

Sentence

Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in My name, there I am among them." Matthew 18: 20

Collect

O God, You know us to be set in the midst of so many and so great dangers that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright; grant to us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers, and carry us through all temptations, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Exodus 12: 1 – 14

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbour in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it.

Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn.

This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the LORD. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

Psalm

149

O praise the Lord, and sing to the Lord a new song: O praise Him in the assembly of the faithful.

Let Israel rejoice in Him that made him: let the children of Zion be joyful in their King.

Let them praise Him in the dance: let them sing His praise with timbrel and with harp.

For the Lord takes delight in His people: He adorns the meek with His salvation.

Let His faithful ones exult in His glory: let them sing with joy upon their beds.

Let the high praises of God be in their mouths: and a two-edged sword in their hands

To execute vengeance on the nations: and chastisement upon the peoples.

To bind their kings in chains: and their nobles with fetters of iron

To visit upon them the judgement that is decreed: such honour belongs to all His faithful servants.

Praise the Lord

Epistle

Romans 13: 1 – 10

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.

For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them--taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due. Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

GOSPEL

Matthew 18: 10 – 20

Jesus said "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

There cannot be too many of us unaware of the import of this passage of the Old Testament. The Passover remains an important annual celebration for Jewish people, recalling their escape from Egypt on their move to the Promised Land. In typical Jewish fashion, the mode of celebration – both on that first time and for ever after – was precise clear and sensible. And it underlined, for ever, the nature of JHWH Who rescued His People in a pattern that was to follow in other events over the millennia.

There are links, too, of course, to that form of worship which prevailed for many hundreds of years, in what Christians know as the Sacrificial System of worship. Since the destruction of the Temple, those rites have not been able to be used, yet the Passover remains the annual link for Hebrew worshippers. Of course there is the link between Passover and Eucharist.

Psalm

There is no doubt that old Israel knew how to celebrate. They must have made a lot of noise and kicked up a lot of dust, but that would have added to the delight, surely. Always such celebrations had to do with the very active God Who was for ever doing things for His people. Mind you, that line on vengeance may well have rung a wrong tune, but that was all part of the growth and development of the Faith. Who of you has never put a foot – or understanding – wrong?

Epistle

'Part of the development' indeed. I have reported elsewhere, from time to time, that one needs to receive the Biblical entreaties with some balance. This epistle of Paul was written before his execution under Nero, along with Peter, and one would suspect that his 'theology' of governing powers – *the powers that be* – would have modified somewhat too.

There is an interesting ambivalence in the Biblical view of kings and kingdoms, Empires and such. And that has always been so. Daniel was written to warn the Israelites against the overweening power of Hellenistic culture. *And others* It has always surprised me that Australians are content to similar absorption of American culture, without the slightest struggle in most cases!!!!!!

It behoves most people to be very wary about political power. Notice that what we call democracy was never an issue for Biblical times, nor is it always the sort of 'better way' that some people like to present it. History shows that there are some very short steps between democracy and totalitarian government. On the other hand, Jews were also painfully aware of the threat from (usually) north east of marauding hordes who would invoke all

manner of ugly chaos if they were given half a chance. **Any** form of government, therefore, was seen as a bulwark against such chaos, *which is the point from which Paul would have been writing this passage.*

GOSPEL

There seems to me to be two rather different sources of contribution to the issues raised here. On the one hand you have the entirely typical caring response of Jesus to the 'little people.' Linking that to the flock of sheep and in particular a single one has us on totally familiar ground. And that caring is the real issue. Caring for the one while risking the rest of the crowd.

On the other hand, there is the unfamiliar reference to the church, the congregation, κυριακή – kuriake, belonging to the Lord. That seems to stem from a later period than Jesus' ministry, and perhaps indicative of issues arising from several decades later.

'Tis a risky path this passage opens up. Over the centuries this process has been tried, at great risk to all involved. If I share a deep part of me with you, then the trust between us has to be total and secure. But when it is a matter of discord or disobedience, then the ration of risk heightens enormously. In spite of its inclusion here, I doubt I would ever counsel such an attempt at resolution of any major issue.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

Have you ever wondered what makes events in your life something so formative that it continues to resonate with you over years, decades, a lifetime? I guess all of us have memories that give direction and purpose, and whilst we may celebrate birthdays annually, those other items may only resonate within.

