

Sentence

Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child, will never enter it.

Mark 10:15

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

Job 1:1 & 2:1-10

There lived in the land of Uz a man of blameless and upright life named Job, who feared God and set his face against wrongdoing.

Once again the day came when the members of the court of heaven took their places in the presence of the Lord, and the Adversary was there among them. The Lord enquired where he had been. "Ranging over the earth", said the Adversary, "from end to end." The Lord asked, "Have you considered my servant Job? You will find no one like him on earth, a man of blameless and upright life, who fears God and sets his face against wrongdoing. You incited me to ruin him without cause, but he still holds fast to his integrity." The Adversary replied, "Skin for skin! To save himself there is nothing a man will withhold. But just reach out your hand and touch his bones and his flesh, and see if he will not curse you to your face."

The Lord said to the Adversary, "So be it. He is in your power; only spare his life." When the Adversary left the Lord's presence, he afflicted Job with running sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head, and Job took a piece of a broken pot to scratch himself as he sat among the ashes. His wife said to him, "Why do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God, and die!" He answered, "You talk as any impious woman might talk. If we accept good from God, shall we not accept evil?" Throughout all this, Job did not utter one sinful word.

Psalm

26

Give judgement for me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity: I have trusted in the Lord and not wavered.

Put me to the test, O Lord, and prove me: try my mind and my heart
For Your steadfast love has been ever before my eyes: and I have walked in Your truth
I have not sat with deceivers: nor consorted with the hypocrites
I hate the assembly of the wicked: I will not sit with the ungodly.
I wash my hands in innocence, O Lord: that I may go about Your altar.
And lift up the voice of thanksgiving: to tell of all Your marvellous works
Lord, I love the house of Your habitation: and the place where Your glory dwells
Do not sweep me away with sinners: nor my life with those that thirst for blood
In whose hand is abomination: and their right hand is full of bribes
As for me, I walk in my integrity: O ransom me and be favourable towards me
My foot stands on an even path: I will bless the Lord in the great congregation

Epistle

Hebrews 1:1-4 & 2:5 – 12

When in times past God spoke to our forefathers, he spoke in many and varied ways through the prophets. But in this the final age he has spoken to us in his Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things; and through him he created the universe. He is the radiance of God's glory, the stamp of God's very being, and he sustains the universe by his word of power. When he had brought about purification from sins, he took his seat at the right hand of God's Majesty on high, raised as far above the angels as the title he has inherited is superior to theirs.

For it is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, which is our theme. There is somewhere this solemn assurance: What is man that you should remember him, a man that you should care for him? You made him for a short while subordinate to the angels; with glory and honour you crowned

him; you put everything in subjection beneath his feet. For in subjecting everything to him, God left nothing that is not made subject. But in fact we do not yet see everything in subjection to man.

What we do see is Jesus, who for a short while was made subordinate to the angels, crowned now with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that, by God's gracious will, he should experience death for all mankind. In bringing many sons to glory it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings; for he who consecrates and those who are consecrated are all of one stock. That is why he does not shrink from calling men his brothers.

Gospel

Mark 10: 2 – 16

Jesus was asked: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" This question was put to test him. He responded by asking, "What did Moses command you?" They answered, "Moses permitted a man to divorce his wife by a certificate of dismissal.' Jesus said to them, "It was because of your stubbornness that he made this rule for you. But in the beginning, at the creation, ""God made them male and female." "That is why a man leaves his father and mother, and is united to his wife, and the two become one flesh." It follows that they are no longer two individuals: they are one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, man must not separate.'

When they were indoors again, the disciples questioned him about this. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and remarries commits adultery against her; so too, if she divorces her husband and remarries, she commits adultery.'

They brought children for him to touch. The disciples rebuked them, but when Jesus saw it he was indignant, and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not try to stop them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you: whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.' And he put his arms round them, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Notes on the readings

Old Testament Lesson

One of the OT books that has left a lasting impression on me has been this Book of Job. It is rather difficult even to begin to date the emergence of this book, but the issue it faces and attempts to resolve is one that is as old as humankind: **why is it that good people suffer without any apparent just cause, or that nasty things happen to good people?**

Perhaps modern people do not take the time to read and ponder this rather ancient tome, but the struggle is worth it. Interestingly, it faces the then (and even now!) rather traditional response¹, and finds it falls far short of reality. There is no final answer given to the question, except that in a rather lovely Jewish way it tells of the enormous growth of understanding of God that Job attains because he asks the very hard question. *And he was not satisfied with pious nonsense.* Some moderns become somewhat fixed on the reference to Satan, and go off into rather useless tangents. That mention, as always, is the typical Hebrew way of pointing up the fact that evil, of whatever source, is being put under the microscope.

