



Advent Sunday

30 November 2008

Father David Wood
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Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

Over these next four Sundays we prepare to celebrate the coming of the Lord at Bethlehem by looking forward to his coming at what we call the End Time, even as we open our hearts to the daily and hourly comings of Christ.

This Advent season helps us focus on the One who came, who comes, and who will come, the adventing God who is never absent, the adventing God who is always present. And this focusing is about using our eyes a bit better than we normally do, looking more closely at all the things we normally take for granted, paying attention to the detail rather than simply settling for the big picture. It means deliberately slowing down just as the world all around speeds up, so that we don't get swamped by the pre-Christmas rush, so that we of all people have time to live deeply into the mystery of God-with-us rather than being swept along with the distracted crowd. In the words of today's gospel, this eye-opening, this paying attention, this pausing to look around, means staying awake, keeping alert, ready for whenever the Lord of surprises arrives. "Keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

Unfortunately, all this talk of adventing, of coming, of arriving, while unavoidable, tends to point us in the wrong direction. It sounds, doesn't it, as if God is something or someone distinct, an individual, a person much like we are, and a person who belongs somewhere else? It sounds as if God is normally removed, over there or out there beyond our world somehow, yet chooses to make occasional visits. Indeed, Christian talk about the incarnation or enfleshment of God in Mary's womb, and the birth of baby Jesus at Bethlehem, often sounds like reporting on a visitor landing from another planet. And after a brief stay of thirty or so years with us, this inter-galactic tourist goes home to wherever it is he really belongs. The resurrection and ascension stories can be equally crudely read as describing this exit, providing an unbelievable super-natural ending to match an equally unbelievable supernatural beginning. Even today's little parable of the householder going on a long journey compounds this commonplace misapprehension, encouraging us to believe that Christ is now absent, as if we are left in charge of the show while he is a long way away on a sort of extended home visit.

Now what I am saying is not that this language of coming and going is absolutely wrong, but that it is not quite as it sounds. This is, after all, our language rather than God's language, human language applied to God, because human language is all we have to work with. But when we talk of God adventing, of God coming or arriving or departing or ascending, we are pretty obviously not really talking in terms of spatial movement. It is not that God actually moves from here to there, so that God is present in one place but not in another. Rather, God 'comes' to me when it dawns on me that God is with me, indeed that God is always with me. God 'advents' in my life when the ice breaks, when the penny drops, whenever I tumble

to the truth of my situation. In the same way God 'departs' from me when I am too pre-occupied or too self-obsessed to see God in my life or detect God's action in the lives of those around me.

This means that at Christmas we will perhaps do better to think in terms of God 'surfacing' in our midst, of God emerging within the fabric of human history - the same God who is the deepest truth about us, the same God who acts in all of history. For the real miracle is not that God suddenly shows up. The real miracle is that we actually notice. The miracle is that we are awake rather than asleep, watching rather than day-dreaming, so that on this or that occasion we see what is always there to be seen. And in this shock of awareness it dawns on us that 'what' is really present is more accurately described as 'who'. In the absence of any other evidence, said Sir Isaac Newton, the thumb alone would convince me of the existence of God. This observation is close, very close, but not quite close enough. Australian playwright Alana Valentine goes one crucial step further, one crucial step deeper, until suddenly we catch a glimpse not just of Newton's God still at arms length, but of God closer than the thumb itself.

This is the truth of God always, and but for a baby in a manger we might never have guessed.

*I have often asked you to be in my day
then wonder to glimpse you in a turn of light.
But the thought instead that you are the day.
Are time and place
are the bands of colour that arouse the morning
to see you not like but is.*

*You are this day
and then more
You are this hour
You are this minute
How plush then
each moment of my life becomes.*

*I have often asked you to be in my flesh
then wonder to see you in my arching hand.
But the thought instead that you are my flesh.
Are bone and sinew
are the blood and phlegm that spin within me
to see you not like but is.*

*You are this skin
and then more
You are this muscle
You are this organ
How gracious then each motion of my flesh becomes.*

*I have often asked you to be in my mind
then wonder to know you in a peaceful thought
But the truth instead that you are my mind.
Are emotion and memory
are the ideas and perceptions that entertain hope
to see you not like but is.*

(Alana Valentine, from the play *Savage Grace*)

So stay awake; keep alert. We have no need to go to Bethlehem, for Bethlehem is right under our noses.



Second Sunday of Advent

7 December 2008

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Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

Almost every day I drive past a beauty salon close to where I live, and find myself wondering about its slogan. 'Leave the real world behind', it shouts, 'relax, detox, rejuvenate.' Escapism is what is on offer behind this shop-front, and for all I know it is probably quite popular. Life is hard for all of us some of the time, and hard for large numbers of people most of the time. Now that the 'greed is good' bubble has finally burst, life looks like getting harder still. Anxiety is pretty much the order of the day every day, but at this time of year all the usual stresses and strains are exacerbated by a relentless 'festive season' overlay demanding that we be happy.

