

**Sentence**

The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes. *Matt. 21:42*

**Collect**

Almighty God, Your Son Jesus is the stone rejected by the builders and has been made 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, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. **Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Exodus 20: 1 – 4 ; 7-9 & 12-20**

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. *You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. *Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work--you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.*

Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

**Psalm**

**19**

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament declares His handiwork  
One day tells it to another: and night to night communicates knowledge  
There is no speech or language: nor are their voices heard  
Yet their sound has gone out through all the world: and their words to the ends of the earth  
There He has pitched a tent for the sun: which comes out as a bridegroom from his chamber, and rejoices as a strong man to run his course  
Its rising is at one end of the heavens, and its circuit to their farthest bound: and nothing is hid from its heat  
The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul: the command of the Lord is true, and makes wise the simple  
The precepts of the LORD are right, and rejoice the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, and gives light to the eyes  
The fear of the LORD is clean, and endures forever: the judgements of the Lord are unchanging and righteous every one.  
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold: sweeter also than honey, than the honey that drips from the honeycomb  
Moreover, by them is your servant taught: and in keeping them there is great reward.  
Who can know their own unwitting sins?: O cleanse me from my secret faults.  
Keep your servant also from presumptuous sins: lest they get the mastery over me: so I shall be clean and innocent of great offence.  
May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight: O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer.

## Epistle

## Philippians 3: 4b – 14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

## GOSPEL

## Matthew 21: 33-46

*Jesus said*, "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.'" So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

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## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### Old Testament

It is almost impossible to know where to begin (and even to finish!) with this most formative of Biblical passages, not only for Christians but far more for Jewish people. Here is no negative statement as abhorred by many, but one of the most freeing of concepts.

Sadder for Anglican Christians, in a way, is the fact that, until a handful of decades ago, each and every one of them would have known the Decalogue off by heart. At every celebration of the Eucharist, these ancient words were repeated. Sunday by Sunday, the code was embedded deeply into the psyche of everyone. Sadly, though, not a lot of explanation was offered with it. I remember one dear Bishop of mine pointing out, 40 odd years ago, that the prescription 'was never designed to be a rod with which to beat people, Ron, but rather a pointer showing the way towards life at its most creative and redemptive.' We ignore the whole thing to our peril as humans, and one would have to add that recent Australian – and world! – experience indicates the chaos that ensues from disregarding the Ten Commandments.

### Psalm

In the light of a Christian (?) world that has done little but castigate the sinner, this rather lovely and thought-provoking psalm offers a balance that rather too few manage to espy or embrace. This author did not see God's rules of whatever source as demanding, restricting and damaging, but rather, like the rules of a game or sport, giving shape, substance and direction to life as experienced by all humans. Yes, there are boundaries, but

they are redemptive and freeing, --- and that is no play on words. The Decalogue is a fuller expression of the *Shema Israel* which focuses on the call to love God and love one's neighbour.

### Epistle

Because we do not live in the world of the First Century AD, it is not easy to understand the dichotomy through which Paul passed to understand Jesus. For him in his Pharisaic life, Law was everything; the Decalogue and the rest of the Torah, was all there was. One needs to say at this distance, that such a 'religion' is little less than a distortion of the faith into a life-and-death competition. (Very sadly, centuries of Christians have tended to reduce the living faith into something remarkably similar.)

Notice the strong language that Paul uses, not so much about the then current Judaic Faith, but about its distortion. In this translation the word used is 'rubbish.' Make no mistake about it; the Greek original uses the word 'excrement' – *sh1t*, if you don't mind. Here is no impoliteness; rather it is enormous emphasis.

Now catch sight of the huge relief and promise that Paul saw in the Person he had heretofore despised.

### GOSPEL

There would not have been a Jewish person present on the day that Jesus offered this parable who would not have known the genesis and emphasis of this tale. From Isaiah on, this story was taken up a number of times over the centuries, indicating first the prophets, and then Jesus, in their attempt to get Israel sit up, listen and respond to what, in their heart of hearts, they know to be true.