Not so with Israel. This Passover Festival has been maintained by the faithful for an extraordinarily long period of time. Assuming that the Exodus was about 1350 BC, that means a lot of annual celebrations. In fact, Jews mark their years from this date. So ask a Jewish person what year this is for them, and you will have a fairly accurate date for the Exodus.

Their celebrations are with good and lasting reason. While the focus is on the escape from slavery oh! so long ago, that celebration is also added to by the number of other times that the Almighty has done similar things in rescuing the nation from almost certain extinction. The Exile in Babylon is another in the series, but there have been smaller escapes both before and after that! The nett result of course is the repeated assurance that God is for real and that He is the rescuer of His people even when the chips seem to be entirely **down**.

It may be helpful to stop a moment or two to underline all this. If you read (second) Isaiah¹ you will be struck by the means whereby that ancient Prophet offered enormous reassurance to captive Israel by reminding them of the Exodus and the God Who brought it about. In fact, one of the most fascinating things about that prophet, was his capacity to understand what God was doing in that most drastic of time *precisely because* he looked back at Israel's history to catch sight of where God was heading. It is also a help to realize that one of the great values of that old prophet was that the principle that he drew from his musings remains true for the People of God up to the present day and way into the future.

We Christians have our own annual celebrations: Christmas and Easter, Pentecost and other special days. But sometimes the sheer routine of the celebration leaves us missing the mark because we tend (do we not) simply to mark the occasion, remember the facts of them, and fail to search deeper into **why** we bother. Such celebrations are meant to lead us further into the purpose of the events. It is part of the need for us all to continue to grow in understanding of the Faith, and in faithfulness to the Lord. And that does not mean some sort of going off into some cloud-cuckoo land, but maturing in our calling to reflect the characteristics of our Father.

I do not know the Faith when I know all the stories of what happened along the way. I only know the Faith as I progress in responding significantly both to the Lord Whom I follow and to people around me whom I serve.

That seems enough to ponder for a while, eh?

¹ Chapter 40 onwards

Sentence

If You, Lord, should note what we do wrong, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, so that You may be revered.

Psalm 130: 3-4

Collect

O God, You call Your Church to witness that in Christ we are reconciled to You; help us so to proclaim the good news of Your love, that all who hear it may turn to You; 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

Exodus 14: 19 - 31

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night. Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers.

At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt." Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained.

But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

Psalm

114

When Israel came out of Egypt: and the house of Jacob from among a people of an alien tongue
Judah became his sanctuary: and Israel his dominion
The sea saw that and fled: Jordan was driven back
The mountains skipped like rams: and the little hills like young sheep.
What ailed you, O sea that you fled: O Jordan, that you were driven back?
You mountains that you skipped like rams: and you little hills like young sheep?
Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord: at the presence of the God of Jacob.
Who turned the rock into a pool of water: and the flint-stone into a welling spring.

Epistle

Romans 14: 1 – 14

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God. We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord,

and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.

GOSPEL

Matthew 18: 21 - 35

Then Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy- seven times. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

Lack of Sunday Schools tends to mean that many members of congregations may be unaware of this story of escape and rescue, even being offended perhaps at the apparent ferocity of the tale. A few comments may be helpful in this day and age of political correctness.

This day and age is odd, I have to confess, as we try and avoid issues of real life, even when surrounded by almost unprecedented violence. Humans often tend to be most violent, and to close eyes and minds to that fact is simply being ridiculous. So face the tale and get over it.

It has been interesting only recently (October, 2010) to find newspaper reports that even scientists acknowledge the clear possibility that the Exodus could have occurred as written. While this is no earth-shattering support, it is a fascinating indication. Mind you, even this septuagenarian knew of the 'strong east wind' thing since childhood. It is there in Scripture but too few people take note of such statements.

The point of this all has nothing to do with miracle, but with rescue. Israel – such as it then was- had been in virtual prison for some time, and this is the result of sound leadership by Moses from almost certain extinction. (Genocide is nothing new in human history!) Rescue. Exodus. That old Greek word means 'way out,' – and that it certainly was.

