

Sentence

Every generous act, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with Whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

James 1:17

Collect

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things, graft in our hearts the love of Your Name; increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of Your great mercy, keep us in the same, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Song of Songs 2: 8 – 13

Psalm

45: 1 – 2, & 6 – 9

Epistle

James 1: 17 – 27

Gospel

Mark 7: 1 – 8 & 14 – 23

NOTES ON THE READINGS

If you are wondering quite why such odd readings appear today, then just look at the calendar. It is the first Sunday in the southern hemisphere Spring.

The Spring is sprung, the grass is rizz; I wonder where the birdies is?

The birds they are upon the wing. But that's absurd – the wing is on the bird!

Old Testament Lesson

The only explanation I can find for this reading is as above. Spring, with all its spa rising. But it can be a useful moment, so we will look closer. I remember when young (a long time ago now) being given what was meant to be a commentary on the Song of Songs. In those distant days, propriety seemed to assume that Scripture could not be offering erotica, so this has to be a song about Jesus. I do not recall the theological gymnastics required to make the transition, but I do recall, decades later, feeling sad that the rather more physical reality was not faced earlier.

Hebrew spirituality always managed to accept reality as reality, and so this book of what we may well call erotica these days was accepted for just that. If only our Christian forebears had seen past their hang-ups to come to a similar reality, there may well have been far less damage caused by the sexual revolution of the '60s and since.. Read the book and enjoy the delight – and see why male and female are an essential part of creation. Without what the Greeks called *eros*, there is no next generation.

Psalm

And it is not only the fellows that can get excited about the women: it runs the other way too, and thank heaven for that. (Mind you, I suspect that there is more than a little propaganda here about the king – such people tend to like quite some aggrandizement.

Epistle

Another commentary from that distant past was of this Epistle, one of the most down-to-earth and straightforward of all the Biblical books. It is oh! So very Jewish, and oh! so very practical. And that is the point. The Faith is not about rules; the Faith is about relationships with each other, regardless of who we are or where we come from. And those relationships are here encouraged to be fulfilling for all.

Gospel

Jesus was ever the One to prick bubbles! Whenever anything reduces to rules and regulations, you can be fairly sure that the implosion point is not all that far away. This process is the illustration *par excellence* that Judaism had reached the end of its tether – and that was because its adherents had decided that people were to be divided into those who knew the rules and kept them, and all the rest. Division was the order of the day. And that is the mark of the end.

Spend a moment or two pondering the challenge that Jesus offered to a religion that thought itself strong, but in fact was nowhere near that. The real demands are far deeper and far ore compassionate.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It never ceases to amaze me that so much criticism persists of what many refer to 'religion.' Most of the comments I have ever seen or read over many decades are comments that miss the point entirely – and present a group of people or an ism that makes not the slightest sense. We Christians are said to be quite stupidly credulous, or so out of touch with reality, that we deserve no attention or credibility. Nothing could be further from the truth.

There must be some substance somewhere to the apparent idiocy to which those critics point. Whilst I have come across such stuff on rare occasion with an individual here and there, I have yet to encounter it *en masse*. Mind you, I am talking about what people seem to call 'established denominations,' there is some evidence of very strange views from some sects and such. If anyone does wander off into cloud-cuckoo land, there is no basis for such a meander in the Biblical record.

Sunday 10th September, 2006

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sentence

So speak and act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty

James 2:13

Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, increase our faith, hope and love, and that we may receive all that You promise, make us love what You command, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Psalm

Epistle

Gospel

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9 and 22-23

125

James 2:1-10

Mark 7: 24 – 37

Notes on the Readings

A short comment first. If ever anyone needed a reminder that the Faith is about relationships with each other and with God then this series does exactly that. In some ways the only real drama underlined in this series of readings is the simple and clear evidence that relating honestly and with love and compassion with people leads to life worth living.