Psalm

The Psalm today is asking the very similar question: exploring the situation where a person of integrity has to face bombardment from peers, in a world where the solid old values are disregarded. It is often rather difficult for anyone to retain their integrity – as he puts it – in the face of contrary pressure. However, this person was determined to remain true, in spite of pressure otherwise.

Epistle

The author of this Epistle presents a very high view of Jesus, and goes to great detail to establish his point. There is no-one but God Himself higher, he seems to be saying, and yet even this Son is not exempted from the power struggles and pressure to fail that is common to humans. That is perhaps the most stunning statement of all – most people of 'high estate' tend to assume that they are far above the pressure of mere ordinary mortals. Jesus does not.

¹ This is that nasty things happen to naughty people and not to the good.

Gospel

It seems to me to be far too easy and trite to lapse into the view of taking Jesus' words on marriage and divorce and turn them into rules. What the entire passage is focussing on, seems to me, is the necessity of all of us, in whatever situation, to take each other very seriously as human beings. Divorce, particularly these days, is the illustration *par excellence*, of reducing other people to the situation of mere cogs for our own personal machine. Jesus, like Moses, was well aware of the failure of marriages, for whatever reason, but the point that Jesus was making is the necessity of valuing the human being. People are more important than marriage, and not the other way around. As if to underline the 'person' thing rather than 'rule,' Jesus then went on with that remarkable comment He made about children. The general idea is that children have a more open and honest approach to life, only learning to prevaricate from their "elders and betters." Kids do tend to have a rather heightened sense of what is fair, true and just. And that is the point.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It is almost enough to focus on that rather fascinating Old Testament Reading and look no further, really. It is one that many Christians either miss, or are not aware of, or know it only by repute. And that is a pity; old this book may be, but the message is both current and coherent.

I remember having, during my years of training for the priesthood, a challenge from an Uncle of mine who – in rather typical farmer fashion, - failed to do anything about a nasty ulcer in his mouth. He left it far too long,. And it became cancerous (or perhaps always was) and it took his life in his mid-50s. As he was being treated in a Sydney hospital, he decided that this budding clergyman should have all the answers as to why such things happen to people. If God is good and loving, then why ????? There are no easy answers.

In our search together, Uncle and I focussed on the Book of Job, and by the time of the end of our exploration I had quite a number of commentaries and other shorter works on the subject. It is not easy to follow the arguments in that book, but patience and thought will be rewarded. As the story unfolds, it took poor old Job a lot of 'blood, sweat and tears' to reach an answer that, in some ways, was no answer at all.

One of the usual perceptions amongst some Christians, even to this day, is that illness is the result of sin, usually personal sin. In spite of enough Biblical evidence to the contrary, that folk-view retains quite some loyalty. (Mind you, the Book of Common Prayer, in its Visitation of the Sick, emphasises that view quite unashamedly. I often wonder why, as Jesus made is perfectly clear (John 9) that such is not the case. So if it is not, what is the answer to the question 'why?'

If you go on to read the whole story, do not be put off by that rather odd reference to Satan² spreading himself thin around the world. This is a parable, a myth if you dare, and the book does nothing other than express the usual Hebrew thing about Satan, that here is a sort of personification of human capacity for evil. In this whole issue shows up what is seen to be the huge struggle between good and evil. And evil such unexpected and unexplained things certainly seem to be.

Those who were Job's maligned 'comforters' were convinced of that ancient furphy, and with what amounted so some glee, pounded Job to confess what they expected to be some hideous and secret sin. As is often the case, with pious friends, their friendship is denied by their piety, or pretence of it. It is helpful to find, towards the end of the tale, that they get their come-uppance, in terms of stringent criticism from God Himself. Comforters they were not.

I find it fascinating that, so early in Biblical history, this terribly regular human dilemma came in for examination and treatment. Part of the genius of Jewish faith has always been its capacity to see God at work in ordinary life, without the slightest recourse to 'going off with the fairies.' God can be seen, even in a shadowy way sometimes, though what goes on in real and ordinary life. So the questioning was part of a perfectly legitimate search.