Here is one of the tragedies of the human will and mind, that what appears more amendable at the time tends to be seen as superior to whatever truth was being conveyed. It is small wonder that the real progress of the Gospel is so minimal and slow.

### NOTES FOR A SERMON

Early in this Long Weekend of October 2010, as I wrote all this, news broke of the utter waste and tragedy for several families as four or more lives were lost in a road accident at Bilpin. It would appear that the driver of a car went out to overtake on the bending and narrow Bell's Line of Route, that I have travelled often. One assumes that a double line was crossed, and the accident occurred. How often do people take that sort of risk, getting away with it. But why is the solid line there?

The answer is that such warnings are not there to limit people's freedom, but to **extend the safety of all of us. Road rules**, I kept saying to schoolchildren in Scripture classes, **are not there to limit BUT TO FREE**. If we were allowed to travel on whatever side of the road we liked, the human road kill each year would be geometrically larger than it is. Believe me.

Or I used to use the discussion of why netball and football and cricket have rules, as do all sports. It is not easy to play a game of no rules and no limits, for the outcome would be quite dangerous chaos. Kids recognized that, even in Primary Scripture classes. And one of the most remarkable and positive short statements of what is important in life (not just in religion!) is the *Shema Israel*. The Two Great Commandments. At least that remains as important in the Anglican Liturgy, thanks to our Hebrew predecessors.

It was not always thus: that passage from Exodus reveals, to me at least, that the children of the exodus still had a lot of catching up to do. In their day and age, the gods were to be feared, or so they thought, as did everyone else back then. Whilst, like younger children, they needed to be surrounded by protective rules, they would discover as time went by, that response needed not to come from fear, but from understanding: if I cannot trust you, and you cannot trust me, then life becomes rather fearfully chaotic. And God and chaos are contradistinctive.

Only this afternoon, my middle daughter, my wife and I had a strong discussion about the Faith. Actually not so much about the Faith as about some Christians turning this living faith into a set of rules, *which like the laws of the Medes and Persians cannot be changed*. You will have encountered, surely, the unbending and rigid approach to life and relationships posed by some so-called Christians. (Unless you fit my sausage-skin, you are out!!!!) This has nothing to do with the faith; this has everything to do with control, and rigid control at that. It is that sort of 'religion' that the Apostle turned his back on, for at last he saw it in its real colours. *If I have to kill you to prove that I am right, then I have done nothing but prove the exact OPPOSITE*.

The real point at issue is that the ancient document of the Decalogue is really very far from passé, but remains remarkably relevant in spite of the passage of millennia. It may feel so for some who regard God as irrelevant but even then my tentative answer to such folk is to consider truth and justice and compassion with God, for that is what He represents, let's face it. In that situation, the arguments simply fade away, do you see?

The terrible human reality is that the further people move from God, the more they move from each other. And the more they move from each other, the closer comes the chaos that even the ancients feared. I have just listened to a radio report on SA ABC of a home invasion in a suburb south of Adelaide. This apparently random attack was vicious, and totally careless of the people robbed. It would seem, too, that the attackers must have had no concern or pride in themselves. With the rapid increase in such events, there seems to be increasing evidence of that claim I have just made. I consider myself most fortunate to have grown up in a very different world indeed, where, while Church-going might not have been all the prevalent, the values of Church and faith were held by the vast majority of people.

So I suggest that anyone who knocks the Ten Commandments would need to have some remarkably solid grounds for doing so.

**Sentence**

This is the 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 daily lives that we must walk by faith and not by sight; give us such a trust in Your fatherly care, that in the face of all perplexities, we may give proof of our faith by the courage of our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Exodus 32: 1 – 14**

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."

Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD." They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation."