Old Testament Lesson

While it must be said perhaps, that God does not intervene in quite the way that the author here imagined, it does not detract in any way from the values that are presented here. Underlying the vision presented is the sensed reality that we humans are in this experience of life together, and that there is a way of relating that offers seriously significant improvements to other more belligerent approaches.

Psalm

And is not the Psalmist offering similar wisdom. We may well have come a long way from fearing God, we do realize with clear vision that this God of ours, and the Faith that He offers, makes far more sense of life and relationships than anyone else around can seem to offer.

Epistle

And dear old James. What a practical and straightforward person he must have been. No baloney. No spin. Just the simple and sensible business of being fair dinkum with each other. This has far less to do with being 'nice' to each other. It has to do with recognizing the realities of each other. It is our humanity not our wealth or status that is to be valued.

And when it comes to faith (or faithfulness) again James was right on the ball. I can talk the talk, but that is of no use to you or me unless I walk the walk. Gee whiz, we need to sit up and take notice, all of us, Christian or not.

Gospel

And is not our Lord expressing exactly the same sentiments and actions as all that has gone before. Forget miracle a moment and look at what is happening. In both instances, you can be sure that the Jewish authorities and other religious 'important ones' would have been horrified and mortified at the way Jesus refused to follow the path of religious isolationism. Not that both incidents involved non Jews. *Horrific!*

And the way Jesus dealt with the crises points up the extent to which He was very careful if pointed in caring about the sensibilities of folk not Jewish. Both that first woman and the second man would not have been surprised at any harsh and rude responses from Jews.

Do not see Jesus as having a shot at the Syro-Pheonician woman: what He said to her would have been what the disciples would have expected, although in the light of the passionate request, they may well have cringed a little. The words that Jesus spoke reflected current Jewish bigotry, and so He rather forced the disciples to see themselves in action. It was not a pretty sight. It was a clear indication of the passion and persistence of that Gentile lady that made the Twelve see how wrong they were in their assessment of other people. It is a lesson we all ought to learn, and learn quickly. It was that profound quality of the Gentile woman that won the respect of those around her. No doubt it also contributed to the healing of her child.

Dr old Mark often tendered a double-whammy. First a Gentile woman; second a Gentile man. It must have become quite obvious to the Twelve that Jesus was not prepared to be hidebound by Jewish tradition and views. It is also worth sighting the fact that it was not just a matter of Jesus being open to non-Jewish people. The reverse was also true: non-Jews recognized the value of Jesus.

Notice the tenderness with which Jesus treated this person: He refused to make the man some sort of icon of His ministry. Rather the reverse. Out of sight of others, the man was healed. And in a manner by which the person could catch sight of what was being offered him. On top of that, Jesus called for silence, leaving the man free to go and take up whatever options lay in front of him. The extent of Jesus' sensitivity to the position various people were in is a remarkable aspect of His ministry.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

Only this afternoon I was involved in a conversation with folk of another Church group, and they were concerned at what looks like a thin future for their little group of people. These older folk were concerned at the lack of interest in Christian issues by the young, and longed for some simple answer to the query.

I do not know how long it will take for Church people and their leaders to recognize the fact that we are living through a very thin and difficult time for the Faith. This fact has less to do with any perceived lack of veracity of the Faith, or even the stupid and tragic misbehaviour of some of its practitioners. It has rather more to do with what may be classified as a cultural pressure. We need to come to terms with the fact that we are living in an almost totally self-focussed community and country. Blow you, Jack, I am all right. And if I am not then I will belt the living daylights out of you to get whatever I want. Self. Self. Self, with remarkable yet delightfully few exceptions.

