

Sentence

‘Who is greater, the one at table or the one who serves?’ asks the Lord. ‘But I am among you as one who serves.’

Luke 22:27

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 we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of Your bounty; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Lamentations 1:1 – 6

PSALM

137

EPISTLE

2 Timothy 1: 1 – 14

GOSPEL

Luke 17: 5 – 10

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

Although there is constant reference to it, Israel’s experience of the Exile in Babylon tends to be something that few modern Christians seem to know – and perhaps care even less.. But one can hardly understand the Hebrew Scriptures without it, and even less to understand the Biblical perception of and response to history, good or bad. It is hugely important for the modern reader to watch old Israel cope with and learn from this most traumatic of experiences of the nation. For Israel, God was discovered, seen and understood through the vicissitudes of ordinary daily existence. There was never any sense of leaving reality behind to find or understand God. God is ever in the here and now, and is particularly so in the downside of things.

The rather trite and foolish Western understanding of this Hebrew ‘thing’ is to reduce the cause of the problem to Israel’s ‘sin.’ That goes on to assume that God punishes that sin by letting lousy things happen. That is far too facile a way of looking at this. The old prophets, bless them, were well and painfully aware of the fact that national disaster stems not so much from invasion from outside, as from weakness within, a weakness generated by all manner of injustice and unfairness. Sin is not so much ‘punishable’ as it is destructive. And – like you – I learn the best lessons from whatever I do wrong.

This passionate song expresses the deep effect of the Exile on Israel, and yet oddly there was no sense of absolute lostness. There was ever, behind all the pain, the sense that God was still their God and had some better outcome to emerge whenever Israel learnt the lesson.

Psalms

Now who does NOT remember that pop-song of the ‘70s or thereabouts, and yet did not realize that said song was a complete and utter take-up of Psalm 137. There seems no great need to hold forth on this short Psalm – but please do note the passion of its author. Mind you, it would be worth remembering that the mention of Jerusalem is but shorthand for all that the Hebrew God and faith stands for.

Epistle

Apart from anything else, this short passage from one of Paul’s epistles indicates the Apostle’s awareness of the profound connection between Old Testament Faith and New. It is far too flase and trite to assume the existence of a great gulf between the two Testaments. Note first, the Apostle’s gratitude for the ‘God of my forefathers.’ Then stop and realize that Timothy’s grandma must have been that same person of faith long before the Gospel was being spread around the world, and even before the Cross.

In the light of what the earlier readings have evoked, it is interesting to notice, once again, that Paul is as aware of God speaking through dangers and difficulties. There has never been the promise that all will go well with the believer, who would be insulated from nasty things. Here is a real faith for real life, and no escape from it.

Gospel

Even the Gospel conveys that same concept of ‘you might be up against it all, but God is there right in the middle of the struggle.’ Mind you, there tends to be the expression of stupidity in some of today’s ‘spirituality’ to take the obscure sort of passage and turn it into something ridiculous. That business of the mulberry (sycamore) tree appears to the western mind and some sort of ridiculous and disproportionate test of ‘faith.’ As in other and similar statements of Jesus, there would have been a reference to some common and well-known expression that is

lost to us now. It is not ridiculous faith that Jesus was looking for, but a genuine one. He also made it quite clear that there would be nothing soft or effete about that faith and faithfulness, for like the Lord Himself, it would bring both Master and servant into conflict with the powers that be. The Faith will often constitute a challenge to the *status quo*, and one ought ever to be surprised at that.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

My dear old Mum used to be quite put out by our clergyman at the time – and it was 60 years ago – who would often quote the final verse of today's Gospel. Mind you, the old AV translation was rather more disparaging than the present translation, for it talked about being 'unprofitable servants.' The point is, really, that the role of the present-day Christian is not one noted for being centre stage, nor in the headlines. Whatever the servant of God does is in full awareness that rather more could and should have been accomplished.

All this runs quite contrary to the spirit of the age. If there is one thing that I find quite annoying, it is the tendency of the high and mighty ones to demand the drum-roll and applause for things that they do. It must be said that while much attention is focussed on the great ones, there is likely to be far more done by the little people, who are moved rather more altruistically. They tend to do it, because it needs to be done. They do not do it because of the acclaim that it might bring.

So the call to the people of God is to reflect the character of their Father in the exigencies of ordinary life. This is how God is made known. There is no fanfare of trumpets, but the simple responding to others in terms of their need and value. Often it may be that there is NO recognition at all, and even rather contrary pressure. But look at the Cross and realise that the most important things in life are often the most overlooked or even disparaged.