But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth?' Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

**Psalm**

**106: 1 – 6 & 20 – 24**

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

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

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

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

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

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

At Horeb<sup>1</sup> they made themselves a calf: and bowed down in worship to an image

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

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

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

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

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<sup>1</sup> Horeb and Sinai are the same place, of course

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

## GOSPEL

## Matthew 22: 1 - 14

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

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## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### Old Testament

I have often wondered why some people seem to desire or even demand the office of Bishop! I am sure that Moses would have been quite glad for someone else to lead that recalcitrant Hebrew mob! Like most moderns, their patience was non-existence and demanded immediate answers to their problems. And before anyone these days mocks the idolatry of those ancients, like impatience, idolatry is alive, well and thriving in today's world too. Few realize that this is why prices are so huge and houses so vast – and SUVs and 4WDs flood *city* streets.

And before you take to heart the concept that 'God changed His mind,' please stop and see that such a comment comes from the perception of those who recorded the incident. So much of the problems people seem to have with the Old Testament presentation of the nature and activity of God stems from the perception of the time. It takes most humans quite some time to let go of their baggage and move forward.

This is not a pretty picture of Israel, but then, like the rest of us, they were not all that faithful nor reliable. In spite of all that had been done for them, they remained intransigent. Small wonder that they spent that generation or more in the desert. (I would have left them there forever!!!!)

### Psalm

Thanks God for people like those who wrote the psalms, or more particularly, those Old Testament prophets, who spent rather more time thinking and praying and pondering about life and God and all that happened. A very different position and possibility emerges from those old writings. Thank God for people who stop and ponder, eh!

## Epistle

For anyone still struggling with the Ordination of Women, please ponder these words of the Apostle. Most of the issues that required change and development in New Testament times did not have rules and regulations to require growth. The process was rather – like psalmist and prophet – to express the situation and the value of it.

Oddly enough, no one to my knowledge has any difficulty with the second paragraph of this beautiful epistle. Whatsoever is true, honourable, just and so on surely must resonate in every human heart that reads this – and each time it comes up before me, I still see how much further along that road I need to travel -- don't you?

## GOSPEL

Now please do stop and see that parables are parables, and are not hide-bound. That angry King is not to be compared to God, but to what one would expect of 'royalty' of that day and age. The point of the story is simply to underline the extraordinary capacity of human beings to ignore the important and prefer the mediocre. You have seen that constantly, have you not? Perhaps you have even travelled that path.

And that business of the wedding robe may need some explanation as well. The story goes that at such a wedding, all the guests were given wedding robes by the host; and that indicated that this guest was unwilling to accept the robe, requiring attendance on his own terms. Hence the position of host was assumed by the guest, and that was not an acceptable option. Invitations, as in the Gospel, are by grace not by demand, so the interloper was cast out - in the story.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

In the world in which we now live, there is an increasing distance from what we older people may describe as the way things were. None of us are sufficiently naive as to imagine things were totally acceptable then, for that is far from the case. But – as I think I have inferred in previous weeks – the ancient verities were acknowledged by the greater part of the population. There was little dispute about where truth and justice lay, and honesty could be expected from other people. None of us were much better off than others, at least as I encountered people, and in those days even houses were not locked unless we were on holidays. Go back far enough, and early model motor cars did not even have keys for doors or ignition. (This is post World War II mind, not the Dark Ages.)

Except in fairly rare instances, even idolatry was not an issue. In fact, even as children and young adults, we would look back to OT times and wonder how people could be so stupid as to worship things!!! That matter has resolved in the affirmative for a long time since those halcyon days.

How did all this arise? Well, after some thought on the subject, it seems to me that today's readings – a little like last week – focus on issues that are of huge importance to the Christian person, but of rapidly decreasing value to – dare I say the usual person? I guess there is some unfairness there, but so much of today's society seems bound to the direction of 'gimme, gimme, gimme,' that things assume a far vaster value than people.

In fact it may not be too much to suggest that Generations X and Y would regard today's readings as naive and passé and valueless. So are we chasing the wrong dream? To my mind, closer examination would suggest strongly otherwise.

If I want to get on top of you, to use you to my own advantage, or even to make sure you get out of my way, then it may be the case that current ways of operating would produce the best results. Mind you, the outcome would be the breakdown of any relationship or connection between us, but if I am selfish enough, that would not matter. But if I wanted my family to remain connected and communicating, if I was interested in maintaining connection with neighbours and others around about, then it would mean that I would have to operate in a very different way indeed.