Psalm

Here is a lovely little exercise of joy at the Lord Who rescued His people from slavery to bring them into the Promised Land. *That, incidentally, is what Israel would long describe as **salvation**.* Notice the reference to sea, river and water. The elements were icons for Jews for that which is evil.

Epistle

Paul may well have been capable of confusing modern readers about the Faith, but when it came to practicalities, he was really very good. One of the things that drives me somewhat bonkers is the capacities of some modern Christians to so emphasize part of Scripture to the exclusion of the whole that the imbalance becomes really quite pathetic. As Paul indicates, there is nothing new in that, but all of us need to take note. Care of each other needs to overcome differences of dogmatics, and even practice. Mind you, none of this emphasis of the Apostle should hold us back from attempting to widen people's horizons: there is far more to the Faith than haggling over vegetarians or their opposites.

Gospel

If there is anything that seems to offer a great divide between modern Christians, it is this matter of forgiveness. On the one hand, there are those who see it their duty to forgive anyone *anything*. On the other, there are those who refuse forgiveness to anyone. So note carefully what Jesus is saying here.

God is a God of forgiveness, thank heaven, for He recognizes the fact that without forgiveness, there is no solid way forward for anyone. On the other hand, the Biblical picture makes it quite clear that blanket forgiveness is a blind alley. What shows up in this short but powerful tale is the capacity of humans to take forgiveness very lightly and learn nothing from the options it poses. On the other hand, even the other characters in the story see very clearly the total injustice in the actions of the first debtor.

For forgiveness to work there needs to be clear and valid repentance on the part of the perpetrator. Repentance is no mere being sorry for the action, but as the Greek word *metanoia*- μετανοια –indicates, **change of heart, mind and direction** is called for. All of this goes to show that a long hard look at parables and stories is called for, so that **all** the implications of the detail are grasped and acted upon.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

Perhaps I have told you this story before, for it goes back a number of years, and I forget how many. It revolves around the ghastly event where the daughter of a pastor was attacked on the front verandah of someone's place, and left there to die. In the days that followed, that poor pastor made it clear that he forgave the murderer, whoever he was. I suspect that such a statement was made, because the pastor thought that Christians forgave, *in this case, anything*. I felt somewhat impelled to write to the bereaved man, concerned at the foreshortened 'theology' he operated from and to relieve him of some of the stress under which he was operating. To my eternal regret, I did not write.

Some time later, one of our own clergy was in a parish where an old lady was attacked and murdered, and that priest was noted, in the press and on TV, to encourage all concerned to forgive the murderer. (As far as I recall, no one yet has been charged with that slaying.) In that case, after my failure in the first instance, I did write to my colleague, asking him to consider more deeply what he was doing and why. In that letter, I underlined the fact that both in Scripture and in Anglican liturgy, there can be no expectation of forgiveness before there is repentance on the part of the perpetrator. My letter was rather more gentle and rather fuller than this report, so that the person could consider and take on board what I was trying to convey. The reply I received was not pretty; I was charged with being totally unchristian amongst other things.

As time went by in that first instance of the pastor's daughter, the horrific nature of the killing obviously preyed on the mind of the pastor. From press reports some years later, I gather that the pastor resigned from ministry and his marriage and family broke up under the strain. I understand also that the pastor rejected the Faith – or at least as he understood it.

And there lies the point of both situations. There is an awful lot of pious nonsense about this business of forgiveness: forgiving and forgetting is part of the nonsense. It may well be easy to do in situations that are very minor and unimportant; but the more damaging they are, the more seriously they need to be addressed. In fact, because the Faith has so much to do with forgiveness, and atonement, the whole matter requires far more thought than tends to be given. For instance, rather too many people have remarkably wrong perceptions about God's forgiveness of them, resulting in some fearful outcomes that indicate clearly how false are those perceptions. The appalling thing about 'easy' forgiveness is that it leaves the forgiving one (such as that pastor) destroyed and the perpetrator having learnt nothing from the situation – remaining unchanged and unaffected.

