

**Sentence**

Whoever does not carry the cross and follow Jesus cannot be His disciple *Luke 14:37*

**Collect**

God of the ages, You call the Church to keep watch in the world and to discern the signs of the times; grant us the wisdom that Your Spirit bestows so that with courage we may proclaim Your prophetic word and complete the work You have set before us, through Your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Jeremiah 18: 1 – 11**

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Then the word of the LORD came to me: 'Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?' says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

**Psalm**

**139: 1 – 5 & 12 – 18**

O Lord, You have searched me out and known me: You know when I sit or when I stand, You comprehend my thoughts long before.

You discern my path and the places where I rest: You are acquainted with all my ways  
For there is not a word on my tongue: but You, Lord, know it altogether  
You have encompassed me behind and before: and have laid Your hand upon me  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me: so high that I cannot endure it.

For You have created my inward parts: You knit me together in my mother's womb  
I will praise You for You are to be feared: fearful are Your acts and wonderful are Your works  
You knew my soul, and my bones were not hidden from You: when I was formed in secret and woven in the depths of the earth  
Your eyes saw my limbs when they were yet imperfect: and in Your book were all my members written  
Day by day they were fashioned: and not one of them was late in growing  
How deep are Your thoughts to me O God: how great is the sum of them  
Were I to count them, they are more in number than the sand: were I to come to the end, I would still be with You

**Epistle**

**Philemon**

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love--and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that

you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother-- especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.

I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. One thing more--prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

## GOSPEL

## Luke 14: 25 – 35

Now large crowds were travelling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'

Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

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## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### Old Testament Lesson

There are a couple of very interesting points of view expressed in this passage: that of the potter and clay; and God telling of a changed response if His people change.

On the former, I report a battle I have had with myself, for what it is worth. Like many of the rest of us, I had often wished that I was someone else or had the gifts and skills of someone else. However no amount of trying or mucking about did anything to change me. By that time it had struck me that the real point of being yourself is to see what you will make of what you are and what you have been given. Good bits and bad bits are all part of the mix, and the real issue to do the best with the clay of which you are made. That is release of a significant value; and leaves me being part- creator if you like, free to make a mess or make progress. That leaves me with the responsibility of who I am, and that means the sky is the limit, if you dare see it that way.

That other issue concerns the future of a nation, or group – or even individual if it comes to that. While old-time preachers seemed to look to God to belt the living daylight out of sinners, even Jeremiah (in fact most of the prophets!) saw things rather differently. Doing evil has its own come-uppance, its karma as they say these days, and will often result in the collapse of the goals of the evil person. In other words, if I choose stupidly, I will end up in quite something of a mess of my own making. **This is the way life is; OR this is the process by which God works with people.** However, if I realize my stupidity and move in more sensible directions, things will work out better, or God will relent. It is important always to realize what St. Paul meant when he wrote about 'God giving them up.' That is the process he called the *wrath of God*. That 'wrath' is no punitive, savage process designed to compel people to choose well. It is that process whereby God steps back – a process which offers the person freedom to choose what sort of person they wish to be – and the responsibility is theirs. (Ask any prisoner in gaol whether punishment does anything to improve a person, and the answer is a resounding NO! It drives them further into their embittered situation. And it is about time that Prison authorities worked that out for themselves.

### Psalm

This psalm has been part of me since my earliest days in the Church Choir, and pointed to the inner awareness of the author, who must have written this psalm millennia ago! It speaks of a sense of purpose and direction, of purpose as well as such satisfaction at the sight of a newly born infant. This approach to life beats the

hell out of ‘who the hell am I?’ and ‘what am I here for?’ especially when someone tries to answer such questions without reference to the Creator.

### **Epistle**

And now we have this tale of Onesimus (worthless one!) and his restoration as a person alongside the Apostle Paul. If you wonder why this personal epistle ever made it to the Canon of the New Testament, then an answer is simple and stunning.

Read this carefully, for the Apostle, who grew up and lived in a world where slavery was unremarkable and part of the ‘scenery’ took the situation that arose with Onesimus and so undermined the practice that it could have no future. Sadly, as is often the case with Biblical material, people seemed to get so blocked out by having the ‘believe’ the Scriptures, that they failed to understand them. Why did it take 1800 years to move the abolition of slavery? Why did it take 200 years more to see the Dominical attitude to the other half of the human race? Please learn to catch sight of what Scripture is **really** saying, and to act on it.

### **GOSPEL**

There is certainly no apology from Jesus as He presents the challenge to anyone who would choose to become a disciple. I suspect when people first heard this sort of challenge from Jesus it marked the clear departure from some sort of do-good religion. Obviously Jesus was not looking for a bland, colourless following but rather determined people, if not one-eyed then certainly committed.