Different. Now there is a word. Are you aware that that ancient and well-used (or was once) word 'holy' has as its root meaning **different**. Not different as in snotty-nosed; but different in terms of not the norm. That is why Isaiah reports of God that 'My ways are not your ways' – not because God's ways are unapproachable, but because they are unexpectedly true and honest and compassionate. Certainly they are not normal human ways.

So that idolatry of Aaron's time had to do with the expectation that Israel deserved and demanded immediate action from whatever god was available, and bugger the realities. Old-time religion – **real** old-time - saw itself as being able to manipulate the gods and goddesses to do what the worshippers required. Cargo cult sort of stuff. That used to be the province of natives of New Guinea or somewhere else like that. Actually I suspect that they caught it from 'advanced' societies, like the USA. Or from Australians.

So as Christians we are called to be different, again not to be snotty-nosed about it, but because we are aware that the idolatry of the present age does nothing other than draw huge lines of division between rich and poor, haves and have not, between developed countries and less-developed.

**Sentence**

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

*Matthew 22:21*

**Collect**

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ You have revealed Your glory among the nations; grant that Your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in proclaiming the cross to be the way that leads to life eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Exodus 33: 12 – 23**

Moses said to the LORD, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight.' Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." The LORD said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." And Moses said to Him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

The LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name." Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." And the Lord said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

**Psalm**

**99**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Epistle**

**1 Thessalonians 1: 1 -10**

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

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead--Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.' Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman herself died. In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her." Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is God not of the dead, but of the living." And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.

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## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### Old Testament

If you are more than a little bemused by that OT reading, do not be surprised. On the other hand, if you take a long hard look, maybe the 'bells will begin to ring.' One thing is reasonably clear in the passage – that JHWH is not going to let anyone – including Moses – to dominate or dictate the agenda.

Had you lived in that day and age, most of the religions by which you were surrounded actually operated on the premise that the worshipper could manipulate the gods by performing ritual acts. In other words, that sort of worship was a matter of following certain patterns or rituals, the outcome of which was – so the story went! – that the gods were bound to respond in the affirmative.

Compare that with what you already know of JHWH, and in particular with this passage. For all Moses' push and shove, he was kept very much in his place. If that seems a little strange, then please ponder a moment or two.

You will be quite familiar with the Hebrew perception (and your own) of God being holy; this was epitomized by the clear understanding that if anyone saw JHWH, then death was the immediate prospect. Put into more conventional language it meant that He was not there to be trifled with. No one could (or can) manipulate God even when the NT offers us the chance to call Him 'Daddy,' Abba, Father. One had and has to take Him seriously or not at all.

With all due respect, this is an aspect of reality that modern Christians need to recover. God is for real, and justice is for real, and integrity is for real. We can try and manipulate those things, but – try it if you dare - it will all explode in your face. *Do you catch sight now of what is being conveyed and underlined?*

### Psalms

And now, of course, you can catch clear sight of what the Psalmist is presenting. Here is no propaganda about God; when you realize that all that is true and solid and lasting – as we have seen above – stems from and is represented by God, it gives quite some certainty and promise for the future regardless of how bleak that future might look. Hate might confront you, but love will defeat it in the final analysis.

### Epistle

I wonder if many people reading this Epistle recognize the nature of the change for those people that the Gospel represented. For most people, even Romans citizens, life would have been somewhat of an enormous risk, for few of the Jewish values of honesty and dependability, justice and truth, would have been available. Never lose sight of the fact that such things are and remain products of the Gospel, - and of Judaism before that – for the entire

Biblical Faith is, may I remind you, something that proffers a healing response to what many still call the ‘human dilemma.’

## GOSPEL

These two cameos underline something that modern Christians could well stop and ponder. For too many such folk, enormous effort is expended trying to defend the faith, when so much of the attacks from people who either know little about the Faith or indicate such confused thinking that their illogic is really very sad.

Jesus had little compunction about taking on antagonists, and I suspect had a certain amount of delight in pulling rugs out from under certain feet, so to speak.