Real forgiveness – which includes repentance! – has enormous and beneficial effect on everyone involved, and can even reverberate in anyone’s mind and life who is aware of the situation.

Sentence

By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God

Ephesians 28

Collect

Loving and righteous God, Your boundless generosity exceeds all that we can desire or deserve; liberate us from all jealousy and greed, that we may be free to love and serve others and in Your service, may find our true reward, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Exodus 16: 2 – 15

The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?"

Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it.

When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labour. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the one who was in the wrong, "Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?" He answered, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and thought, "Surely the thing is known." When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well.

Psalm

105: 1 – 6 & 37 – 45

O give thanks to the Lord and call upon His name: tell among the peoples what things He has done

Sing to Him, O sing praises: and be telling of His marvellous works

Exult in His holy name: and let those that seek the Lord be joyful in heart.

Seek the Lord and His strength: O seek His face continually.

Call to mind what wonders He has done: His marvellous acts and the judgements of His mouth

O seed of Abraham His servant: O children of Jacob, His chosen one

He brought Israel out with silver and gold: and not one among their tribes was seen to stumble

Egypt was glad at their going: for dread of Israel had fallen upon them

He spread out cloud for a covering: and fire to lighten the night

The people asked, and he brought them quails: and satisfied them with the bread from heaven

He opened a rock so that the waters gushed: and ran in the parched land like a river

For He had remembered His holy word: that He gave to His servant Abraham

So he led His people out with rejoicing: His chosen ones with shouts of joy

He gave them the land of the nations: and they took possession of the fruit for which other peoples had toiled

So that they might keep His statutes: and faithfully obey His laws. O Praise the Lord

Epistle

Philippians 1: 21 – 30

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well-- since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

GOSPEL

Matthew 20: 1 – 16

Jesus said "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.'

When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

As last Sunday's reading, this too may be relatively unknown to Generation X & Y, who mostly missed out on Sunday School. It is an interesting snippet of Hebrew history, showing that the preparation of Moses meant he experienced two or three cultures in his development as a human being. That is never a problem to people.

Both his Hebrew and Egyptian backgrounds meant his was a wide range of perceptions, added to, obviously in his formation in the desert as a shepherd.

I may be a little twee, but I do have to comment that, as I look back on my formative years, the experience was not accidental, for each aspect up to theological college was a form of preparation for ministry. Even having grandparents on the land was part of the deal. Never be surprised, nor down-play apparently useless experience in early or even later life.

Psalm

Once again the choice of Psalm for today echoes the Exodus experience of Israel. Have you ever stopped to consider how carefully that nation was nurtured and directed by God -- for it was hardly the sort of group or people that one might choose as significant. It may well have been **because** Israel tended to be a minor player on the then world scene that evoked God's interest in them. Bigger players would have had their own, essentially selfish agendas to follow.

Epistle

I find it rather fascinating to listen to St. Paul, who was obviously operating under considerable difficulty, with so many people of our present time, for whom life seems to be far more of a threat than a promise. Not only is

suicide a sad issue for some, but violence is also becoming just as serious an issue. (When I consider myself to be of little value, I am most likely to see you as being far less important even than me!)

See in this passage Paul's dilemma – life is valuable and yet, for him so is death. And out of that equation comes the Apostle's encouragement – in a world rather more violent even than our own! – to get on with living as one of Christ's people **while still in a world that disregarded the Christ entirely**. In this day and age, we need to get used to being disciples who need to 'push wind uphill.' That may remain so for several generations, but Christians have been there before, remember.

GOSPEL

Here is a parable of Jesus, with which my Mum had great difficulty. Unionist she never was, and would be appalled to be counted as such, but she could not come to terms with the apparent injustice of the work situation presented here.

One of the other things we need to get used to is the overwhelming generosity of the Father, for that is what is in view here. The whole picture needs to be put in its place of the first century AD. There the day-labourer was paid at the end of each day, and the lives of his family was dependent totally on him bringing home that day's pay. Without it, his family's future was threatened, for no food meant ... well, you can guess. (Just as an aside, if the phrase from the Lord's Prayer about 'give us today our daily bread' is not a correct translation from the Greek. **There** the reading is 'give us today our bread for tomorrow.' When that translation was used first in the draft Liturgy of 1966 in Australia, the uproar was enormous. *But that is what the Greek original of the NT says*. And why? That is all a person expected in that day and age. God would provide for tomorrow, but you have to trust Him for any time after that. (Contrast that with today's emphasis on mortgaging today so that we are affluent tomorrow!)