The reason for that is simple, of course. Jesus was offering people a direction that could change the very world in which they lived, and still can. But mealy-mouthed followers would be of no use whatever. The Gospel is stunning stuff, designed to bring the Kingdom right here.

### **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

I find it rather interesting – if not very disturbing! – to live in a time when so many people appear to wish to be someone else. So many young people in particular want to emulate their pop idols and film- or sports-stars and become singularly depressed when they do not manage to reach such heights (?) Not only is it a matter of looking only at one side of the story, but it also fails to see all the pitfalls anyhow.

Great and strong sadness overcomes me when I watch such people in their depressions. To add to the sadness, the only response, it seems to me, of much of the medical profession, is to offer pills and potions to restore the balance, when the reality is that normality will come in better and perhaps easier ways.

For anyone who considers the Christian (and Hebrew!) Faith to be silly, I would offer the suggestion that some research into Scripture may well provide some re-evaluation. And it is not only the New Testament that deserves attention. I offer you a long hard look at today’s Old Testament Lesson from Jeremiah – a prophet who lived in singularly difficult times about 2,500 years ago.

What Isaiah had to say to Israel that far back in history is perfectly capable of translation into similar issues in our own day. Then, the prophet was making it quite clear that Israel, the nation and its people, was designed for the benefit of all, and yet had distorted its existence into something that appeared better but rather was very selfish and destructive. What was being held up in front of those recalcitrants was not some sort of great punitive outpouring, but rather the offer and challenge of restoration to what could and should be.

That rather horrific experience of the Exile in Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC was something that forever reverberated in the Hebrew mind and psyche. For some, it was restorative and redemptive; and there were others who ignored the whole thing totally. There was benefit for the former, and less than nothing for the latter.

Potter and clay. Creator and creature. And with all due respect, we are the latter not the former in this comparison.

In other words, I did not make myself, create myself, and nor did I even choose my parents. I did not even choose the time in history or the place in geography that I would grow up. Gender was not in my province to choose, nor the colour of my hair (or how long it lasted!!!) nor my height or other dimensions. It was all a given, and for most of it I have been most grateful. Especially my parents.

But there were lots of things that I would have liked to be different. My teeth have always been a bugbear for me; my shortness of breath has always been an issue from childhood up. My lack of skills in some directions, and one or two severe issues that I will not even report to you, have been drags on me from childhood. Like St.

Paul, 'three times I prayed that these things be removed,' Like St. Paul, there was never a positive response from God. I have been stuck with them, much to my dismay.

When I pondered all of this, in the light of my perception that God wanted me to be all sorts of things I am not, my exploration went into asking the whys and wherefores. ....

In that search, I had – and have – a great mate with whom I had grown up and with whom I remain great mates even to 70 years further on. My great mate has been crippled from birth. (Not crippled, Ron, he would say; I have a disability, that is all.) He is a stunning human being, in spite of his difficulties, and has never complained. In other words, he is rather much the result of having coped with what was unchangeable, and remains a bright Christian person. He has realized that he is clay, not Potter, and always needed to deal with the way things are rather than get all bitter and twisted about what was not right or fair .... Or even helpful.

And that is the point. Yes, I would like some things to be different, but there is neither point nor purpose in busting a gut over what is never likely to be. The circumstances surrounding me are there to see how I will deal with them, and how they will affect the person I become. I can be shaped by those circumstances wither for good or for ill, **and that will illustrate who I am.**

It is no easy task, I assure you. But you will know that already, if you have followed this path. But there is no room for depression because I am not someone else. There is enough to do and be in where I am. There is only cloud cuckoo land if I go off trying to be someone else. Actually I have often wondered about 'being someone else,' and in pondering such a change, have observed such 'others' in all sorts of situations. What emerges from such observations is that there are all sorts of 'bits' about such folk that do not sit at all happily on me. In other words, the whole picture of such 'others' is never as attractive as would seem on the surface.

You may be 'clay,' but you are also unique. Lots of lousy things may well happen or have happened, and it is not so much the sum of those things, but how you deal with them that is what makes you the person you are becoming. There is no need to be depressed about the you that is you. There is only the need to grow and become and develop ..... hopefully into the you that you were designed to be.

**Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2010**

**Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Sentence**

I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

*Luke 15:10*

**Collect**

O God, without You we are not able to please You; mercifully grant that Your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Jeremiah 4: 11 – 12 & 22 – 28**

At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem: A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse--a wind too strong for that. Now it is I who speak in judgment against them.

For my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good. I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger. For thus says the LORD: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end. Because of this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black; for I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back.

**Psalm**

**14**

Fools have said in their hearts "There is no God": they have all become vile and abominable in their doings, there is not one that does good

The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of Adam: to see if there were any who would act wisely and seek after God

But they have all turned out of the way, they have all alike become corrupt: there is none that does good, no not one Are all evildoers devoid of understanding: who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not pray to the Lord?