It is in the opposite direction that the traditional Hebraic-Christian faith has always pointed people. Who knows quite how old the Book of Proverbs is, but tradition has it that Solomon may well have had something to do with its genesis. (Mind you, that would need to have been in the early part of his life.) Even so, it is a remarkable series of observations of how best to treat fellow humans, and for life to be expressed at its most significant. And in what direction does it point? Away from self, and towards others. And when you ponder the Psalm, it is seen as hading in exactly the same direction. Please get past the perception that people decided to be 'good' to avoid Divine punishment. It is far more altruistic than that. It may take some time, but sooner or later, people will come to see that mutual caring about each other produces a far more fair and effective community and culture.

Whenever you spend time reading James' Epistle, it must feel like it is taking you back to childhood, and repeating lessons learnt at one's mother's knees. It is so simple and straightforward, it is so unsophisticated and basic, and yet it becomes so easily lost in the frantic and noisy self-indulgent world in which we live. All has become competition, and compassion has fled out the window. And that will need to change, or otherwise I suspect we will finish up in an unrepairable mess and chaos. History itself shows that this is a high likelihood. Sooner or later, the chickens will come home to roost, and we will have to start all over again from way behind the proverbial eight-ball.

Now it seems to me that while we Christians seem to have small opportunity to get the message across because no one is listening, that still provides no excuse for giving up the battle, so to speak. As long as we are clearly aware of the need for care and compassion, *as long as there is clear evidence of all this happening within congregations and between Churches*, there will often be someone looking out for sense and validity somewhere and if we are displaying and living it, the sheer integrity of that action will appeal to the searcher.

Mind you, there is another and rather scarier aspect to the time in which we live. If there is one thing that echoes and re-echoes in the Biblical story, it is the fact that the Lord saves, not by battalions and crowds, but by little groups of people. Abraham was one; Gideon's little mob was another, and never lose sight of the fact that Jesus and a mere Twelve began the movement of which you are part. Even one of that group of Twelve was less than useful.

So if ever you wonder about giving it all away and getting with the strength, stop and look again to see that what may appear weakness at first glance is, in fact, something very different indeed from that.

Sentence

Those who want to save their life will lose it; and those who lose their life for the sake of the Gospel will find it.

Mark 8:35

Collect

God of mercy, help us to forgive as You have forgiven us, to trust You even when hope is failing, and to take up our cross daily and follow You in Your redeeming work, 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

Proverbs 1: 20 – 33

Wisdom cries aloud in the open air, and raises her voice in public places. She calls at the top of the bustling streets; at the approaches to the city gates she says: "How long will you simple fools be content with your simplicity? If only you would respond to my reproof, I would fill you with my spirit and make my precepts known to you. But because you refused to listen to my call, because no one heeded when I stretched out my hand, because you rejected all my advice and would have none of my reproof, I in turn shall laugh at your doom and deride you when terror comes, when terror comes like a hurricane and your doom approaches like a whirlwind, when anguish and distress come upon you.

The insolent delight in their insolence; the stupid hate knowledge. When they call to me, I shall not answer; when they seek, they will not find me. Because they detested knowledge and chose not to fear the Lord, because they did not accept my counsel and spurned all my reproof, now they will eat the fruits of their conduct and have a surfeit of their own devices; for simpletons who turn a deaf ear come to grief, and the stupid are ruined by their own complacency. But whoever listens to me will live without a care, undisturbed by fear of misfortune.'

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

James 2: 18 – 26

Someone may say: "One chooses faith, another action.' To which I reply: "Show me this faith you speak of with no actions to prove it, while I by my actions will prove to you my faith.' You have faith and believe that there is one God. Excellent! Even demons have faith like that, and it makes them tremble. Do you have to be told, you fool, that faith divorced from action is futile? Was it not by his action, in offering his son Isaac upon the altar, that our father Abraham was justified? Surely you can see faith was at work in his actions, and by these actions his faith was perfected? Here was fulfilment of the words of scripture: "Abraham put his faith in God, and that faith was counted to him s righteousness,' and he was called "God's friend'. You see then it is by action and not by faith alone that a man is justified.

The same is true also of the prostitute Rahab. Was she not justified by her action in welcoming the messengers into her house and sending them away by a different route? As the body is dead when there is no breath left in it, so faith divorced from action is dead.