² Satan, in Biblical terms is not some outside influence, but it is the capacity of each and every human being to choose evil and to influence others around them, deliberately or otherwise.

Job would have been as aware as you that he was far from perfect, and his protestations of innocence are not to be thought of as his statement of his personal purity. He was aware of his imperfections and sins, but he also knew that there was nothing in his life and background that could have justified such a savage series of losses and ailments. Nothing made sense, and yet Job knew enough about God to know that – in the final analysis – sense had to be there somewhere. So there is no stoicism in Job; just the search for answers that stand up.

Far be it from me to go through all the exhausting and exhaustive arguments, discussions and debates that occupy the greater part of the book. The powerful climax commences with Chapter 38, where Job, after having run out of words to say and complaints to make, is silenced by the answer he received from God. There is no reference whatever to Job's actual problem, but rather the setting of perspectives, so to speak, and the pounding reminder to Job that he is not God but one of God's creatures. This is no putdown, but a means of almost forcing Job to get his perspectives correct. In that Divine tirade the Lord pointed to all manner of conundrums and such in life and in nature. In pounding challenge after pounding challenge, Job is left with his mouth open and his heart wrung dry. So powerful is this enormous debate that the only result that could possibly emerge is that described in Job's own words – stunning in its simplicity and yet of huge implication for Job and for anyone who ever follows him. Listen to 42: 4: *You said, Lord, listen now and I shall question you.* And Job's reply comes: ***My ears had heard of You, but now my eyes see You. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.***

The remarkable end to the story does not, as mentioned above, provide the answer 'why.?' What does happen is that through that most bitter of experiences, ***Job moved from knowing about God, to knowing Him; from theory to reality. And if God was there in it somehow, that was sufficient encouragement for poor old Job.*** It was a very steep and painful learning curve, for Job. And that is the point. No learning curve = No discovery.

This story packs an enormous punch for us even these days, when medical science has progressed as far as it has. Perhaps the biggest lesson for Uncle and me was precisely that search into the nature of God of Whom we knew something about, but went on the discover far, far more.

Sentence

Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it *Mark 10:15*

Collect

Almighty God, Your Son Jesus was the stone rejected by the builders, and by Your doing has become the chief cornerstone, grant that, by the power of His Spirit working in us, we may become living stones built up into Your dwelling place, a temple holy and acceptable to You, through Jesus Christ our Lord

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Job 23:1-9 & 16-17

Then Job replied: “Even today my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning. If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say. Would he oppose me with great power? No, he would not press charges against me. There an upright man could present his case before him, and I would be delivered forever from my judge. But if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him. *But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold. My feet have closely followed his steps; I have kept to his way without turning aside. I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread. But he stands alone, and who can oppose him? He does whatever he pleases. He carries out his decree against me, and many such plans he still has in store. That is why I am terrified before him; when I think of all this, I fear him.* God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me. Yet I am not silenced by the darkness, by the thick darkness that covers my face.

Psalms 22:1-15

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent.

Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel.

In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them.

They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed.

But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people.

All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads:

He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.”

Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother’s breast.

From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother’s womb you have been my God.

Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.

Roaring lions tearing their prey open their mouths wide against me.

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me.

My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death.

EPISTLE

Hebrews 4: 12 – 16

The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize

with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

GOSPEL

Mark 10: 17 - 31

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.’” “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

Peter said to him, “We have left everything to follow you!” “I tell you the truth,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

NOTES ON THE READINGS

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

You will have noted already my passion for the Book of Job and its contents. This passage (and I have not eliminated verses 10-15 as per the Lectionary and have printed them italics) is of particular value, as it points up something with which polite Anglo-Saxons have difficulty. Perhaps Job was annoyed at his so-called comforters, but here his passion ran hot. While he knew he would not get a fair hearing from those comforters, he remained convinced that God would listen. Not only would He listen, but He would also vindicate. Mind you, Job only held to that point of view because he knew he had his facts right.

Job has left me quite free to argue with God and even yell at Him. But Job has also taught me to stop then, shut up and listen, for that is the significant part of the exercise. God speaks to us; He is not dumb. However, far too often we are deaf, because we never get further than our complaints.

The real issue for Job, in his great debate with the Creator, was that he knew that God will act with justice, fairness and compassion. That was far more than he could expect from his mates.