That business about the coin is really rather telling, and actually widens the perception of anyone reading of the encounter. Here is no simple business of dividing sacred from secular<sup>2</sup> but a far wider, all-embracing look and understanding of life.

For Jews, the presence of the Romans and their occupation of the country represented the sort of angst and anger that either Japanese or American occupation would produce in you! (Does that say anything to you about Afghanistan?) On the other hand, the Apostles could write in their epistles of respecting the ‘powers that be.’ For people of that age, even the detested Romans represented protection from any chaos that would result from collapse of any sort of rule. In other words, if you are part of the community, country or culture, it is incumbent on you to pay your share of the cost of that.

On the other hand, the debate with the Sadducees was really remarkably pathetic. It bodes no one any good to try and draw an argument from hypothetical illustrations. That does not stop people from doing so, but it does underline the folly of it. Whilst there was always that aspect of early Jewish law that a brother was expected to take up the cause of any brother’s widow, - and people did so willingly and effectively – the case as posited was ridiculous. Notice just how Jesus responded to it/

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

Have I told you the story of the son of a colleague who, many years ago now, was living off the fat of the land (well, not quite!) as his unemployment benefits managed to cope with his rather minimal needs. While he would have preferred to receive more, his theory was that the country and culture to which he (sort of) belonged, was effete and passing away, and to it he offered neither allegiance nor support. It was around the time of the Vietnam War, which also got right under his skin, as it did for most of the rest of us.

So he expressed his total disgust at the *status quo*, and tore strips off his parents and the rest of us for being part of the ‘establishment.’ I questioned him about his inconsistency, as you might imagine. I have rarely been able to keep my trap shut when people propose baloney. The young man reiterated his disgust at society and government – so I suggested that he should alter his way of operating. ‘How can you continue to accept your dole payments,’ I asked. ‘You are a parasite on the society you claim to despise. I have no problem with your point of view of Australia, **but you are totally dishonest in living off the very society you despise.** Either refuse the dole, and survive on your own, or change your attitude entirely.’

As you might imagine, the young man was *livid!* He exploded at me (as I hoped he would,) and tore strips off his parents, who were open-mouthed at me, not their son. But after he had a chance to think about it all, he had to see his own dishonesty. I am glad to report that, while it took a little while to occur, his direction in life changed dramatically, and he became a rather more useful member of the society he found he could not despise, in spite of its shortcomings.

If you consider this to be at a vast distance from those readings for today, I ask you to think again. If you consider this to have nothing to do with the holiness of God, I repeat the same request. Can you now see the clear and distinct link between that which is holy – truth, justice, equity, compassion and love, all of them characteristics of the Father, unchangeable and enormously valuable – and all that is other? ‘Between them is a great gulf fixed,’ you may recall from Jesus’ Parable of the rich man and Dives.

Go a step further: one of the common complaints of the people of God over the last few decades has been ‘where will it all end, Ron?’ as if the increase of ‘that other’ is somehow proof that God either no longer exists or is no longer capable of dealing with it all. Repeatedly I have pointed out that the reality is clear yet unexpected by many. This rise of evil in this world of ours is a constant experience of humans of almost whatever space and time, that the ‘faith once delivered’ has always presented as an antidote, *the antidote*, so that whatever you seem to fear is

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<sup>2</sup> No self-respecting Jew would ever see any such distinction.

actually proof of the relevance and effectiveness of the Gospel. Ponder that a while if you will. Like Abraham, you may not see the final denouement, but it will be there, sometime, someplace. As John expresses it in Revelation, though not in these words, evil has within itself the source and cause of its own destruction. The rescue is brought to fruition, not by force but by love. *That is the scary bit.*

**Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 2011**  
**Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A**

**Sentence**

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment: and a second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the prophets.

*Matthew 23:37*

**Collect**

O God Whose Son has taught us that love is the fulfilment of Your law; stir up within us the fire of Your Holy Spirit, and pour into our hearts Your greatest gift of love, so that we may love You with our whole being, and our neighbours as ourselves, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Deuteronomy 34: 1- 12**

Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the LORD showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain--that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees--as far as Zoar. The LORD said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there."

Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses. Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

**Psalm**

**90: 1 – 6 & 13 – 17**

Lord, You have been our refuge: from one generation to another

Before the mountains were born, or the earth or the world were brought to be: from eternity to eternity, You are God

You turn us back into dust: saying, 'Return to dust, O children of Adam.'

For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday passing: or like one watch in the night

You cut them short like a dream: like the fresh grass of the morning

In the morning it is green and flourishes: at evening it is withered and dried up

Relent, O Lord, How long will You be angry?: take pity on Your servants.

O satisfy us early with Your mercy: that all our days we may rejoice and sing.

Give us joy for all the days You have afflicted us: for the years we have suffered adversity

Show Your servants Your work: and let their children see Your glory.

May the gracious favour of the Lord our God be upon us: prosper the work of our hands, O prosper the work of our hands

**Epistle**

**1 Thessalonians 2: 1 – 13**

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from

you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.

So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers.

As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.

## **GOSPEL**

## **Matthew 22:34 – 46**

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

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## **NOTES ON THE READINGS**

### **Old Testament**

Here is an epitaph to end all epitaphs – the passing of Moses, who here was classified as a prophet. That is an interesting statement to make about this person. Added to this passage is the passing of the mantle to Joshua, son of Nun. That transition is just as interesting.

There is some tragedy in this passage; because of his intransigence, Moses was refused permission to enter the Promised Land. That must have torn at Moses' heartstrings, but he had erred powerfully you might recall. He had the temerity to assume the role of God in dispute with Israel, and that was the end of that.

So Moses died, and his grave is unknown to this day – meaning that it would never be possible to make a shrine out of that place, for that would have the distinct likelihood of distorting the Hebrew faith. It is a sad fact of history that Christians have not followed that pattern of not having shrines.

### **Psalm**

The ancient Jews were nothing if not practical and honest in their assessment of humanity. We are not immortal, as the author clearly indicates, and as we have just seen that applies even to noted people like Moses. So the clear distinction is drawn between eternal God and mortal humanity. Not a bad base from which to work.

And in a way the prayer at the end of this psalm had already been answered. One clear perception of the Hebrew Faith has always been that not only was the Faith effective but that God was unchanging, as were His attributes and values. That factor is a universe away from any chaotic view of life.

### **Epistle**

From the end of Moses, so to speaks, to the start of Paul, whose ministry was to places far distant from Israel. But with the same profound caring for people in spite of the stresses and strains of the role, Paul presented the same optimistic outlook on life, even for those in a far-from-satisfactory situation. Never imagine that life was easy for the first-generation Christians in a pagan land.

## GOSPEL

It may doubtless be a surprise to us who have lived with this story all our lives, to find that it may well be the case that the questioner of our Lord did not expect the answer He gave. Even less did that lawyer expect such a powerful response for the Torah – so vastly important to Jews. However, the said lawyer did not grasp the enormity of Jesus' response, for he would have assumed that Jesus' concern and attention would go no further than Jewry.

The second challenge, from Jesus to the Pharisees, may be quite confusing to the modern reader. That confusion may well remain until one sees why Jesus raised the question at all. Our Lord had to answer to a wide range of titles epithets and misnomers, and 'Messiah' was one of them. Sadly, much of Hebrew thought for centuries up to that time had focussed on the longing for another King David, for under him the nation was at its strongest and with widest boundaries than any other time in its history. Like most people, the hope was for a return to the halcyon days of power and pomp, and most of all for the vindication of Israel – being proved right in its life, faith and God.

So this rather confusing conversation was, seems to me, an attempt on the part of Jesus, to force a rethink in the minds of His interlocutors, to see way past any power politics to issues far more significant and important. Sadly, not only was that attempt far from successful, there remain to this day Christians who are as triumphalist as the old Pharisees, looking to power, of numbers or of wealth to bring in the great new age. Such folk need to study their Scriptures (and their secular history!) far more seriously

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

What a confusing Gospel this is today. If you think it to be so, then may I make a comment not all that helpful either? It is an answer, of a sort anyhow.