They shall be struck with terror: for God is with the company of the righteous

Though they frustrate the poor in their hopes: surely the Lord is their refuge

O that deliverance for Israel might come forth from Zion: when the Lord turns again the fortunes of His people, then shall Jacob rejoice and Israel shall be glad.

**Epistle**

**1 Timothy 1**

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Saviour and of Christ Jesus our hope, To Timothy, my loyal child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith. But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions.

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me. I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ

might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen.

I am giving you these instructions, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies made earlier about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, having faith and a good conscience. By rejecting conscience, certain persons have suffered shipwreck in the faith; among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have turned over to Satan, so that they may learn not to blaspheme.

## **GOSPEL**

### **Luke 15: 1 – 10**

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

## **NOTES ON THE READINGS**

### **Old Testaments Lesson**

It is rather sad that far too few people know their Bibles well enough to be aware of the history of Israel during the time of the Major Prophets. There was a most tragic but formative experience for the Southern Kingdom when Jerusalem and Judea was conquered by the Babylonians and anyone who was anyone was taken hostage to that far land. It was a most shattering experience for the nation, who had expected their God to keep them safe regardless of the threats around them.

As mentioned in previous notes, much of Israel's theology and understanding of God came, not from mystics who spent time alone pondering the Divine, but ordinary people who watched and observed, and to draw their conclusions from life to understand Who God was. However, not all Jews operated at that level. As in all communities, there were the go-getters who gave not a damn about others. God's response was not to punish and damn, but to step back and allow such folk to see the outcome of their courses of action. And it was that determination to be unjust, disloyal and disregarding of the important aspects of life that led to the collapse of the nation. It is tragic beyond words to see a nation or culture collapse from within, left spiritless and hopeless through their own choices.

Much of (Second) Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel cover this harsh time in Israel's history.

### **Psalms**

At another level, the ancient psalmist underlines the folly of the choice to turn one's back on God, for that means turning one's back on everyone else as a rule. Whilst it has to be said that this author overstates the case to some extent, sooner or later this disregard spreads, affecting the outlook, attitudes and actions of those who refuse the guarantor of truth, justice and compassion.

### **Epistle**

There is often a fine line between truth and falsehood, and the Apostle was well aware of the danger of cutting fast and loose with important issues. Never forget that this period of the Church's history was no easy one, for it was not as if Christianity was the only player on the stage of religions at the time. In fact, the situation then was as complex as the modern day, with all manner of competing isms and ideas and religions, most of which offered very little in the way of genuine guidance.

*I confess to considerable concern in our own day and age when even among Christian Churches and sects there is a multitude of strange and foundationless ideas and isms claiming to be Christian and in fact being nothing of the sort. 'Test the spirits' Paul used to encourage people and I endorse the words of that Apostle*

### **Gospel**

You may well be aware that today's Gospel continues with the story of the Prodigal Son (though this parable should emphasise the prodigal father actually. So there are three tales about lost things, and the important things to note are in the various items. But lost things call out to be found, and when they are, there is *joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.*

The sheep gets lost because, well, sheep are sheep and usually manage to lose themselves without a lot of effort. Why else were there shepherds in those days and fences in our own? And the coin was lost through no fault of its own. Someone else had to lose it, the coin being quite helpless. And in both cases, the 'owner' did the searching, exerting great effort in the search. *You will note that when the prodigal son was 'lost,' and that because he determined to be lost, no one but no one went looking for him.*

One suspects that, in the culture of Jesus' day, no one went after any lost person because the rest saw such a deserting action as a sign of their sin – and who would want to get their hands dirty looking for such outcasts anyway? **You know the answer to that.**

### NOTES FOR A SERMON

I made comment elsewhere about the sad failure of many Christian people to think through the ramifications of the data given to us in the Scriptures. Perhaps the far-too-long emphasis on 'believing the Word of God' left a void when it came to **understanding** what was being conveyed. As I look back over Christian history, I am amazed at the capacity of people of the various times to grab hold of some aspect of the faith --- and quite simply avoid issues and matters for more significant and important. (No doubt, someone 50 or 100 years from now will wonder why we did not see important issues of faith.)

I wonder if you can find any clear link between the various readings for today? It is a strange amalgam of readings, don't you think, and perhaps only the sentence and Collect offer any clue. You may well see something other than I offer, so don't be limited to what follows.

In each of the readings, Psalm included, there seems to me to be a remarkable connection between human sin and evil, its outcomes, and the response of God to it all. Spend a few moments looking back on the readings, to see if you catch sight of what I am pointing to.

At the time that I am working on this material, the news broke in South Australia that the strong attempt on the part of the State Government to get on top of the bikie gangs and obliterate them has failed in the Supreme Court. That Government has claimed to be hot and strong on Law and Order, and it has backfired. And I don't think I am sorry that it has. Strong controls and punitive actions are hardly likely to produce much in the way of constructive relations with anyone, let alone such people. For anyone who thinks otherwise, may I point to the sorts of options that are available in this remarkable set of readings.