It seems to me that this collection of readings has some unexpected things to offer, unexpected emphases to present. For so many people over so many generations has been the odd and selfish perception that if one is faithful to God, then the Deity will ensure that 'His holy one' is protected and even spoilt. So the professional good person tends to be well and truly put out if life takes a sudden and unpleasant turn. However, if one looks at both the Scriptures themselves and the various situations that provoked their emergence in their own time, it is almost always the case that out of harsh and even embittered experiences, the People of God understood God better even in and through the ugliness. Exodus, Exile and Cross are the reminders constant that out of even hideous experiences, God's People emerge with the increasing certainty that there is ever some light at the end of the tunnel.

In an age that seems always to demand rapid and easy answers to profound and difficult questions, this would look like a complete and utter reversal. And it has to be said that, time and again, it is precisely that sort of reversal that we need to look for, --- for I have more than a sneaky suspicion that there will be more, not less of such harsh lessons ahead for humanity.

Sentence

What shall I return to the Lord for all His bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation, and call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows in the presence of all His people.

Psalm 116:24

Collect

Almighty God, in Your wisdom You have so ordered our earthly life that we must walk by faith, not by sight; give us such a 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

Jeremiah 29: 1 & 4 – 7

Psalm

66: 1 – 11

EPISTLE

2 Timothy 2: 8 – 15

GOSPEL

Luke 17: 11 – 19

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

Here again is another interesting insight into the mentality of the prophets when it came to surviving the Exile in Babylon. One might well have expected depression and downheartedness, a sense of hopelessness and fear. How would you cope if, some time in the future another country such as Indonesia invaded this nation and you found yourself transported into a totally foreign culture?

And what was the response of the prophet Jeremiah? He has often been held to be one who could only ever see blackness and despair. Not so, as you read on. The prophet was making it quite clear that, not only were they to go on living – even in that culture so totally alien - but to live optimistically and with hope of a future.

One cannot live that way without a strong basis for such confidence. For Jeremiah, that confidence was in JHWH, and was well and truly founded in fact. Here was no crossing of the fingers and hoping against hope. Here was the clear sense that the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob has been reliable before over many centuries, and was just as reliable still. Small wonder that so many of today's people seem to have little or no hope, when they have lost sight of God. Faith, as I keep saying to people, is no 'hoping against hope.' It is always a choice one makes *on the basis of the evidence that is available*. *Faith has always a solid basis, or it is not faith at all but wishful thinking.*

Psalm

All too often these ancient songs tend to be misunderstood or disregarded entirely. They seem to have a totally unjustifiable faith in a God Who for some must have seemed so distant. There is another approach to these quite remarkable words: but it may well take a longer view (from us) to acknowledge either the sense or the value of them. I find such a time in history as ours to learn from this ancient.

What the Psalmist is getting excited about is his (I presume his!) conviction that in spite of all the evil, corruption and turning from the truth in his day and age, there would come a time, sooner or later, when there would be quite something of a rebalance. He was not expecting any 'end of the world' scenario. He was expecting that there would have to be a time when truth and justice would emerge from the shadows, and be acknowledged once more. Otherwise, as the author would have known, life would be reduced to utter chaos. *This, incidentally, is a sort of left-handed justification and relevance of the Gospel.* So the author was not away in dreamland. **He was certain, that given the character of JHWH, change lay ahead, change that may well be a huge challenge even to the faithful ones.**

Epistle

Now, having said all that is above, does it not make this short passage clear, where Paul expressed exactly the same sense of certainly. He used fewer words than the psalmist, too, for a big change!

Gospel

The terrible pathos of this incident and passage lies in the exposure of the utter ingratitude and turpitude of so much of human nature. Do not ever imagine that Jesus never had to do with thoughtless, wilful, selfish humans. And it must have driven Him bonkers. But He persisted, knowing as Paul and the Psalmist, that God is the

guarantor of all that is true, just and compassionate. On the other hand, there may also be some real bright lights of encouragement from some single human being. And thank the Lord for that.

Notes for a sermon

‘Walk by faith; not by sight.’ My vision tends to be filled with the rather pious and pompous sermons I have heard over the past sixty years or so, and the terribly false sorts of directions into which people have been pointed. Mind you, I may still be rapped over the knuckles by those who would still disagree – perhaps even violently – with the sort of material that follows right here and now.