Now all that may take some absorbing, so take some time. But see what this all says about the generosity of the Father, of the trust we need to have in Him, and the awareness of the needs of **everyone** in that whole process of staying alive and thriving.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

So the Christian Faith (and all others, apparently) is superstition, is it? It seems to me that all those who lay such claims have not examined the Faith that they castigate. There was nothing superstitious about the emphases of the prophets, as they plugged away for a just and true society and nation. And any good unionist of our day and age would have a fit over the parable you have just heard once again. A fair day's pay for a fair day's work has been turned upside down, into what a family needs is what should be the go.

And there lies the rub, doesn't it! That is a statement not a question. Life is about community, and community is about caring and sharing; and without such a direction and emphasis, we all become little more than competing individuals trying to get the better of all the rest.

And that is what the Faith is about; always has been and always will be. Love God; love your neighbour. If that is too much for the atheist, then simply substitute love what is true and just and honest and compassionate. And who could possibly complain about that? Not a hint of superstition is visible here.

There is not a lot to add, actually. Paul, writing to the Philippians, has the same thing to say, in spite of his awareness of the fact that Christians then were pushing the proverbial wind uphill. Antagonism to the Faith was enormous, even though that same Faith was there to provide substantial benefit to everyone around. To quote Paul again, 'love is the fulfilling of the law;' and 'against such there is no law.'

Perhaps all one needs to do at this stage is to spend a short time pondering any changes needed in our attitudes and outlooks ... and then our actions.

Sentence

Come, let us return to the Lord, that we may live before Him

Hosea 6:1a & 2b

Collect

Grant, O merciful God, that Your people may have the mind that was in Christ Jesus, who emptied Himself and took the form of a servant and in humility became obedient even to death; for You have highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, Jesus Christ the Lord; Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God in everlasting glory.

Amen

Old Testament Lesson

Exodus 17: 1 – 7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Psalm

78: 1 – 4 & 11 – 16

Give heed to my teaching, O my people: incline your ears to the words of my mouth
For I will open my mouth in a parable: and expound the mysteries of former times.
What we have heard and known: what our forebears have told us
We will not hide from their children, but declare to a generation yet to come: the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, His mighty and wonderful works.

For He did marvellous things in the sight of their ancestors: in the land of Egypt, in the country of Zoan.
He divided the sea and let them pass through: He made the waters stand up in a heap.
In the daytime He led them with a cloud: and all night long, with the light of fire.
He cleft rocks in the wilderness: and gave them drink in abundance as from springs of water.
He brought streams out of the rock: and caused the waters to flow down like rivers.
But for all this they sinned yet more against Him: and rebelled against the Most High in the desert.

Epistle

Philippians 2: 1 – 13

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

GOSPEL

Matthew 21: 23 - 32

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

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NOTES ON THE READINGS

I am rude enough to wonder why Psalm 95 was not set for today – the Psalm that was always set for Morning Prayer in the old BCP. It depicted the folly of Israel in the desert and made a great thing about 'Massah and Meribah.'

Old Testament Lesson

Always be ready to draw more than the obvious conclusion from this incident: whilst water would have been a desperate need, it was parallel to the other huge need of Israel, that which was represented by Horeb – Sinai – the Law including the Decalogue. It was not just need of water that Israel had, but also need of direction, need of discipline, need of hope.

I have long suspected that the apparently increasing disaster of our own day and age lies in the same lacks amongst rather too great a proportion of our population. My wife finds watching the news each evening an increasing strain on her concern. The steep increase in violent crime, even in quiet old Adelaide, is the same issue that was facing Israel back then. That is not to stand in judgement at all; it is a tragedy of enormous proportion and requires clear and significant attention immediately. 'Law and order' is not the issue! Purpose and point to life is!