Stop me if you think this too complex, but .....

In that Old Testament Lesson, the prophet was concerned about any future for the People of God. Certainly God was about to act in judgement, but notice that even Jeremiah does not see this so much as punitive as it was a matter of God stepping back from stupid Israel and allowing nature to take its course. This is echoed in the New Testament constantly, and is a case of 'if you wish to be silly or stupid, then "pay your money, take your chance, and see where it gets you."' The fascinating thing, from where I sit, is how else do you get people to take responsibility for their actions? **And this is how God has always worked with people, even wayward ones.**

Then the Psalmist takes the 'ungodly' to task. *The fool has said in his heart, 'there is no God...'* I have a sneaky suspicion that there is a touch of hyperbole here, but there is the basis of truth of course. It is not all 'ungodly' who become evil, but as we continue in life these days, it becomes increasingly clear that – however you like to put it, 'discarding God results in discarding our fellow humans and even the world in which we live.' In any situation, the outcome becomes tenuous and shaky.

And Epistle and Gospel take us along the same path with slightly different inputs. The Epistle underlines the need for clear and precise 'doctrine' – one's theology needs to be clear, for there are far too many people ready to take you off into the wide blue yonder. I am amazed constantly at the extent to which even our printed media is so full of utter baloney setting itself up as guides to truth about life. Recent items on TV news points up the same misleading and dangerous stuff in 'health' foods and so on.

You will be aware that the Gospel for today is part of a trilogy: the three lost things. Sheep, coin and – next week the prodigal son. Three separate items and three different ways of getting lost, and these first two are of items less capable of choosing to be lost. That prodigal son is wilfully different.

The whole point of this fascinating series of readings – seems to me – is that the Scriptures illustrate, from real life, the different responses of the Father to those who are His lost ones. Most of all I underline the complete lack of punitive, repressive punishment. We have a God Who yearns – and Who makes it rather more possible for the penitent to find their way home again. Mind you, there is one great requirement before that return happens:

there is the need to be honest and fair dinkum on the part of the 'sinner.' God may be rather softer than most human beings, but He is not about to be taken for an idiot either. It is a lesson we all need to learn.

**Sentence**

You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich  
*2 Corinthians 8:9*

**Collect**

Loving Father, Whose Son Jesus Christ has taught us that what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters we do also for Him; give us the will to be the servant of others as He was the servant of all, Who gave up His life and died for us, and yet lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Jeremiah 8:18 – 9:1**

There is no cure for my grief; I am sick at heart. Hear my people's cry of distress from a distant land: "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King no longer there?" Why do they provoke me with their images and with their futile foreign gods? Harvest is past, summer is over, and we are not saved. I am wounded by my people's wound; I go about in mourning, overcome with horror. Is there no balm in Gilead, no physician there? Why has no new skin grown over their wound? Would that my head were a spring of water, my eyes a fountain of tears that I might weep day and night for the slain of my people.

**PSALM**

**79: 1 – 9**

O God, the heathen have come into Your land: they have defiled Your holy temple, they have made Jerusalem a heap of stones  
They have given the dead bodies of Your servants as food for the birds of the air: and the flesh of Your faithful ones to the wild beasts of the earth  
Their blood they have spilt like water on every side of Jerusalem: and there is none to bury them  
We have become a mockery to our neighbours: the scorn and laughing-stock to those about us  
How long, O Lord, shall Your anger be so extreme: will Your jealous fury burn like fire?  
Pour out Your wrath on the nations that do not know You: or the kingdoms that have not called upon Your name  
For they have devoured Jacob: and made his dwelling-place a desolation  
Do not remember against us the sin of former times: but let Your compassion hasten to meet us, for we are brought very low  
Help us, O God our Saviour, for the honour of Your name: O deliver us and expiate our sins, for Your name's sake.

**Epistle**

**1 Timothy 2: 1 – 10**

First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, for sovereigns and for all in high office so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life, free to practise our religion with dignity. Such prayer is right, and approved by God our Saviour, whose will it is that all should find salvation and come to know the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and man, Christ Jesus, himself man, who sacrificed himself to win freedom for all mankind, revealing God's purpose at God's good time; of this I was appointed herald and apostle (this is no lie, it is the truth), to instruct the Gentiles in the true faith.

It is my desire, therefore, that everywhere prayers be said by the men of the congregation, who shall lift up their hands with a pure intention, without anger or argument. Women must dress in becoming manner, modestly and soberly, not with elaborate hair-styles, not adorned with gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, as befits women who claim to be religious.