That sort of pious nonsense has tended to produce little else than unrealistic aims and directions for people, and leave the rest of the world quite certain that Christians are crackpots. That sort of piety expects to find no evidence for the propositions offered. For that is what faith has been presented to be: going totally against normal standards.

In Biblical terms, faith is nothing as vague, unrealistic or foolhardy as that. Never has been and never will be. Faith, as I often ask folk, Christian or otherwise, to see, is the choice one makes on the basis of the evidence in front of them. It is never foolish, though it may well be somewhat risky. So can we find, in today’s passages, anything that points us to this risky but realistic path of service?

Jeremiah the prophet lived through what was arguably the worst and harshest period in Jewish history. He lived through the collapse of Jerusalem, of Judah (the southern kingdom) and through what appeared at the time to be the nadir if not the end of Judaism. With the Temple destroyed, conventional wisdom saw that as proof that the god of the temple was dead if ever it had existed. Jeremiah lived through the aftermath, the forced removal of Jews from Judah to Babylon, and the very extended exile into that foreign land and alien culture. It was the end of the world as Jews knew it. It was devastating, demoralising, utterly destructive. Do stop and see that when people can no longer see any reason for living, that they tend to be dead already. Life was as black as life could be.

Or so it seemed on the surface. And that is as deeply as most people looked.

What we know as the major prophets were remarkable human beings: for in spite of all the evidence pounding their minds, they felt certain that this was not the end. That there was rather more to life than depression. And – if you read their writings you will discover for yourself – they looked back on the history and experience of Israel, with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And they began to see that, whilst **some** of the evidence pointed in the direction ‘popularly’ understood, they saw deeper: they realized the God Himself was right there in the middle of the apparent disaster, and that He had a lot more life left in Him than many saw.

So look again at today’s OT Lesson and see what Jeremiah was saying: yes, life has taken a hideous and powerful turn, but because God has His hand on all that is going on, ***get on with life. There is a future and a hope***¹ - and if you want to see what faith is, now stop and look. This remarkably optimistic view of life, history and politics stemmed from the certainty that Jeremiah had about the character of God. All the evidence to back up this view certainly did seem to come from God’s activity in the past, and from God’s character and values all over those hundreds of years.

In some ways, the OT prophets may have wondered, occasionally, whether they were simply whistling up the wind, - or pushing wind uphill, perhaps. But they were also prepared to wait and see, and they were prepared to be committed to that view to which they held so strongly. And later history validated their views, their words, their teaching.

Now, not to spend too much space on it, do you see how both Psalmist and St. Paul underline the nature of confidence one can have, (all can have) in the character of God. But will you then go on to draw the distinction between what is commonly called ‘faith’ and what is the reality. Far too often, even Christians fail to see that what they call ‘faith’ is closer to credulity. Someone somewhere may have challenged them to have more faith, when that call may have been a challenge to be credulous. These two are a world apart, I have to say, and it is the involvement in this ‘credulity’ that tends to be the butt of rude – but too often true! – barbs from atheists.

¹ These are Isaiah’s words, you may recall, operative in exactly the same dilemma.

These two are a world apart. Faith is confidence, not in thin air, or even a 'crossed-fingered hope' that God will do something miraculous, out-of-character, and remarkable. Can I tell you a story – that you may have heard from me before this.

It was several years ago, and I had had a phone call from a stranger who said he needed food. It is not an unusual request as clergy will tell you. I was in a hurry, so I arranged with a local supermarket to provide him with some tucker, but no cigarettes nor beer. I called in later to pay the outstanding amount, to be told by the owner that the 'client' had bought his tucker on my account, but had produced his own credit card to buy his fags and grog. Nothing terribly unusual about that.

However, the same man called at the Rectory a day or so later, and made it clear that he who had no money needed cash to get to Albury to face Court. I offered – a little tongue in cheek – to arrange with the local Post Office for either a bus- or train-ticket, but no he wanted cash. I indicated that I have never given cash, and he began to explode. 'You are a Christian; you are supposed to trust me!' I suggested otherwise. I trust God in the same way I trust you, boyo. I trust God when I found Him to be trustworthy. When you come into the same category, we are in business.' Then I told him about the swiz he played at the Supermarket, and also with the local St. Vinnie's folk. He exploded into a rage – until he began to see that faith and trust is NOT credulity, but is something that is earned by the one wanting to be trusted shows themselves to be wait for it trustworthy.

That man was not impressed, but he certainly did get the message. Faith, trust, confidence, trustworthiness. There is nothing vague or disconnected about all this.