That expression, 'festive season', always strikes me as unthinkingly cruel, with its vacuous insistence on celebrating whether or not we have anything to celebrate. How does it land, I wonder, on the broken-hearted parent who comes to Christmas since the death of a child? How does it strike the lonely man spending this Christmas alone after losing his wife of fifty years? What does it do to the worried young couple struggling to pay the mortgage, or to the shattered workers made redundant on Christmas Eve so that they go quickly and quietly without upsetting the other staff too much? These people can't leave the real world behind, and lack the ready cash to relax, detox, and rejuvenate.

Opting out is not an option, but opting in just might be. Surely this is why the Church sets before us some Advent seriousness beneath the froth, offering us the experience of depth below all that shallowness? For the God who came, who comes, and will always come calls us to engagement, not escape. Don't attempt to leave the real world behind, that illusion leaves us even more dissatisfied than we were before. Escaping only takes us down the garden path to nowhere, or, to change the image, leaves us up a well-named creek without a paddle. The fact is that year's end will never be festive just because the advertising industry says it should be, and our troubles do not magically vanish in a frenzy of retail therapy and self-indulgence. Engagement, on the other hand, means being realistic about our situation, facing up to the truth of things, living more fully in the real world – which, after all, is the only world we have. And when we do this, when we stop struggling and look around, when we stop struggling and look within, maybe we will be still enough to glimpse the Light, and feel the Love under-girding everything. Maybe this is all we need do to prepare the way of the Lord, following John the fore-runner in making a highway in the desert for our God.

In the absence of any other evidence, said Sir Isaac Newton, the thumb alone would convince me of the existence of God. Newton wasn't escaping the real world, he was engaging with it patiently and joyfully. So too the Australian playwright Alana Valentine, whose prayer I am using as a sort of mantra this Advent. By engaging fully with the real world, she sees more than Newton's God, who as creator of the thumb is still at arm's length. Alana Valentine sees God in the thumb, 'not like but is', closer to us than

the thumb itself. Here is the truth of God always, God whose proper name is Emmanuel, and but for a baby in a manger we might never have guessed.

*I have often asked you to be in my day
then wonder to glimpse you in a turn of light.
But the thought instead that you are the day.
Are time and place
are the bands of colour that arouse the morning
to see you not like but is.*

*You are this day
and then more
You are this hour
You are this minute
How plush then
each moment of my life becomes.*

*I have often asked you to be in my flesh
then wonder to see you in my arching hand.
But the thought instead that you are my flesh.
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Are emotion and memory
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(Alana Valentine, from the play *Savage Grace*)

Lord, we are not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of your sandals, yet you raise us to the heights, calling us to engagement, immersing us in reality, baptising us in Holy Spirit.



Third Sunday of Advent

14 December 2008

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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28; John 1:6-8, 19-28

The comedian George Burns is credited with this remark: 'The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending; and to have the two as close together as possible.' On some occasions it is very difficult if not impossible for the preacher to be quite that brief, but the aim is always to speak directly and not go on too long.

We are well into the Advent mood by now, enjoying once again the distinctive ethos of this season. We are attentive and alert, on the lookout for the continually adventing God, the God of surprises who came, who comes, who will always come. So when we pray in Jesus' mother tongue maranatha – *O Lord come, we are not asking God to do anything out of character; indeed, we are not asking God to do anything at all; rather, we are praying that we ourselves may be sufficiently awake to notice what God is always doing.*

Today we are John the baptiser, John the forerunner, those who expect to trip over God at every turn. We know that God is not out there or up there or over there, but right here under our very noses. Sunday by Sunday our eyes and ears are being trained to see all that is there to be seen, to hear the divine music to which everything and everyone dances whether they know it or not. As we light the Advent candles and as we gather again and again around the Lord's table, our hearts are being tuned to think and feel as Christ thinks and feels about the world. We are witnesses of the huge mystery many people are too preoccupied or too prosaic or simply too busy to notice. Instead of allowing ourselves to become the centre of attention, we point past ourselves, beyond ourselves, pointing to the true light which enlightens everyone. In a word, with John the forerunner, as John the forerunner, we introduce those around us to One already standing among us, unknown and unrecognised.

Our missionary task, you could say, is arranging introductions. We are not selling door to door, but we are go-betweens - helping people make connections, helping them join up the dots, shuttling between their surface selves and their deepest selves. Christian mission is neither program nor strategy. There is nothing artificial or forced about it. It is a natural, self-authenticating way of living and breathing, a particular stance toward life, a distinctive way of being in the world. Relating to people as people, sensitive to their needs, respecting their human dignity, doing them no harm, we refuse - for God's sake - to treat others as targets or potential recruits or scalps to be gathered.

'If there were no other evidence,' said Sir Isaac Newton said, 'the thumb alone would convince me of the existence of God.' But, of course, there is other evidence, so much evidence that it astonishes us and fills us with awe and leaves us breathless with wonder, and so it is that we become witnesses, those who testify to the truth, speakers for the prosecution.