PSALM

In the light of what I have written above, I now ask you to come a few steps further on. This Psalm is well-known as Jesus quoted from it on the Cross. Even before that, one needs to note that real faith has to take into account all the negatives in life, or else that faith is totally unreal. Going back to that Lord for a moment, one also needs to note that not even He was remote from or relieved from the pain of injustice, hatred and even murder.

Two things need to be noted: and the first is that even the Psalmist sensed such rough treatment to be contrary to what he expected from God. In other words, there was ever the expectation that somehow, somewhere, the imbalance would be righted. Somehow, sense had to come out of nonsense. Like Job, the Psalmist lived through the experience to discover that balance. So did Jesus, Whose resurrection was God’s vindication of His Son’s actions.

EPISTLE

If you have been following the trend of today's readings, you will find the connection between what has gone so far, and this passage. If there is one thing that the Christian can base his or her hope on, it is that in the final analysis, God is a God of truth, justice and fairness. Unlike other views of God, the Bible does not present the Lord as capricious, changeable or unable to be 'followed.' On top of that, our 'great high priest' has been as involved in real life, warts and all, just as we have. We have no remote Deity but One Who is always involved in the darkest corner of life and of living.

GOSPEL

So we have travelled quite some distance as we reach the Gospel. Both that rich young man and Jesus Himself had the expectation that the reason for the Faith, and indeed of life itself, is for the good, the benefit of all people. However, like a lot of so-called 'religious' people, that young man saw 'religion' as the stage for exhibiting his own specialness. It was that very thing that brought him undone.

It is a strange expression of Jesus, refusing the epithet of 'Good.' We tend to think that no one else has the foggiest possibility of making such a claim, but that Jesus does. He, however, rejected it. Perhaps it was a case of Jesus rejecting that self-obsessed view of religion. "I am good, and in fact far better than you!" The focus in this sort of religion is so self-centred that it destroys the very aim it is setting.

However, not even that stopped Jesus from expressing quite some affection for him. Here was someone quite near to the Kingdom, but who ---like all others -- needed repentance, not from some heinous sin, but from the very false direction he was taking. Both that false view of 'religion' and his other security blanket, his wealth, made him quite unready to forget himself and be involved with other people.

I am constantly surprised at the fact that few people have understood the business of camels and the eye of the needle. It was a very clear and readily understood image of considerable impact. When the gates of a city were shut for the night, protection was afforded to everyone inside. But if a late traveller arrived, he was blocked from entry, or almost. Like a huge shed door, a small part of the gate or door could be opened, in the case of a shed, a normal sized door about 6'8" by 3 feet. Likewise in the city gate, a small trapdoor could be opened, and it was called the eye of the needle. A late traveller could be accommodated for entry and so could his camel, as long as the camel's load was removed. Entry was not impossible, but only for the bare person or animal.

The impact of the whole incident focuses back on being fair dinkum. If one is to be disciple of Jesus, then there is no room for half measures or mistruths or unfairness. It is all or nothing. One needs to realize that discipleship means that we need to reflect the character of the Father, not for our benefit, but for the benefit of others.....

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It must be said that these notes are being written a rather long period before the actual date, but I doubt if that is an issue for what follows. If there is one thing that sticks out like a sore thumb in each of today's readings, it is the perceived need to be utterly, totally fair dinkum in one's response to God and to each other. From Job's extremity to the rich young ruler's rather shallower plea, the focus seems to be on complete honesty as a prerequisite for real living.

Often one can gain a clearer picture of what is being said in the Readings by focussing upon the complete opposite as one looks at ordinary life these days. Transparency may be a buzz word these days, but it is breached far more often than it is observed. The fallout from all evidences of dishonesty is the decreasing trust of other people, and the increasing tensions that render life very much more tenuous.

The further this contrast is pursued, the more one can see the increasing relevance of the Faith. Here is no religion designed to limit and proscribe people's actions and activities: rather it is designed to offer people far more sense and value -- and I guess one can also add peace and prosperity. Traditionally, the Faith

has been seen and even presented as a self-serving and self-preserving thing. Be a good little boy or girl and you will get to heaven. Or it has been expressed as a control thing: if you do not do this or that, the full weight of punishment will fall on you, right here and now. Neither of these approaches is to be found in the Gospels, nor have they ever proved effective in real life. Australia may be said to be suffering still from its convict past.