Sentence

Will not God grant justice to those who cry to Him day and night? Will He delay long in helping them?
Luke 18:7 – 8

Collect

Lord, tireless guardian of Your people; teach us to rely day and night on Your care. Drive us to seek Your justice and Your help, and support us lest we grow weary. In You alone is our strength. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Jeremiah 31: 27 - 34

Psalm

119: 97 – 104

Epistle

2 Timothy 3:10 – 4:5

GOSPEL

Luke 18: 1 – 14

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

If ever there was a passage that underlined the fact that for the ancient Hebrews, the evolution of their Faith was a constant, here it is. In fact there is a remarkable series of strong points made, as Jeremiah obviously pondered the cause and effect of the Exile in Babylon. That pondering produced some interesting side-effects, too.

First of all, there was the recognition that even in damaging situations, JHWH was at work with His people for their benefit. Second, - in an issue that may well have been somewhat surprising, even shocking at the time, - the prophet pointed up that each individual and group carried the responsibility for their actions. *The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.* It is a vivid illustration. Jeremiah was making clear that - even in that close knit community, - responsibility for actions and outcomes lies with the perpetrator. No longer could anyone blame the generation before or someone else: I carry the can for my own actions. It is about time our own day and age caught sight of this little one of life's realities!!!!!!!

And then there is the 'new covenant.' And this applies to all human being, Jew or Gentile, believer or not. Any person needs only to ponder a while to know where the truth lies when it comes to relationships and interactions. In my own experience, a noted offender many years back confessed to knowing that he was being foolish, selfish and destructive, without anyone telling him. The truth was quite close within him.

Psalm

It would be easy to consider that this psalmist was going through an 'I love me' episode, would you not think. But consider further. In fact the person was rejoicing in the fact that, with JHWH, he - and all those around about him - had been given a clear and unequivocal indication of what is important to life and relationships, and what is destructive. In a day and age when so many people seem to have lost any sort of direction, or any sort of values, (and suffer deeply accordingly), it is perhaps easier to see the grounds for this person's delight.

Mind you, our rather modern emphasis on 'sin' and its punishment may need considerable revision in order to see that the problem with sin is the damage it causes and the havoc it wreaks. (And such a revision is rather more in line with the entire Biblical emphasis.)

Epistle

In the light of the reference above, I have to say that, earlier in my life, the sort of emphasis one expected on preachers commenting on passages such as this, was of banging Bibles and pulpits, and offering promise of eternal damnation. While that approach may have scared some gentle folk into the Kingdom, it must have been a distorted kingdom into which they fled. And that very distortion was the factor that led many to discard the Faith.

The reality of the Gospel, and its grace lies in the fact that we have been offered a very different way to operate than that usually seen as the human default programme. And the reason we have been offered the New Way is not to ensure that we get our little sordid souls into heaven, but that we may reflect the nature of our Heavenly Father, *for the benefit of those around about us.* Going back a bit, now this might show why that psalmist of old was getting so excited.

GOSPEL

If ever there was anyone highly aware of the difficulty of persisting in faithful discipleship, it was our Lord. Take some time to wonder at the persistence of Jesus, especially as He approached the Cross, knowing that the Cross represented the total failure of the leaders of His time to consider the truth of what He had been preaching and teaching. Jesus would have been as painfully aware that there would always be so few who would tread in His footsteps. So He was making it quite clear that to follow Him requires us to be 'head down, tail up,' and work our way through all manner of contrary pressure.

Jesus was just as painfully aware of the temptation to make one's 'religion' into a means of separation rather than reconciliation. If I stick my nose in the air, convinced of my spiritual superiority to you, then I have done nothing else than prove the complete opposite. The Faith is not about superiority; Adam is.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I heard only recently of a lady of self-confessed faith in Christ, who has denied (without knowing it) the very faith she says she professes. In a series of savage tirades against members of her own family, she has set herself as so spiritually superior to them as to isolate them both from her and from Christ. I am led to believe that she has done so in all good conscience, but the reality is that she has destroyed all credibility, for herself and for the Lord to which she confesses allegiance. It is a tragedy beyond words, but it is only a small reflection of similar tragedies one encounters constantly.

I have more than a sneaky suspicion that this sad tale is rather more general than might otherwise be thought, and is much of the reason why those professing no faith remain so critical of 'religion.' Further, I confess to having turned my back on 'religion' and 'being religious' for a number of decades. Jesus was never in support of religion, but was ever pointing to love. That did not and does not make love some feeble response to harsh opposition, but does provide a challenge to offer something far more caring and creative.