**GOSPEL**

**Luke 16: 1 – 13**

Jesus said to his disciples, "There was a rich man who had a steward, and he received complaints that this man was squandering the property. So he sent for him, and said, "What is this that I hear about you? Produce your accounts, for you cannot be steward any longer." The steward said to himself, "What am I to do now that my master is going to dismiss me from my post? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am too proud to beg. I know what I must do, to make sure that, when I am dismissed, there will be people who will take me into their homes."

He summoned his master's debtors one by one. To the first he said, "How much do you owe my master?" He replied, "A hundred jars of olive oil." He said, "Here is your account. Sit down and make it fifty, and be quick about it." Then he said to another, "And you, how much do you owe?" He said, "A hundred measures of wheat,"

and was told, "Here is your account; make it eighty." And the master applauded the dishonest steward for acting so astutely. For in dealing with their own kind the children of this world are more astute than the children of light.

So I say to you, use your worldly wealth to win friends for yourselves, so that when money is a thing of the past you may be received into an eternal home. Anyone who can be trusted in small matters can be trusted also in great; and anyone who is dishonest in small matters is dishonest also in great. If, then, you have not proved trustworthy with the wealth of this world, who will trust you with the wealth that is real? And if you have proved untrustworthy with what belongs to another, who will give you anything of your own? No slave can serve two masters; for either he will hate the first and love the second, or he will be devoted to the first and despise the second. You cannot serve God and Money.

*The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and scoffed at him.*

## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### Old Testament

If ever you want to get the feeling generated by the threat and then the reality of the fall of Jerusalem and being taken into exile in Babylon, then try to imagine how you would have felt (about God and about everyone else) if you had been caught up in the Holocaust. The sense of having been deserted – without any sign of vindication! – would have been horrific. And when you thought you had a God Who would look after you, the embitterment would have been multiplied. *We have the wisdom of hindsight, allowing 20-20 vision as we look back.*

Jeremiah was facing the impossible and inevitable, as the Babylonian armies surrounded Jerusalem and threatened annihilation. Where the hell was God in all this? Why all this pain and death and destruction. And that would have been amplified by the fact that people around them would have operated on the thesis that if someone's temple was destroyed, it meant only one thing: that god did not exist .....**ever!!!**

Never be surprised if / when God puts His people through some horrific situations! He is not there to protect but to encourage people to grow. (Even demand that they grow!) And that may well involve considerable pain and hurt in the process. Do you not learn rather better from your mistakes and problems than from whatever goes right?

### Psalm

This ancient author was facing the same real historical event as Jeremiah was dealing with! He was unable to come to terms with the devastation of it all, and the cost in lives, and damage to people and the city. Note his concern that other people, other cultures, would be affected by the vision of Israel being decimated! Where is your god in all this?

### Epistle

It has to be said that this passage bears all the hallmarks of a particular point in time, and development of the Infant Church. There is a clearly Jewish background is there not, even to the separation of the sexes in worship. And then there is an apparently strange view of the invading Roman control. Do not be surprised at this, for if there was one common threat in those days, it was of invasion from the north-east, the marauding tribes who would bring only utter chaos and ruin. Thus government, of whatever sort, was a bulwark against chaos. (The passage of time and the decadence of Rome would later have its impact on such views. John's Revelation is clear evidence of that development.) It all indicates that the Christian and the Church is ever at a state of flux in relation to government and rule.

### GOSPEL

*I have been rude enough to insert verse 14 to underline something that may well have been missed otherwise.* Many commentators ask people to realize the extent to which Jesus preached about money and its use and abuse. The result will be rather educational.

This passage has provided some problems for some readers, for Jesus appeared to be congratulating a rogue! But read the fine print as ever: He was drawing attention to the fact that 'religious' people are often far too naive for their own good, and do not consider all the issues.

The real issue is one of proper and balanced attitude to money, and a more focussed attention on the matter of honesty and integrity. There are no short cuts for Christians. You cannot serve God and money, though I understand that there are sects who pronounce otherwise! A bit like the Pharisees obviously.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

If there is one thing that the Old Testament prophets really did rail against, it was against opulence. Against greed. From Amos to Malachi, the cry went up about Bulls of Bashan living the soft life while those in need went unnoticed and uncared for. The early prophets, such as Amos, were convinced that the Northern Kingdom suffered defeat and annihilation basically because the huge division between rich and poor had reached damaging proportions. Apart from anything else, our own recent experience of Global Financial Crises should have reminded us that money is not the sound and dependable factor that many seem to assume. And that is the real point surely.

Now we can go all holy and suggest that the love of money is the root of all evil, and pontificate to our hearts content, but I have a sneaky suspicion that while part of us goes along with the idea, the other part still hangs on to what we have. Are we kidding ourselves, or are we painfully aware of the fact that – where we live at least – one cannot survive without at least some money.