GOSPEL

Mark 8:27 – 38

Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" They answered, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, others one of the prophets." "And you," he asked, "who do you say I am?" Peter replied: "You are the Messiah."

Then he gave them strict orders not to tell anyone about him; and he began to teach them that the Son of Man had to endure great suffering, and to be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes; to be put to death, and to rise again three days afterwards. He spoke about it plainly. At this Peter took hold of him and began to rebuke him. But Jesus, turning and looking at his disciples, rebuked Peter. "Out of my sight, Satan!" he said. "You think as men think, not as God thinks."

Then he called the people to him, as well as his disciples, and said to them, "Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine must renounce self; he must take up his cross and follow me. Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and for the gospel's will save it. What does anyone gain by winning the whole world at the cost of his life? What can he give to buy his life back? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this wicked and godless age, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Notes on the Readings

OT Lesson

There is little doubt in the view of this author that any person has the responsibility for making sensible choices in life, and that much of what follows may well be the result of that sensible choice. The same is palpably true when it comes to making foolish choices. There is no mucking around here, and not much in the way of a middle path. It is the sort of advice and challenge that was offered to me as a young person, and there was enough evidence around when I was young to illustrate the powerful validity of the views expressed here.

One would have to say that this is not the most popular of messages, and one that tends to be disregarded in our most 'sophisticated' of ages, but one that will have the same effect, regardless of modernity or sophistication. .

Psalm

I am not surprised at the regularity of the appearance of this Psalm on so many Sundays. It is another of what seems to me to be quite a formative Psalm of the Old Testament. It points up for me the extent to which Judaism – like most world religions – gained its insights and wisdoms from simple and clear observation. Here is no 'off with the fairies' religion, but one earthed into the very world of which it became an important part. Look around, the Psalmist seems to be saying, and you will hear the songs of the universe. There is no mystic drift off, no trying to point to something not there. Perhaps this is why I tend to be somewhat impatient with mystics. And even more impatient with the spin and blurb and baloney of modern politics, advertising, and shallow rubbish that seems to be important to people these days. Let's for heaven's sake get real – the world of people needs it.

Epistle

And James continues the picture of realism. For some people, 'faith' is the excuse to disappear into the ether. 'If I believe something, that makes it real,' seems to be the modern catch-cry, so it is small wonder that such castles in the air come crashing down at the first stroke of reality.¹ For James, as for anyone at all sensible, real faith is evidenced by what a person does and how they operate as a human. One can hardly become more realistic than that. I am still dismayed by Martin Luther's antipathy, even antagonism to this Epistle. However, it simply did not fit into his view of theology. Such a pity.

Gospel

If there is anything that takes Christianity out of the realms of make-believe, it is this sudden and stunning apparent *volte face* on the part of Jesus. Up to this point His ministry tended to be expressed in terms of meeting people in their needs and meeting them, and encouraging the disciples into a wider vision of Who God is and where

¹ I find it hard to resist the comment that what passes for 'reality television' these days is one of the biggest oxymorons imaginable!

reality is. Now it has come to the point of the crunch. He is the beginning of the great conflict between truth and falsehood, good and evil, right and wrong.

Far too few people even yet see the Gospel in terms of a completely different way of living, a response to the damage and havoc created by all that is evil in human endeavour. Now this is becoming more and more evident, and needs to be given very serious consideration.