Psalm

Although I understand it easily enough, the discarding of the very idea of God is that which produces the problems mentioned above. No God does not mean no god. It means I usurp the position of God, and relegate you to virtual non-existence, or at least no importance, so I stand on your shoulders to demand attention before anyone or anything else. When a society reaches such a stage, its collapse under its own weight is not all that far away.

Epistle

And here lies the remedy to it all. This is no pious, other-worldly poetry; here is the Gospel at its most potent and significant. 'Law and order' mentioned above is all about power; and a moment's thought indicates the harsh and destructive outcome from that. *I have recently pondered to what extent today's political situation is a sort of precursor to the Nazi regime of the 1930s. What started off as the answer to Germany's problem became a nightmare of extraordinary proportion. And it all had to do with power.*

Gospel

'By what authority?' Well, do these passages for today ring some bells, and all similar ones at that! Take time to ponder this reading if you will, and see what is being expressed. Chief priests and elders were there to challenge Jesus, for they saw in Him a direct challenge to their power and prestige. *And in a way, Jesus was nothing of the sort.* Stop and notice that Jesus' real answer to the challenge before Him was to point to **truth.**

Stop and ponder that a moment eh? Even the tiny cameo of the two sons actually revolves around that issue: what should a person do? There might well be the internal struggle to prove one's strength – but the real response to any situation is to respond truly.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

We have travelled this way before, and every time this Philippians passage is there for the reading, I get the urge to underline the majestic power (because it is true) of this Gospel in a nutshell. Here is no pious crap! Here is where the rubber really hits the road.

Ask anyone where real power truly lies, and you will get all sorts of answers. Barak Obama, President of the USA, is supposed to be the most powerful person in the world right now, and that assumption stems from the fact that the US military is said and supposed to be the most potent. The American dollar is said to be likewise. Oddly enough, it was from the U S of A that the World Financial Crisis emerged, and went rather close to bringing the almighty Yank, dollar and nation, - indeed, the planet! - down. But don't focus there only – wherever we humans decide that the answer to any problem is force, of arms, of finance or even of personality, the outcome remains the same. No resolution emerges, and the issue becomes more grave.

So why do we humans not ever learn? I suspect the answer lies in the fact that humans never seem to learn, or that those who do remain in the minority. All of this is not a religious question but an immensely practical one. It is not limited to one culture or country; it is totally widespread. And yet an answer has been posited in Scripture at the very least since the time of the major prophets, or however long or short a time it was before that when the Creation Stories of Genesis were completed in their present form.

The picture presented by Paul in this magnificent passage from Philippians, may well have been a Christian hymn at the time of Paul's writing. It is a vivid parallel or contrast between 'adam' – humanity, you will understand, and Jesus. As outlined above, humanity for ever grapples with the demand to be kingpin and boss, subjugating whoever happens to be around the place, demanding obedience and threatening extinction. Contrast that with Jesus Who came as Servant of all, not in order to be nice and naive, but in order to underline the fact that the only way life can be enhanced and real progress made is by each serving the other, by reconciling by the truth, by caring about the health and wealth of each and every one of us. It may seem to be an impossible dream, but it is presented as the 'only way to go.'

As far as I know, no one has ever attempted to apply this process on a wide scale, except Jesus. Sadly, though, whilst much of the Faith has been taken on board by millions they tell me, one does not hear a great deal about this aspect of the Faith, *this aspect of life*. Small wonder that opponents of faith and of the Faith tend to regard both as useless. Not a lot of us are all that capable of expressing the Faith in any conflict or disagreement with others.

Ever since first being exposed to the Servant Songs of Isaiah (and that would be over 50 years ago!) the real point and purpose of the Biblical Faith came to light. And it does not have to do with the dear bye and bye, but the right here and now. That fact may well be why so many Christians avoid the immediate issues of justice and truth and reconciliation. Oddly, that is what the Cross is all about – so there can be no excuse really.

With a little bit of luck, this may encourage people to look with fresh eyes at this Gospel which majors, not on heaven, but on offering this hurting and hurt humanity to find the path to peace. There is no peace without justice and truth, so quite some of the responsibility falls on each and every one of us.