God and mammon. That is the rub is it not? And it has to be said that the rub is rather great in this day and age. Do you recall the series of adverts on television several years ago: from one of the Super Fund and Financial Managers – *‘for the most important person in the world, YOU!’* Like the Oreol ad, the focus is the same. All a bit selfish you may feel, but it runs far deeper than that. Call me old-fashioned if you like, but one of the great difficulties I have with city living is ... that no one seems to know their neighbours, nor care a damn about them anyhow.

If ever you wondered why the old Israelites had such a thing about cities – from Genesis on – it was because of that rather strange situation. Like Robyn felt when she was in London decades ago. There were mobs of people all around, and no one dared look at let alone speak to anyone else. It was a case of isolated individuals in a rushing, roaring crowd. And yet, in my experience, the further one went out into the country – and even more in the Outback! – you were valued as a human and supported especially if you were in strife. That is community, and I am nothing unless I interact with you. We need each other; we belong with each other. The old aboriginal position was ‘what’s mine is ours, not mine.’ It had its disadvantages, and still does. But there is that vastly different approach to **things**.

And if you want to know why both Old Testament and New punch the drum about distribution of wealth, it is because humans have always had that determination to be head and shoulders over anyone else, and the major measure of that is wealth. It might be cash or house or car or land; it may be anything. It can even be status, which more of the aforementioned illustrate. And the real issue is that – in such situations – the reality of a human being is overlooked completely, rubbed out by the rule that my dollars are more important than your life.

I don’t know if you are aware of the old Jewish law of jubilee. It is an interesting situation, though I wonder if ever anyone ever acted upon it. If I had to sell you all or part of my land because I was in strife, the law required that, after 49 years, you had to hand it back, because it was an inheritance and was not to be abused. The year of jubilee was an important reminder of the importance of a person, of a family. Even the poor were treated better than most in those times. If I had a crop of wheat or whatever, when it came to reaping, I was **required** to leave unreaped the edges of the crop. It was not mine; it belonged to the poor. **But**, interesting to note also, the poor were expected to come and reap that part of the crop for themselves. In that way, their pride was untouched and their hunger was met. So even in those so-called unenlightened times, people were treated as humans and not as ciphers.

So there is the whole point of it. Any prosperity is there to be shared. Not amassed, and used as a lever against other people. It may sound rather idealistic, but in this day and age, it is a fascinating leveller and well worth exploration. Should you consider this to be all ‘pie in the sky,’ I would hasten to add that in my experience, many of those who are less-well-off are far from amendable to receiving ‘charity.’ And with that I agree entirely.

**Sentence**

Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

*James 5: 16*

**Collect**

O God, from Whom light rises in darkness for those who seek You; grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what You would have us do, so that in Your light we may see light, and in Your narrow way may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever **Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Jeremiah 32: 1 -3 & 6 – 15**

The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar. At that time the forces of the Babylonian king were besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was imprisoned in the court of the guardhouse attached to the royal palace. King Zedekiah had imprisoned him after demanding what he meant by this prophecy: "These are the words of the Lord: I shall give this city into the power of the king of Babylon, and he will capture it."

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Jeremiah said: This word of the Lord came to me: Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is coming to you; he will say, "Buy my field at Anathoth; as next-of-kin you have the right of redemption to buy it.' Just as the Lord had foretold, my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guardhouse and said, "Buy my field at Anathoth in Benjamin. You have the right of redemption and possession as next-of-kin, so buy it for yourself.' I recognized that this instruction came from the Lord, so I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel and weighed out the price for him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed and sealed the deed, had it witnessed, and then weighed the money on the scales. I took my copies of the deed of purchase, both the sealed and the unsealed copies, and handed them over to Baruch son of Neriah, son of Mahseiah, in the presence of Hanamel my cousin and the witnesses whose names were subscribed on the deed of purchase, and of the Judaeans sitting in the court of the guardhouse.

In their presence I gave my instructions to Baruch: These are the words of the Lord of Hosts the God of Israel: Take these copies of the deed of purchase, both the sealed and the unsealed copies, and deposit them in an earthenware jar so that they may be preserved for a long time to come. For these are the words of the Lord of Hosts the God of Israel: Houses, fields, and vineyards will again be bought and sold in this land.

**Psalm**

**91: 1 – 6 & 14 – 16**

Those who dwell in the shelter of the Most High: who abide under the shadow of the Almighty  
They will say to the Lord 'You are my refuge and my stronghold: my God in Whom I trust'  
For He will deliver you from the snare of the hunter: and from the destroying curse  
He will cover you with His wings, and you will be safe under His feathers: His faithfulness shall be your shield and defence  
You shall not be afraid of any terror by night: or of the arrow that flies by day  
Of the pestilence that walks about in darkness: or the plague that destroys at noonday  
  
'You have set your love upon Me,' says the Lord, 'and therefore I will deliver you: I will lift you out of danger because you have known My name  
When you call upon Me I will answer you: I will be with you in trouble, I will rescue you and bring you to honour  
With long life will I satisfy you: and fill you with my salvation.'