Quite recently I was pointed to a book written by a Melbourne layman who expresses his concern at the narrowness of faith that tends to be offered and preached about at some churches. Both my brother-in-law and I share his concerns. There is rather too much in the way of unthought-out 'theology' being presented to people, where a closer look at Scripture offers a far more adventurous view of God, life and history. It has always been there, in Old Testament as well as New, but somehow the important issues tend to become lost in the fogs of orthodoxy and dogma.

Look, for instance, at the First Lesson. Jeremiah, amongst others, lived right through one of the most harsh and formative periods of Jewish history, when Babylon captured and destroyed the southern kingdom of Judah. With others, Jeremiah was transported into an alien and unwelcoming culture, where Jews were vulnerable to even more devastating outcomes. And where was God in all that?

Many modern believers have managed to renege on their faith when things in life turned nasty, contrary or sometimes just uncomfortable. The sorts of questions without answers had run something like 'if God is a God of love, why does He allow such-and-such to happen?' So people have turned their back on God, failing or refusing to want to know where real truth leads them. Almost all evil that befalls us humans tends to have a human origin. Not all of it, but a very large proportion. And if God is going to stop all that rubbish, the outcome would be nothing other than the removal of all freedom from us, **and the removal of all responsibility**. And that is nothing less than the removal of our humanity. Thank heaven, God never has treated us like spoilt kids. Or adults.

So when Jeremiah pondered where God might be found in that precursor to the Holocaust, the old prophet had to take all factors, including the then conventional views of things, and see where it all led. Amongst other things, Jeremiah saw, understood and underlined the reality of human responsibility. *The fathers have eaten sour grapes* – or, I cannot blame my parents and demand they take the blame for my own misdemeanours and misunderstandings. I am human; I am responsible.

The old prophet took the matter further. In line with that whole business of human responsibility, he was the need for each person searching within themselves for whatever truth is to be required for whatever situation that we may face. *I shall put My law within them* – was not, in reality, some future promise, but then and now a present reality. Our problem tends to be that we do not really want to listen.

I have told the tale before of an RE class in a Primary School, where the lesson had to do with the God Who speaks. One bright young man of all of a dozen years or so, thought he had the issue dealt with when, interrupting proceedings, reported loudly that God had never talked with him!

I wandered over to his desk, with the class expecting some sort of yell and scream from me. Instead, I asked the lad when was the last time he had had an argument with his parents. (He was fortunate in having both

parents at home.) He looked a little crestfallen, and reported that around breakfast time that very morning there had been ructions. Indicating I was not wanting to invade privacy and obtain details of the brawl, I asked if he had stuck to the real truth of the argument, or whether he was operating on sheer bluster with his parents. He really did begin to look sheepish. Yes, he knew he was playing with the truth, he reported. 'Who told you that?' I asked him, and got a shake of the head in reply. 'I don't know what you mean,' he answered. 'Who told you that you were fudging with the truth?' I repeated, 'was it Mum; Dad. Siblings?' A negative response emerged. 'So how did you know, and where did the stirring come from?' He hesitated then tried to express the view that it was something fairly deep inside of him. 'But you knew, didn't you, without much in the way of uncertainty?' A nod was all that emerged, and by this time the class was so quiet you could have heard the proverbial pin drop.

Let me offer you all a surprise, I spoke to the whole class. Please do not EVER tell me that God does not speak to you. That's where that sense of what was true came from, and it will always come provided we have the honesty to listen. *I shall set my law within them, writing it on their hearts.*

And the only way we can escape from this awareness is to close our hearts, minds and souls to that still small voice, but if we do that, not only have we turned our back on God, we have turned our back on our fellow humans, and even turned our back on our own humanity. This is not promise of some future hell. This sort of hell is much sadder and rather more immediate.

Sunday 28th October, 2007

Twenty Second Sunday after Pentecost
Sts. Simon and Jude

Sentence

Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child, shall never enter it.

Luke 18:17

Collect

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

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Joel 2:23 - 32

PSALM

65

Epistle

2 Timothy 4:6 – 8 & 16 - 18

GOSPEL

Luke 18:15 – 30

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament Lesson

It may sound more than a little naïve to the modern mind, but to old Israel, there was always a strong and clear connection between their God and the conditions of life around them. However, it is important to see past a shallow reading of this passage, to gain a clearer and truer perception of what the prophet was trying to convey.

In that day and age, there was seen to be a close connection between the state of the community in all its various relationships, and the state of the country. If I sin, then it will affect the rainfall and the crops, so I am also sinning against you as well as God. It is a sort of natural connection.