What these Readings seem to say to me, as they pile up on each other so to speak, is an offering of freedom, first of all, to express my dissatisfactions with God (and life in general) but then to listen to the Divine answer, and respond to it with all the honesty of which I am capable. History, including Christian history, is shot through with some most amazing and distorted and dishonest answers to issues of the day. (If Christians are capable of such self-deception, one should not be surprised when others do the same.)

But the real point is, that if and when I am prepared to think, explore and act with integrity and honesty, when I am prepared to see the wider picture rather than simply my own little survival, then the Faith provides us all with a framework to live together and get the best out of life. When I act with integrity for your sake then you may well be freed up to do the same in return. When we can begin to rely on each other, the relief of tension should be almost palpable.

What lies at the heart of these possibilities is that which is mentioned in the Epistle. That word of God is nothing other than the truth of any given situation. Well may people these days try to claim that truth is relative, but more often than not, it is little other than an attempt to avoid something they would rather not face. Certainly, truth may not be the easiest thing to find, but it will always include the necessity of seeing given issues from both sides of the argument. It will involve, also, the necessity of determining all the factors of the situation, so that everything can be taken into account. This is not only both sides of the argument, but anything else that impinges on the debate. Hardest of all is the necessity of accepting the truth of the other person's argument even if it weakens or demolishes ours!

One only needs to begin to state the case, from these Readings, to be aware of the fact that I have a long way to go to reach that goal of integrity and honesty. But it also underlines, for me at least, that I do not know of any goal more worthwhile not just for me, but for the entire population of this planet.

Now comes the real crunch: for this Faith is never some escape from reality but rather it is such an approach to life, people and relationships that finds itself pushing wind uphill so to speak, and running against the general tide. Notice that the Crucifixion of Jesus was the illustration *par excellence* of exactly that. SO if it is any comfort to you, the fact that the situation in the world seems to be getting worse, not better, is *a priori* evidence of the fact that the Gospel is exactly what is needed. It is not irrelevant and never has been.

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked. They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.” “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” “We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”

When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Dear old Job! Here is comeuppance beginning to come. And with what impact it came. The reader needs to use imagination as this passage is read, and in fact could well do with reading on. The argument that God offers Job was overwhelming, and was meant to be. If you have not caught the picture, then ponder. God had been patient enough listening to Job’s complaints, however well justified. But it was time for the clay to be told he was not the Potter, if you follow me. Job may well have thought he had a balanced and overall grasp of the issues, but God reminded his servant that **he** was servant and not Creator. It was a salutary lesson for poor old Job, as it will be for each of us. It is a terribly human trait to assume that ‘I know it all; ergo, I am God, or damn close to it.’ Every now and again it does us good to have the rug pulled out from under our feet. When this happened to Job (in this story) it was the beginning of a huge and enormously valuable learning curve for Job.

PSALM

Clearly, the Psalm takes us in a similar direction. It is so painfully easy for humans to assume that this is our world, and we will do with it as we will. It is our life, and ditto. The Psalmist is doing us a service by reminding us that both life and universe is a gift, and not a permanent one at that.

If you find that last verse (26) of the Psalm a little enigmatic, then you are quite right. Quirky, perhaps is a better word. But that is the point. If you have read the rest of Job 38, you will find quirky things there too. E.g., why does God have it rain at sea? Why do we have whales (leviathans) – and the Psalmist’s answer is for them to play. Why not?

Epistle

One of the most important factors of our Faith is the intimate involvement of mere human beings as both leaders and followers. However, this is a factor that we tend to disregard because of the number of disasters that ensue. If, on the other hand, we were forever lumbered with somewhat superhuman leaders, we would know the greater disaster that stems from that.

There is another side to this factor that is just as valuable, or rather, more so. We have a Leader Who has the human experience and knows what it is like to be mere mortal. You have a Lord Who knows what it is like to be you. *If the reference to Melchizedek bemuses you, may I suggest that you consult a Concordance – it is a long-drawn out business, very Jewish and very obscure. Read about him in the Abraham sagas.*

GOSPEL

A long hard look at any of the Gospels will reveal the increasing difficulty Jesus had with His chosen Twelve. Like almost any other human beings, they remained with their hang-ups and bigotry in spite of long and constant contact with Him. It is no easy task for a person to rid themselves of blind spots and odd passions.