**Epistle**

**1 Timothy 6: 6 – 19**

Of course religion does yield high dividends, but only to those who are content with what they have. We brought nothing into this world, and we can take nothing out; if we have food and clothing let us rest content. Those who want to be rich fall into temptations and snares and into many foolish and harmful desires which plunge people into ruin and destruction. The love of money is the root of all evil, and in pursuit of it some have wandered from the faith and spiked themselves on many a painful thorn.

But you, man of God, must shun all that, and pursue justice, piety, integrity, love, fortitude, and gentleness. Run the great race of faith and take hold of eternal life, for to this you were called, when you confessed your faith nobly before many witnesses. Now in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Jesus Christ, who

himself made that noble confession in his testimony before Pontius Pilate, I charge you to obey your orders without fault or failure until the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ which God will bring about in his own good time. He is the blessed and only Sovereign, King of kings and Lord of lords; he alone possesses immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light; him no one has ever seen or can ever see; to him be honour and dominion for ever! Amen.

Instruct those who are rich in this world's goods not to be proud, and to fix their hopes not on so uncertain a thing as money, but on God, who richly provides all things for us to enjoy. They are to do good and to be rich in well-doing, to be ready to give generously and to share with others, and so acquire a treasure which will form a good foundation for the future. Then they will grasp the life that is life indeed.

## **GOSPEL**

### **Luke 16: 19 – 31**

There was once a rich man, who used to dress in purple and the finest linen, and feasted sumptuously every day. At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, who was covered with sores. He would have been glad to satisfy his hunger with the scraps from the rich man's table. Dogs used to come and lick his sores. One day the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and there, far away, was Abraham with Lazarus close beside him. "Abraham, my father," he called out, "take pity on me! Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water, to cool my tongue, for I am in agony in this fire." But Abraham said, "My child, remember that the good things fell to you in your lifetime, and the bad to Lazarus. Now he has his consolation here and it is you who are in agony. But that is not all: there is a great gulf fixed between us; no one can cross it from our side to reach you, and none may pass from your side to us." "Then, father," he replied, "'will you send him to my father's house, where I have five brothers, to warn them, so that they may not come to this place of torment?" But Abraham said, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them listen to them." "No, father Abraham," he replied, "but if someone from the dead visits them, they will repent." Abraham answered, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets they will pay no heed even if someone should rise from the dead." '

## **NOTES ON THE READINGS .....**

### **Old Testament**

Here is a remarkably down-to-earth and brave Jeremiah putting his money where his mouth is. As we have seen in previous weeks, Jeremiah lived through a traumatic period in Jewish history. Being prophet around the time of the collapse of the Southern Kingdom, and part of the elite really, he was (a) painfully aware of the fact that the breakdown of everything was coming, (b) that few people would hear let alone respond to his message about the forthcoming experience, and (c) was sufficiently forward-thinking to commit to a deal that sounded ridiculous in the extreme.

So please catch sight of the enormity of Jeremiah's action. In spite of the hopeless political situation, he was prepared to invest in the future, because God would be there in that future, however it turned out. He of all people is painfully aware of the fact that Israel now faces extinction, as once before in its history. All is hopeless, and even the life of the King is threatened. But in order to fulfill an obligation to a kinsman, he purchased a block of land – making a monumental statement of hope that somewhere there is light at the end of a very long tunnel. That takes bravery beyond calculation! History proved Jeremiah right, even if it took 70 years or so.

### **Psalm**

Lining up in parallel with Jeremiah's confidence in a dark place, so too is the Psalmist, writing centuries before. He evinced the same hope in spite of huge problems and threats. It is another encouraging action on the part of a faithful person. That man must have taken a very long-range view of life and outcomes, and this is something that any human must do, if they are to survive in rough and ready world. In fact, the entire Bible needs to be seen, not as some basis for doctrine and tenets, but as a history over millennia of people's experience of God. You are not asked to **believe** it; you are asked to line up your experience of life against these earlier examples. Does it work? Does it ring true? Can you find light in the dark also?

### **Epistle**

In the light of what is written above, can you now see how Paul is asking of you exactly what the other authors have done! Paul would not have been confronted with Generation X and Y and their demand for everything yesterday, but there would have been greedy go-getters of various sorts. Be content with what you have does not sit easily on modern shoulders (who do not have to be X or Y!) The constant call of Scripture is to live within your means, and to act with justice and integrity with those around you. Transparency is the current buzz-word, and

while it is available more in breach than observance, it remains and always will remain the mark of the Christian – because it aligns with the character of the Father.