On the other hand, if that natural connection is greeted by the People of God being concerned and careful to attune themselves with their environment, then all sorts of side benefits will ensue. This is where Joel talks about dreams and visions and all that. This is not some fringe benefit for heaven's sake. It is an outcome of being close to the community's *raison d'être*. If I am in tune with God, then I am in tune with you. And if we are in this together, then the outcomes are likely to be very positive indeed, **as we all get together and respond to God, life and each other as we are designed to do**. This is no happy-clappy whiz bang business. This is meant to be a normal outcome of quite joyous living.

Psalm

Whoever chose the Psalm for today certainly was in tune with the readings he or she selected. Do you not see how this old psalmist made the same sort of connections. It is worth pondering this psalm for a few moments, to enter into the delight expressed here. I for one remember vividly, as a young choir boy, catching the spirit of the last two verses of the psalm in an anthem that we used to sing occasionally. Do you?

Epistle

If you have entered in to what is written earlier, you may well be able to see how St. Paul, even in that quite critical situation, was able to sense to point and purpose of life even when he had been bowed down by those disciples who proved to be somewhat useless under pressure.

Gospel

It must have been a somewhat stunning ride to have been with Jesus during His ministry. It seems that the slightest connection of ordinary human interactions became springboards for learning for His disciples and others. It seems to take a certain sort of personality to see all manner of powerful illustrations in day-to-day stuff. But there are two interesting outcomes.

The first is to see that God is there right in the middle of life however banal or even dangerous. The second is to be reminded that the Faith is not about highly elevated, rarified and almost secret stuff. It is about down-to-earth matters So let's never forget that.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I have two quite small illustrations that seem, to me at least, to underline the direction that today's Readings seem to take us. The first has to do with the early life of Desmond Tutu, onetime Archbishop of Capetown, and one very remarkable human being. It seems that, one day, young Desmond was with his mother out

shopping when a white man passing the other way, raised his hat and greeted Mrs Tutu and her young lad. No conversation was entered into, it seems, but the gesture was impactful and significant for both the black people. In that day and age, no one white person ever acknowledged the presence of black or coloured people in South Africa, but that man did. He was an Anglican priest, and would become well-known in the future, because both that action and his writings made clear his total disagreement with apartheid, or with the ugly situations that the evil process provoked. It was a miniscule little event, and it changed the lives of the Tutus, especially young Desmond.

The other tale is from my own experience. I have mentioned before one or two Jewish folk who have become quite precious friends. And part of the reason for that friendship is the way in which those people, without pressure or cant, simply lived out such a tremendous faith in God in such remarkably simple and different ways. The best example is of a lady whose very sick husband had died, and I was asked to take the funeral – for an Anglican husband of a Jewish lady. It would take far too long to describe my learning curve as she and I dealt with the arrangement of the funeral, and the rather lovely differences and similarities of that process that our different backgrounds made. She saw God at hand in everything, even in the passing of her mate – who died at home, and whom she treated with all the Jewish rites before even advising doctor or undertaker. It was a wonderful time for me, and hopefully for her: we discussed all manner of things, including her recognition of Jesus and His teaching, but having great difficulty accepting Him as divine. (I actually suggested to her that I suspect that our Lord could cope with her difficulties. Jesus is not as into dogma as we might sometimes like.) The point of mentioning this is simply to underline how low-key yet absolutely stunning was the encounter. We still write occasionally, in spite of the passage of ten or more years. And increased distance, geographically.

When Jesus made it clear that He considered that people had to enter the Kingdom like a child, He did not mean that they had to be naïve, immature or even over-trusting. What He was emphasizing was the need for each and all of us to be sufficiently honest and open to recognize truth, wherever it comes from, and to respond to each other in the light of that. Had that priest not doffed his hat at Mrs Tutu, we may well have never had such a spiritual giant on the scene, and South Africa may well be still in the hideous grip of apartheid. I doubt if I would be anti Semitic, for I have had too many Jewish people over the years to relate to and get to know. But they were pressureless encounters, and all the more valuable because of it.

Seems to me that today's readings are not asking us to become naïve. They are asking us to look again to see that the world gets on far better when people (of all races, religions and cultures) learn to relate with openness and honesty, and with the humility that frees us to appreciate each other and learn from each other, without any sense of superiority or correctness. It may not do a great deal to remove the threat or experience of droughts and flooding rains, but it will make us all far more aware of the fact that we live in a global village, and when one person hurts, everybody hurts.