One of the hardest things to learn and perhaps even harder to come to terms with is the dramatic and complete departure of Jesus from normally accepted human forms and demands of leadership. To this day, the Gospel has not permeated into the leadership of the Church let alone the nations. If one is leader, then one expects and demands obedience. One also expects and demands perks of office – kudos, notice being

taken, and the best of everything.

In this incident, it is a little strange, in reverse sight, to find it is John (of the Gospel) and his brother who were pushing for the power and perks of high office.³ A more mature John must have shuddered at the memory of this departure from the faith. Jesus' whole concept of leadership was always and only that of servant and of service of others. Demands were not His scene; power not His method. This is all epitomized in the Cross, the total self-giving for others. This is not just the means of forgiveness; this is the only effective way of leadership. This is not just as Christian; this is also as human in whatever culture.

Unless and until modern Christians come to terms with this, the Church will tend to fail and struggle because humans still assume that power and control is the way forward. ***It is not and never will be! It is denial of Gospel in fact.***

NOTES FOR A SERMON

One of the things that delights me, but somehow proves threatening to many of my Christian and pagan contemporaries, is the complete openness and transparency about this Lord of ours, and even of the Scriptures themselves. In other words, one is given the complete freedom to explore life and faith at one's own timing, and to question and even rage at the apparent constrictions.

I remember well an experience many years ago, of freedom coming to a person who has enormous questions she did not feel free to ask. After a long and very painful struggle with cancer, her mother had died, and the daughter had held God responsible for the pain and anguish. She stopped me in the forecourt of the big Hospital where she worked, and poured out her grief at the unfeeling God Who had caused such hurt to her Mum. She could no longer pray, she said; no longer worship, for this big black hole kept her away.

I asked her whether she had told God of her problem, but she felt she could not because she would yell and kick and scream. I suggested to her that that would be a good thing to do, and she was shocked. 'No one can talk to God like that!' she replied. So I pointed her to Job, who did exactly that, out of frustration and hurt. And I suggested that she do just as Job did, and that was, after all the yelling and screaming, to listen. Listen quietly and intently, for God does answer, and answer at our deepest level. She was most uncertain, but I continued to encourage her, having followed Job's path myself many years before for a different reason.

That lady did not cross my path again for a couple of weeks or more, but oddly, it occurred at the same place in front of the Hospital. The relief was obvious on her face, as she reported having yelled and screamed and carried on like I don't know what, and then listened. Nothing would bring her mother back, but she went on to see the position more clearly. Sometimes medical science is rather too clever, not allowing nature to take its course. However there is still the deep and human problem with death and suffering. And on the other hand again, we have a Lord Who knows all about that because He had been there, done that.

The Faith is NOT about believing the incredible; it is not about being credulous. It is certainly not about being naïve. I have more than a sneaky suspicion that we have a Lord Who expects us to use our grey matter, to think and ponder and question, and Who is not put out because we dare to raise questions and issues. In fact, it is only as we question and ponder that answers come, as do fresh questions.

And then there is that matter of leadership. When I was called to the priesthood at the delicate age of sixteen or so, my great problem with the call was that I was not like the great and powerful leaders of the world, but uncertain, and not all that pure either. Over the years, little has changed, except that, as I ponder Jesus, I long ago realized that if I was one of the greats, *I would be of no damn use to people whatever. I would have been too self-focussed.* It has been a fascinating pilgrimage, as person let alone as priest, for it continually faces me that the very person who thinks he or she is God's gift to pulpit or parish is really nothing of the sort. It may be OK for sports elite to be churlish, self obsessed and pathetic. It ill behoves the Christian, priest or lay, to carry on like that. If they do so behave and carry on, it is quite obvious that they have never caught sight of the real Jesus.

³ It is almost certain that the reason for Judas' betrayal of Jesus stemmed from that disciple sensing that there would be NO perks when Jesus came into His kingdom. Hence, he jumped ship, so to speak!

SUNDAY 25th October, 2009

Twenty first Sunday after Pentecost

Sentence

The redeemed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing and everlasting joy will be upon their heads
Isaiah 51:11

Collect

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

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Job 42:1-6 & 10 - 17

Then Job replied to the LORD: "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. "You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' *My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.*"

7 After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. 8 So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has." 9 So Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite did what the LORD told them; and the LORD accepted Job's prayer.