### **Gospel**

It was only a week or so ago that I referred to the many references of Jesus in the matter of the cold hard cash thing. Here is yet another example of how Jesus saw things: the wealthy could see no further than themselves, myopic, self-obsessed. The great fault of the rich man was that he never even **saw** Lazarus at his gate. He had no thought for anyone but himself. That is how he lived; and in this story, that is how he died.

Never imagine that this parable offers a picture of life after this: here is an illustrative tale, meant to be thought about. As that rich man – for the first time in his life- thought about anyone other than himself, it was for his brother. Jesus' comment that if that man (and others) did not listen to Moses, then they would never respond to anything. Every human being has, at some stage in life, an active and listening conscience. If and when that capacity is silenced, then it would be better for that person if ..... something like a millstone .... you know what I mean. A dead conscience is a very dead human being indeed.

### **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

If ever there is a challenge for the person of God, it is to hold to their position and integrity regardless of the conditions that surround that person. That, of course, is something far more easily said than done. So today's Old Testament Lesson is one very serious challenge to the disciple of whatever age and under whatever circumstance. And no one who knows what they are talking about could ever say that the life of the prophet was an easy one.

It is a measure of the worth of a person when the times in which they live(d) are seen to be difficult and critical. Few people would have faced the issues as Jeremiah did, and probably fewer still would have survived. From the inception of his ministry, this prophet would have been most aware of the risks he would be called on to take, and the threats likely to emerge on his very life. As we have seen already in the readings from this man, his very call indicated quite something of the future.

It was a time of enormous threat and turmoil to the (southern) kingdom of Judah. Its twin nation, Israel, had succumbed to invasion from the north, and now it was Judah's turn. Israel had never been one of the big players in world politics, though during David's reign there was a brief flash of importance. But David had been 500 years before, or thereabouts, and whilst his memory had been heightened as is often the case in retrospect, no parallel ruler had emerged. It would have been during the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC that this series of events would overtake the remaining nation, and threaten it with extinction. Reasons for such crises were listed as ignoring God (and all the remarkable emphases of justice and truth and integrity,) and going its own way – which roughly translates the same sort of direction that is evidenced in today's life and history. People were divided into haves and have not. And the gap was widening. Truth and justice and integrity were vanishing, particularly amongst the leadership religious as well as political.

It would not be long between the prediction of Israel's defeat and destruction and the actual events, and whilst Jeremiah (along with the other major prophets) anticipated the final denouement, other people in leadership positions attempted, as such people always do, to overcome reality with spin, falsehood, and downright lie. If you have ever tried to correct such lies and falsehood, in rather less tense periods of history, you would know the likelihood of success and the greater likelihood of being (at the very least) disparaged and despised. Jeremiah was not put off by such put downs. Not only was his silence not obtained, but he acted in very surprising response to an awkward situation.

When a nation is under threat, one of the first things affected is the value of things. So when Jeremiah was advised that it was his responsibility to act as a kinsman – at considerable cost to himself – he did not avoid the issue, but acted, some might say, irresponsibly. Seventeen shekels of silver was far from a meagre sum, as you might imagine, and on the surface it would appear that there was no likelihood whatever of that land being found back in Jeremiah's possession. Any lesser person would have refused to be part of the transaction because of the threat from the armies of Babylon which were waiting for Jerusalem to fall into their hands like some ripe fruit. It seemed to be a futile, empty and silly gesture, for there was no future **at all** for the stricken nation.

In other words, it was an act of great faith, and greater integrity. It was also a far-sighted action, as it would be 70 years or more before the people of Israel returned to their own land. It was a commitment to a future of which Jeremiah seemed sure, but for which he had little in the way of evidence. In fact the only evidence he would have had was the conviction that if God was the God of Israel, then somewhere, somehow, there was 'a future and a hope.'

It strikes me that each of the readings for today require all of us to have rather longer range views of life, of history and of God. Like Jeremiah, we are living through a period when God seems to have been consigned to the edges of life, or even beyond the edges. I would not mind a fiver for every time someone has asked me ‘when will it all end, Ron?’ expecting some sort of final collapse of civilisation as we know it. Movies and other ‘entertainment’ seem to focus on cataclysm and what is popularly called ‘apocalypse,’<sup>1</sup> - strangely so that people can have their spines tingle without any damage to themselves.

Oddly, most Christians seem unaware that the tirades that emerge from the prophets have to do with precisely the sort of world in which we now live. Selfishness and greed are the real catalysts for implosion, which is why the Scriptures call constantly for justice and truth and integrity. Without those ancient verities life cannot **but** drop into the abyss. That very familiar Gospel parable of the rich man and Dives underlines **exactly** that selfishness that leaves the well-to-do not even caring about the unfortunate who live within eye-shot, and ear-shot, and one suspects smell-shot.

Pardon me, but it seems that the rest of this sermon is going on already right inside of you.

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<sup>1</sup> Apocalypse is **not** disaster, actually, but something previously secret now being revealed!