and nation that seemed to have very little to do with water, either riverine or maritime, water of this nature was often seen as symbolic of evil. It is an image that stretched from this incident right up to John’s *Revelation*.

Right at the precise and necessary time, the flow of the Jordan ceased, enabling people to cross the river, as the sea, *dry-shod*. Evil did not prevail. From information available, and described in Scripture, an earthquake higher up the Jordan locked the flow of water for the time needed to allow the tribes to cross. Mind you, it must be said that the Jordan, then and now I understand, was no great flow of water, but rather was what Australians would likely call a creek. Billabong Creek, passing through Culcairn in southern NSW, would seem not dissimilar, from photos taken of the Jordan.

The above comments are not there to negate nor deride the miracle. However, it does underline the fact that a great deal of Biblical miracle is not so much in the event itself, as in its timing. The Ark of the Covenant – that icon of the Divine presence, - was sufficient to obviate the danger and the difficulty of the Jordan. Access was rendered far more possible.

### **Psalm**

This Psalm is in the great tradition of songs that celebrate and reflect the great and majestic acts of God in the deliverances of His people. The Exodus remains highly formative for Israel’s understanding of itself, and of God’s place in that history and experience. It is perhaps most important to remind ourselves of

the fact that most if not all of Israel's understanding of God came from life-experience, from its history. It is in the real world that God is made known to His People. This is something we ought never forget.

In the second part of this psalm, the thought has struck me that, in a less environmentally sensitive period in history, much of the impact of this short stanza could be missed. Notice the unexpected reversal of roles, so to speak. *He turns rivers into desert ..... because its inhabitants are evil.* Is it not the case that – in our own struggle to preserve the Murray Darling system, - that sheer human greed and self-assertion lies behind the salination of the vast system? One only needs to look back into history to learn that much of what is now desert in North Africa was once the granary of the Roman Empire. Was once!!!!

### **Epistle**

There is really quite some exuberance in what Paul had to say to the Thessalonians, and that is good to see. It could never have been easy trying to be a Christian in those times, and even less easy to be an Apostle. However, there were, quite clearly, some times of great joy as people delighted in each others' company and faith.

The Apostle was keenly aware of the possibility individuals turning away from the faith, and there is powerful realism in that. I confess to a certain distaste with some people who are certain that they will never fall away. I have seen too many instances of the most certain believers becoming the most certain disbelievers. The NT approach is to encourage constancy and humility – none of us is perfect, nor ever likely to be.

### **Gospel**

Have you noticed the stark contrast between the first paragraph of today's Gospel and the second? In the first there is the tragic illustration of the sheer human possibility of turning that which is designed to be hugely valuable into a total parody of the reality. Much of Judaism had been turned from living faith into very dead rule-obeying. The basis behind that was nothing other than a tool to establish superiority in some and inferiority in others. It was a total denial of the realities of the Faith. *And the turning of a living faith into a refined form of Pharisaism as not confined to the first century of the Christian era. It is alive and well in our own day.*

Now contrast that with the deep longing Jesus had for His people, even those who were missing the point. The imagery of the hen and her chicks is simple yet so very descriptive. And, when one stops to think of it, that image of loving is the only tool in the Master's armoury (and ours!) to win people over to the Faith. Never underestimate the power of love.

### **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

I wonder if we Christians are aware enough of the effect on our view and practice of the Faith that comes from the culture and attitude of our times. It is not just a matter of what we might call 'view of morality' but in what amounts to rather more subtle influences. There are some quite beneficial influences that come, but there are also others than are very damaging.

In our day and age, it is doubtful if there has been anything as damaging and dastardly as the discovery of the prevalence of child abuse, and sexual perversions that have penetrated even into the clergy in this country and in others. One of the other (perhaps less 'spectacular') influences has been the increasing evidence of self-assertion and self-service. It may well be an illustration of my advanced age, but I have never encountered such self-driven clergy in all denominations than has been the case in recent years. In fact, it is becoming a rarity to find anyone who is self-giving rather than self-getting.

There is nothing new in all this: as Ecclesiastes expresses it, 'there is nothing new under the sun.'

However, it seems to me that today's Gospel in particular is quite something of a polemic by Jesus against whatever stands in the way of the Faith being real and effective. He is against all that turns a living faith into a means of control of others, or the demeaning of others. And the Christian Church does not have a great record in that department.

I guess it is so easy to be critical, but this is designed to be other than that. It is an attempt to get us all looking at a wider canvas, and towards a greater warmth.

It has to be said that I grew up in a fairly conservative society, and an even more conservative Church. But what always annoyed me, even as a young person, was the pressure applied by those older and 'wiser' on us who were in our formative years, to fit a narrow and sequestered pattern. We talked often of Christians and non-Christians, as if it was up to us to divide the sheep from the goats. There were things that one was not to do, and other things that one must. Taboos of all sorts, many of which did not stand up to any sort of examination. I am not talking about the potential waywardness of youth; I am talking about remarkably stupid taboos.

It is not particularly necessary to delineate them. One was required to submit, to obey and not to question. *And that was the real issue for me.* On top of that, I had lovingly thought that the ancient taboos had been done away, but I find them just as powerful, even if expressed in other directions. It is the old shaman mentality that I know what is good for you, and you do not, so shut up and listen. Refuse to listen and conform and consider yourself on the outer, excommunicated and ejected. If you think I am exaggerating then give me a ring and I will show you evidence that the McCarthy attitude is still alive and well in some Christian circles.

There is a stark contrast between the first paragraph of today's Gospel and the second. The first portrays a horrible distortion of faith, and the second underlines the power and passion of caring and of love. Here we have the image of a Lord Who is like a hen with her chicks. The hen does not separate one chick from another, but gives of herself for the chicks' benefit. It is all about being concerned for the chick's welfare and is nothing about categorising the family into good or bad, useful or useless. It is only when such affection and support is reliable that the infants can grow.

And this is precisely the sort of 'religion' that Jesus offers, as rather better an approach than the traditional one. It will certainly mean that not all chicks are alike, nor will all grow at the same rate. For those of us who have had children, we will be aware of all sorts of nuances and differences between our kids, and that is partly the thing that makes them so different and interesting. Peas in a pod I could do without.

Perhaps there is little need to expand further in this direction. It seems to me that each one of us would have illustrations aplenty to show up all manner of useful directions to head.