After Job had prayed for his friends, the LORD made him prosperous again and gave him twice as much as he had before. All his brothers and sisters and everyone who had known him before came and ate with him in his house. They comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the LORD had brought upon him, and each one gave him a piece of silver and a gold ring. The LORD blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. And he also had seven sons and three daughters. The first daughter he named Jemimah, the second Keziah and the third Keren-Happuch. Nowhere in all the land were there found women as beautiful as Job's daughters, and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers. After this, Job lived a hundred and forty years; he saw his children and their children to the fourth generation. And so he died, old and full of years.

Psalms 34: 1 - 8

I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.
My soul will boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice.
Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together.
I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears.
Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.
This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles.
The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.
Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.

Epistle

Hebrews 7:21 – 28

He became a priest with an oath when God said to him: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever.'" Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant. Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our

need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.

GOSPEL

Mark 10: 46 – 52

Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.” Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him. The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.” “Go,” said Jesus, “your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

Notes on the Readings

Old Testament

Please note that, for the sake of completeness, I have included the verses 7 – 9 deleted from the official reading. In case you have not read this ancient book before, this will complete the picture for you just a little bit.

In a way it is a pity that we have not been subjected to the complete reading of the Book of Job. Although it is long and very wordy, it also illustrates the length and strength of the struggle that was Job’s as he came to terms with the ugly things that befell him. Here the Lord had answered the so-called comforters, and somewhat tore strips off them for daring to speak in His Name with a response that He would not hold. *I am always very wary of people who say that the Lord told them this or that. Not only is a moral blackmail imposed, which is so contrary to the Lord’s approach; more often than not, what they press upon one is very often pious garbage.*

Job had been faced with the outburst that He shot at God, and while God has not difficulty with the outburst itself, He did expect Job to have taken the matter further. One of the great failings humans are heir to, is that strange capacity of arguing with only part of the information surrounding the issue. Is it not true that when you argue and fight, you bring up only those areas of debate that set your cause forward. Anything that upholds your opposition is hidden away from sight. Small wonder that few just results emerge from our brawls!!!!

The outcome of the big debate God has with Job is that Job fell on his knees in repentance. This is not so much because Job was wrong, but that he had not ‘taken off his blinkers.’ He had needed to look wider, see further and think more deeply. And that business of repentance is not so much for his sinfulness, as for his failure to realize that God is God and Job is only human. The absolutely stunning outcome is not repentance -- it is encapsulated in those immortal words: ‘*My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you*’. Previously, for Job, faith was something of a mental exercise; not it had become experience of God. Once a person has been there, there is no looking back.

Job never did receive any answer to his question “Why?” In fact, there is never any sensible answer to be found to that question. It could be better asked, “What are You saying to me in this, Lord?” This was the reshaping of a similar dilemma, suggested to me by a very great and dear friend, many years ago. She was right! The answer to that was immediate --- and very significant.

PSALM

While it may seem all so simple, this psalm is a song of joy from someone who had been through a mill similar perhaps to Job. These days, one tends to hear only self-pity from people under stress; here,

however is something far more positive. Perhaps a reason for the negative response lies in the fact that few have thought through all the issues, as Job had to do.

It could also be said that we tend not to catch sight of the significance of God. While He remains only a figment of our imagination, we can have little response from Him. This is an almost immediate downside of today's huge dependence upon emotions and 'how I feel at the time.' This is a most unsteady basis from which to live.

If God IS God, then there is every guarantee that, whatever the vicissitudes of life, God is there at the helm, and has something very positive for us, through it all.

EPISTLE

It must be said that parts of this Letter to the Hebrews is hard going for the modern reader, there are still enormous flashes of insight and encouragement that emerge. As priest for the last 40 years or so, I have been bewildered often at the failure of my colleagues when the chips are down. Hard as that is, I have to add to that my own sense of dropping short in my own ministry. What chance have people got, when even the called are only human?

The author of this letter was obviously aware of the failure of the Temple priests of his time, and even of the High Priests. And that is why he pointed – with considerable alacrity! – at Jesus, Who, though human, still fulfilled His responsibilities without lapse. That makes His ministry so utterly reliable and dependable. There is enormous power in that!

GOSPEL

It surprises me constantly that few readers of this little cameo about Bartimaeus ever give any thought to the beggar's name. In Hebrew society, names meant a very great deal, indicating the nature of the person, of sometimes their role. Even Jesus means 'saviour.'