I have (still I hope) a delightful Jewish friend whose husband's funeral I celebrated quite a number of years ago. Both then and in the years subsequent, we have had quite a series of email discussions and debates about the Faith. I have found her Jewishness a delight in her perception and meeting with the Almighty in every aspect of her life. On the other hand, when discussing particular passages of Scripture (Old Testament of course) I have to confess to being utterly confused by her approach to, for example, the writings of Isaiah. What Isaiah says to *me* is a universe away from what the prophet says to her - and her Jewish people. Neither of us can make the slightest connection with each other's 'interpretation,' and that is particularly so when it comes to the Servant Songs.

No doubt quite some of that extraordinary difference must have to do with cultural issues and outlooks. I have no doubt about the veracity of my friend. On the other hand, it would seem to me to be more a matter of avoiding the issues. That it can hardly be, for that friend is determinably open to the Creator.

Now you would have to say, would you not, in that conversation with Pharisees, their focus was singularly one-eyed, one might say. They were certain that Jesus had all but thrown out the Torah, which would have meant that He was hoist on His own petard. He would have destroyed His own case to be listened to. However on that issue of the Law, the Shema Israel, and Jesus was completely and totally orthodox. (It spoils the game of those rather nasty Pharisees.)

However, Jesus was not finished with them it would appear. He was wanting them to come a step or two closer, and give some thought to the relationship between God and Himself. Certainly it is a somewhat obscure passage from the Psalms that Jesus employed, and certainly it would have made those ancient theologians work their little butts off, and they sensed that Jesus was painting them into somewhat of a corner. A tactical retreat was the best they could do, before they dropped themselves into a rather deep hole.

Funny thing about that! In many discussions I have had with people of vehement no-faith, they love to raise issues – usually quite out of left field, as to what we are said to believe, and caricature it as stupid, superstitious, unacceptable. When I underline what we do believe and why, they tend to react in a way rather similar to those old Pharisees. Retreat. Or refuse to discuss further on the grounds that 'you are not dealing with the subject, Ron.' Never be put off by this rather sad and pathetic smokescreen. Nor push the issue at them further. I suspect they know when they are outside their safe boundaries.

What am I trying to say?

Really, that we tend to be unaware of the veracity and the power of the Faith once delivered. It is not easily demolished, unless of course we have slipped into what really is some sort of superstitious 'belief.' The facts of the Faith are incontrovertible. The reality of the eternal verities are beyond reproach. As I have mentioned before, even

atheists are somewhat dumbfounded to discover that the real life issues that the Hebrew-Christian Faiths uphold are not limited to religious (how I hate that word!) people. They are applicable to all and every human life. Where would we be without truth and justice, integrity and compassion, and all that both our Lord and the OT prophets propounded. And God does not punish the living daylights out of people, here or in eternity, but longs for them to leave behind selfish and destructive patterns and live life as it has always been designed to be

**Sentence**

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

*Matt. 23:11*

**Collect**

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

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Joshua 1: 7 – 17**

The LORD said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses. You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the Ark of the Covenant, 'When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.'"

Joshua then said to the Israelites, "Draw near and hear the words of the LORD your God."

Joshua said, "By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap."

When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant were in front of the people. Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.

**Psalm**

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

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

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

**Epistle**

**1 Thessalonians 3: 5 – 13**

I could bear it no longer, so I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labour had been in vain. But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us--just as we long to see you. For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is

lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

## GOSPEL

## Matthew 23: 1 – 12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father-- the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

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## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### Old Testament

We become increasingly aware of the need in our own culture let alone any other, of the clear hand-over of authority and responsibility after the death or non-election of our leaders. It is always important for all people to see who is 'it,' – and so it was with the death of Moses and the anointing of Joshua.

