

Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> October, 2008

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

**Sentence**

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

*Philippians 3:13*

**Collect**

Generous God, Whose and 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**

**PSALM**

**19**

**EPISTLE**

**Philippians 3**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 21: 33-46**

**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 false 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 freedom that is reached out for becomes a rather refined form of slavery. 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 **and no longer worth playing!** 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 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 wowsery, 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 a response to truth, wherever 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 the universe is an outcome of a vast random accident, chaotic, meaningless. Therefore it reduces everything in-

cluding 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'être*.

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 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.

## 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’ 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 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. Put it another way if you will – there will be no real restoration of stability until there is a similar and significant return to God and Gospel. That may not be in terms you might prefer, but it will have to do with a return to the ultimate and unchanging values in life – as epitomised in the Ten Commandments.

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.

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. The vast escalation of violence is simply an expected outcome of the process.

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 of a few years ago, 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?

Sunday 12th October, 2008

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

**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**

**PSALM**

**106:1-6 & 20 – 24**

**EPISTLE**

**Philippians 4: 1 – 9**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 22: 1 – 14**

**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 precautionary tales for future generations. In this cameo at the foot of Mt. Sinai 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 uncommitting 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. However, somehow they seem to lose sight of the very destructive outcome of such a path.

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.

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 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 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. "*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.*"

## 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 me 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 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. Add to the idiocy, and notice that most of these products are made in offshore sweatshop and poverty-stricken conditions.

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.***

Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> October, 2008.

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

*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**

**PSALM**

**99**

**EPISTLE**

**1 Thessalonians 1: 1 – 10**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 22: 15 – 33**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

**Old Testament Lesson**

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 nobody anywhere was taking responsibility. In other words, Jesus was saying that Jews 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. Life is for living and for caring for those less fortunate.

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 peo-

ple'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 was free to do so. Surely had to break his links with the decadent society that produced his dole payments. **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, however reluctantly from his sycophantic position. You may even see his name in some rather prominent newspapers today.*

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!**

Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> October, 2008

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

**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**

**C o l l e c t**  
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**

**Deuteronomy 14; 1 - 12**

**PSALM**

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

**EPISTLE**

**1 Thessalonians 2:1-13**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 22: 34 – 46**

**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 has 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 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's 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*- 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 be David’s lord (with or without capital) – and that alone required a huge rethink for Israel and its leadership.

## 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 it needs 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 through 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.