Here was a blind man, and that alone isolated him from everyone and rendered him ineligible to attend synagogue. One disadvantage. The second relates to his name. **'Timaues' means 'a nobody, a zilch, a blank.' To underline the futility for the man, it was his father's name as well. A nobody, son of nobody, and blind to boot.** Small wonder he was told by disciples and crowd to shut up and go away.

On the one hand, Jesus was Himself blind to those narrow and disabling bigotries of ordinary people. For Him, Bar-timaeus was human. Capable of all sorts of things, good and ill. The fact that this nobody went out of *his* way to catch up with Jesus indicated something of the spirit of the man, a spirit to which Jesus responded very positively.

One could hardly have a clearer picture that Jesus is open to all, regardless of their position on the status symbol level. The most humble person is of interest to our Lord. *And thank heaven for that!*

NOTES FOR A SERMON

One of the areas of life in which many people feel inadequate is in the direction of pushing the limits and testing the edges. Interestingly, many ordinary people will applaud those who do, and will enter in to their discoveries. Perhaps it is the fear of failure that stops many people searching; perhaps they may be a little scared of what they might find out there.

This fear often stretches to the arena of faith, and nowhere does this fear of exploration show up more than if someone dares to challenge the 'certainties' of the creed. Just under fifty years ago, I was in Theological College, and a certain English Bishop JAT Robinson dared to challenge some dearly-held tenets of the Faith, and was castigated for his troubles. I recall many comments and sermons delegating Robinson's writings to a conservative hell, especially as he questioned conventional belief about the Resurrection of Christ. Much of what he wrote about then tends to be quite commonly held now. I suspect that, in time, much of Bishop's Spong's work will likewise become traditional. Right now he is *persona non grata* to many.

The passage that has brought all this to the fore is that most ancient book of Job. No one, to my knowledge, has been able to date the book, so old is it. On the other hand, not many people nor denominations have taken hold of what it has been expressing all that time. In the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, there is a service for Visitation of the Sick, which turns it back on Job and even Jesus, neither of whom attributed illness to sinfulness.

The Book of Job has always been seen as the search for an answer to the question, *why do the innocent suffer?* Conventional wisdom, then and even into Jesus' day and beyond, was that illness was God's punishment on sin. This is perhaps one reason why those who were 'demon-possessed' in Jesus' day were especially stigmatized and isolated. Such inexplicable and incurable disease must stem from the most awful sin. Even today, mental illness has a distaste all of its own.

For the conventional believer in Job's time, Job's daring to challenge conventional wisdom was too much to bear. For the conventional, the world was 'coming to an end' if Job was allowed to get away with it. Who knows what dreadful outcome might follow such 'blasphemy.' It is appalling to realize the extent to which lateral thinkers have been castigated and even executed by the Church. It may have been in the name of maintaining peace, but it has been at the cost of truth and discipleship.

So here is the great plea for freedom for people to explore. Certainly, there are huge areas of nonsense these days, that pass for conventional Christian belief. I have the fond hope that the passage of time will remove the nonsense from the real, though I have to admit that in our age, many people are particularly credulous and stupid. **I remember reading somewhere, not all that long ago, that when people give up belief in God, they do not believe in nothing. They will believe in ANYTHING.** And there is more than an element of truth in that.

It seems to me that the series of readings in Job has brought us to this point of being prepared to question, explore, and understand the Faith so that it is clearer for our contemporaries in life. Failure to do so – seems to me – is for the present generation of Christians to miss much of the point.

In my notes above I have drawn readers' attention to the meaning of the name of this poor unfortunate blind man who met Jesus one day. His blindness alone isolated him from the normal population and refused him acceptance in synagogue. On top of that, he was reduced to beggarmdom, a non –person. That, in fact, is what he name meant – zilch, son of zilch. Small wonder the other people and disciples determined to consign him to his rightful place, on the extreme edge of society. **But not Jesus.** For our Lord, here was a real human being, needing love and support and capable of giving it too. He may not have been the most attractive of humans, but response to him may well change that.

Here is another area of exploration that lies in front of people today, in our multicultural country. With the closeness of communication and -for us at Port Augusta! – nearness of detainees from overseas, there is the challenge of yet another rethink in the direction that Jesus would have taken were He here.

It remains all so terribly easy to write people off in order to avoid the challenge they present. That would be about as 'Christian' as the Inquisition.