The next ritual, the crossing of the Jordan, was similarly precise; and while you may be taken by the apparent miracle of crossing dry-shop, remind yourself of the similar situation when the Red Sea<sup>3</sup> was crossed 40 years before. Please note that the issue is not so much the miracle as the symbolic business: water, and especially the sea has always been – I understand – the symbol in Jewish thought for all that is evil. (See my notes on Revelation for a fuller exposition.) Mind you, it has to be said that (a) the Jordan is or was a trickle compared to any real river. Australian creeks are a fairly clear parallel, and (b) the description here of the blocking of the river by landslide further upstream is indicative of quite a few miracles. All a matter of timing rather than some sort of great Divine intervention.

### Psalm

Israel was very fond of singing the praises of God in their worship, constantly referring to His hand among them in the vicissitudes of life and history. This snippet shows references to the Exodus and also, I suspect, to the Exile. One of Israel's great gifts to the rest of humanity was its capacity to recognize, from the events of their life, quite something of the nature of JHWH.

### Epistle

One gets the sneaky suspicion, reading between the lines of Paul's letters to Thessalonica, that those Christians were not the brightest lot! There is some evidence to show that they grabbed hold of *part* of what the Apostle taught, but like many people today, adapted some of it to suit their somewhat laid-back culture. It is a very sad fact of Christian history that people and the Church have a capacity for what suits them, ignoring many other issues that present challenge or change of behavior or action.

## GOSPEL

It is not just the ancient Pharisees who like to be seen and to show off. Modern humans in our culture are greatly given to such showmanship; it says little for the ordinary person who seems to be caught up in such charades, and copy their idols.

Jesus was not fooled by any of those people – especially when the Gospel He was upholding had far more to do with giving service rather than demanding it from others. This whole passage, like many others, is our Lord's attempt to underline the necessity of both equality of all humans and the need of each of us to be servants of others. It may not be popular nor politically correct, but it is very much part of the Gospel of reconciliation.

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<sup>3</sup> Almost certainly the **Reed Sea** –one of the salina lakes rather than the sea itself.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Do you remember back in the olden days, when the priest had to read out the Old Testament Lessons and you had all those jaw-breaking names from early Israelite names? Attention seemed to head in that direction and the rather more important bits failed to register. It was ever so, and tends to remain the same, does it not?

The important thing to focus on today is – even way back then – there was a necessary transition of responsibility, if not power, and that tends to be a hard row to hoe for people of any time. It must have been far harder for Israel, after the long-range trek from Egypt. Remember, too, that the only person who had begun that exodus with Moses was the one being anointed new leader. *None of the rest of the mob would have known anything else but Moses.*

And ancient Israel was rather skilled at grumbling. *Murmuring* was the active word. And here was another water barrier to cross. And the people were able to cross dry-shod. Whatever did that mean? From the time of the Exodus or even before, large areas of water appeared to be symbols of evil; was the crossing of the sea escape from evil? Was the crossing of the Jordan another escape from evil? Even John, in *Revelation*, in the scene of the Throneroom of God saw the lake of water before God as indication of the fact that in the end, evil is still somehow under God's feet. It will be destroyed; just as evil was – in a singular way- destroyed by the Cross. For evil has its

sting removed **when it is seen for what it is**. Whatever the case. The picture of Israel crossing sea and river *dry-shod* indicates a lack of effect on the People. *Or is that, like many of our prayers, in the language of hope?*

From that idealism to the harsh reality - that is where the Gospel takes us. In other words, the tragedy lies in the way that the Moses Gospel finds its failure and let-down at the hands of Moses' latter-day disciples. There the great tragedy lies in the way in which what was designed to be a faith to live by had been turned into an instrument of division, of separation of the good from the bad, though the reality is that such separation was the opposite to how the Pharisees would have understood it. When a living faith is turned into a destructive religion, it is a matter of the powerful controlling and demeaning the weak. There lies the horror of it all.

Small wonder that Jesus had little difficulty in putting His finger on the real issue and exposing it all. Even less wonder that He turned the tables when the emphasis of His preaching was to uphold the humble and remove the rug from under the feet of the powerful. Sadly, it is rare to find the Christian Church taking enough notice of the **real** Gospel.

I suspect there is enough there to ponder ... and preach