In line with most of then-current Judaism, the disciples had the expectation of Messiah, who when(ever) he came, would sort out the sheep from the goats, show which way was up, and – in the process – vindicate Israel as the source of all truth and light. The Messiah would do it all on his own, as some sort of first century Superman, and all Israel would have to do was to bask in the reflected glory, and reap the benefits. Little has changed in human expectations, even if the nomenclature alters. The dream does not. *And this may explain, in part at least, the rise of despots – even in democracies.*

NOTES FOR A SERMON

Some weeks back I took the opportunity to comment on a statement by the Pope when he was referring to the horrific experiences of WWII in Germany, and the Holocaust in particular. Like the Pope, I was quite young when all that unfolded, and perhaps was distant enough not to be as traumatised by it all. But there was one thing, and it remains with me still, that bemused me about those days. I simply could not understand the mentality of the German people in their enormous adulation for their Fuehrer. Hundreds of thousands of people would gather, whether by force or by devotion, and drink in the outpourings of a person who turned out to be quite mad really. Why? Why? Why?

I am not really able to answer the question with scientific and precise accuracy, but it does seem to me that people can become so much like lemmings sometimes. In the hope of some easy answers to huge difficulties, or in the search for someone who will solve their problems (preferably at no cost to themselves or effort on their part), people seem far too ready to prostitute their integrity. It is going for the easy answer. And there will ever be mobs of people ready to offer such elixirs.

One of the evidences, on quite a low-key level, comes from my spam box. It is stunning the extent to which the ether is absolutely filled with messages from people all so ready to make me rich. If it is not some stunning share scheme, it is to advise me that I have been bequeathed somewhere between \$500,000 and a million and all I have to do is What worries me far more is the extent to which politicians, even of so-called democratic ilk, offer to provide all the answers of riches and security that anyone could possible dream of. It is all wishful thinking on the part of the recipient, and very much more greed on the part of the offerer.

There is none of that, nor has there ever been, in the faith as presented by Jesus. It has nothing to do with burgeoning riches, good looks, or even improved sex appeal. However, it does have to do with vastly improved relationships and resolution of issues. And that will always and ever require the readiness to face the realities head on. There can be no losing oneself in mindless debate, nor in trying to hide from whatever is the problem or issue.

Sentence

Whoever wants to be first must be last of all, and servant of all

Mark 9:35

Collect

God and Father of all, You have taught us through Your Son that the last shall be first, and have made a little child to be the measure of Your Kingdom; give us that wisdom that we may understand that, in Your sight, the one who serves is the greatest of all. We ask this through our Lord, Jesus Christ, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Proverbs 31: 10 – 31

Psalm

1

Epistle

James 3: 1 – 12

Gospel

Mark 9:30 – 37

Notes on the Readings

It is a rather large pity that there may well be something of a revolt against the first reading this morning. Not only is it likely to raise the feminist angst, but also the wider spirit of the age that seems to demand each person be rather more assertive of their right and prerogatives.

If the reader is honest, all of today's readings take us in directions contrary to the spirit of the age, and that is precisely the real issue. The spirit of Gospel runs so totally against that modern spirit, and far too few modern Christians are prepared to take note and respond positively. It seems to me that this is one very major thing that needs to change.

Old Testament Lesson

While there may well be those who would classify this passage as passé, outdated and demeaning, it may well be worth stopping to look again at the underlying attitude in this well-known and once-loved passage. (My Mum, for instance, had no fight with the sentiments expressed.)

As the range of readings this week underlines, the real point of the Faith and the readings is to underline the need for a 'servant' approach in our relationships with each other, Christian or otherwise. I find it increasingly sad that this 'servant' approach is being avoided or overlooked, and control is becoming the thing. It is precisely that Adamic approach to life that the Gospel is highlighting and offering a significant alternative. Why can we not see that?

Psalm

This is not some sort of pious nonsense, but something that is well worth examination and testing. If my delight is in the 'law of the Lord,' then I am rather more likely to be concerned about the interests of others. When that is the situation, then life is likely to be far more conciliatory, and outcomes more productive.

The Psalmist was realistic enough about life and relationships to know that the contrary approach of the 'ungodly' has the strong tendency to produce jagged and fractured relationships. And he (she?) was not living in the 21st Century, eh!

Epistle

Dear old Jacobus! Ever the simple, straight-forward and direct one. We may feel him to be somewhat unsophisticated, but he really does hit the nails right on the heads. It hardly needs comment to relate how all this fits into the readings before it, for it epitomises the very heart of the problem. I don't know about you, but James always manages to blow me out of the water! I suspect he is talking about me!

Gospel

There is a powerful imbalance between what Jesus wanted to get across to His disciples, and what they wanted to have resolved. Jesus had His mind and vision filled with the business of forgiveness and reconciliation; and the Twelve were far more committed to the business of being Big Boss. The former is creative; the latter is destructive.

It was a matter that Jesus had often to deal with, underline, and attempt to correct the mindset of the Twelve. The measure of His difficulty remains an almost certain constant up to the present day. And there lies enormous tragedy. The relative failure of the Church in the modern era relates almost entirely to the inability or unwillingness of the Church to be servant. *It is seen as far too risky a path to travel.*

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I may well be classified as somewhat passé myself, but as a priest of the old school I find myself out of step with very many of my more modern colleagues. Whilst I may be misunderstanding them, it appears to me that the emphasis they have tends to be expressed in the saying 'that is not my job; it is yours.' Clerical life seems to have become very much more managerial, as has so much of the other serving occupations. Is it not true that one no longer receives anything like the old attention to care and detail from bank employees, salespeople, nurses and doctors, or anyone else very much? Yes, delightfully there are marvellous exceptions to the rule, and thank heaven for that, but the service of people tends to have been replaced by the worship of the almighty dollar.

One of my convictions growing over many years is that the reality and validity of the Gospel can be seen and confirmed very largely by observation of very ordinary human life and relationships. There is nothing very new about that, of course, That has and had been the process of Judaism for very many centuries indeed. Their very interesting contribution to the understanding of God has come, not by wafting off into the wide blue yonder, but by observing and thinking, and drawing conclusions.

It strikes me that we are living in the time when exactly that same process is far more available to *hoi polloi*, as life goes on, history is written, and we live through what strikes me as the decadent stages of a failing culture. Much of the reason for the disintegration stems from the failure to serve and the determination to dominate. Whether it is a matter of international politics, national politics or even international trade, the rot is increasingly visible as tensions increase, and the only real move towards resolution is expressed in military terms. One needs only to observe, to see how counterproductive all that process is.

I was interested (or was it appalled?) to read the comment in the local *Advertiser* recently that so much of even State politics is seen to be caught up in the web of big egos. It came as no surprise to me, but then I will be waiting for loud and long disclaimers – in spite of the reality of the charge.

Then there is the increase of such new problems as road rage and even footpath rage. The emergence of all this is just another example of big egos, power games, and determination to control. There is small need to point up the drastic and hideous outcomes of all that conflict.

All that is no pretty sight at all. But those illustrations have been offered if only to point out that the position that the Gospel offers, diametrically opposed to all of the above, was not a matter of Jesus being 'nice,' and 'loving' and do-goodey' – it is an essential and remarkably creative response to the ugliness of human sin and evil.

Service and servanthood have always lain at the heart of the Gospel. It is the pattern set by Jesus Himself, and even the Old Testament prophets, Isaiah in particular, had become very aware of the importance of it all in human relationships. From my early childhood, a Grandpa would read from the Servant Songs after each midday meal, but the stunning reality behind Isaiah's ponderings did not really reach my air-space until my experience of life developed enough. Traditional views of those songs focussed entirely on Jesus and atonement, - and fair enough to a point- but the reality of the Gospel has far more to do with reality than getting people to heaven. It has to do with redemption of the world now. Failure to make that connection is one of the reasons for the discarding of the Gospel by much of today's world of people. They can see little or no relevance.

So as you ponder the simple but powerful impact of today's Readings, please see that the challenge is to start with ourselves, as we see the need to reflect the characteristics of our Lord in all the various relationships and connections we have as humans. There may well be less need to talk about it, and far more need simply to live it.