We are all John the forerunner, voices crying in the wilderness, making a highway for the Lord through the contemporary desert. We point out the Presence all too easily missed, the Beyond-in-the-midst, the Stranger in the crowd, the incognito Redeemer who is already here. And we live this way and speak this way without ever losing that note of surprise, of astonishment, the language of worship.

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But the truth instead that you are my mind.
Are emotion and memory
are the ideas and perceptions that entertain hope
to see you not like but is.*

(Alana Valentine, from the play *Savage Grace*)

John was not the light, and we are not the light.

The Light is in us, indeed the Light is us - and then more.

To this Light we testify, the true Light coming into the world.



Fourth Sunday of Advent

21 December 2008

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2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

Ten thousand men are standing in a park listening to a speaker. 'Sisters', the speaker says to them, 'we are all meant to be mothers of God. For God is always needing to be born. 'How is God born?' they ask. What does the speaker mean? God is born poor, in a stable. God is given birth to by people who let God into their lives and then go out, unafraid. God is born to people whom the world rejects. 'There is no room for you in the inn.' God is born from those people. 'But we are men.' 'How can I give birth to God?' a man asks from the back.

'Listen', says the speaker. 'Listen to the world. Enjoy the beauty. Do not be ashamed to cry. Learn to hug and do not be too quick to give explanations.' 'And what about me?' a burly man says near the front. Be powerful. Use power with honesty. Tell no lies. Know that you are beautiful and that God delights in you. Be there for people. Wait. Men can be good at waiting, as a mother is. God waiting. Like the prodigal father and his prodigal son. Be a person. Do not be pushed around and do not push.

This unlikely scene is from a man called Graham English, a religious education consultant in the Sydney Catholic Education Office, from his book of reflections and prayers *Someone Keeps Sending Me Flowers*. It taps right in to where we are on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, placing a finger on who we are in the Christian economy of redemption. We are all meant to be Mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born. Just as last week we were John the forerunner, making a path for the Lord through the contemporary desert, so today we are Mary of Nazareth greeted by the angel Gabriel with divine courtesy. God comes to us on bended knee, respecting our dignity, reverencing our unique individuality, and says 'Hail, favoured one', 'Greetings, my daughter', 'Greetings, my son.' Greetings, the Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, for you have found favour with God. And behold you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David.

He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. And Mary says, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' And we say, 'How can this be, since we are poor and weak?' And the angel replies, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.' And eventually Mary speaks for us all when she says, 'Here am I, the slave of the Lord, may it be done to me according to your word.'

We start out on the journey of faith hearing the story of Mary and the angel, like all the other great stories in sacred scripture, as a story from long ago about someone else, someone who belongs to another realm, someone exalted and special and intrinsically different. But as we journey on we begin hearing the stories in a new way. It begins to dawn on us that this is our story too, my own story, your own story, for Mary is us and we are Mary. Even in her virginity Mary represents us all, for being a virgin means she has nothing to offer God except her human emptiness. Just so, we are all virgins, coming to God empty-

handed. We are ordinary people waiting to be filled, needing to be overshadowed by the Spirit of life in order to be graceful and fruitful. The only difference between Mary and ourselves is that Mary says 'Yes' to God unreservedly, whereas we hedge our bets, hesitating and prevaricating, fearing self-surrender, thinking servant-hood beneath us.

All through this Advent we have been using as a mantra that great prayer from Alana Valentine's play *Savage Grace*. As we hear it again, be aware that it is Mary now who speaks, Mary who carries the Christ within her body, and we join our voice with her voice for we are all Christ-bearers. Overhear the Mother of God speaking, but hear yourself as well, for every disciple of Christ is truly Mother of God.

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(Alana Valentine, from the play *Savage Grace*)

Hail, favoured one, the Lord is with you.
Here I am, the Lord's slave; may it be done to me according to your word.



Christmass

24 December 2008

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Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 3:4-8a; Luke 2:1-14

Yankel Goldstein, in his late 80's and still gainfully employed as a salesman, has been trying unsuccessfully to sell ribbon to Myer for many years. Just before Christmas he makes another attempt to speak to the anti-Semitic buyer. "Goldstein," the buyer says, "you've been trying to sell me ribbon for at least 25 years. Now is your chance: send me enough yellow ribbon to reach from the tip of your nose, to the tip of your penis." Three days later, four tractor-trailers full of yellow ribbon drive up to the Myer receiving dock. The ribbon buyer goes ballistic. He calls Goldstein and yells, "What's going on??? I ordered enough ribbon to reach from the tip of your nose to the tip of your penis, and you send me four truck loads of the stuff." Goldstein replies calmly, "The tip of my penis is in Poland."

I suppose I should have kept that story for next Sunday's feast of Christ's naming and circumcision, but I couldn't resist using it tonight. For one thing, Christmas is a time for happiness and laughter, and for another thing, the joke makes the obvious but all too often overlooked point that the baby whose birth we celebrate tonight is a Jewish baby. Born in an outpost of the Roman Empire, off in the back-blocks, to parents of doubtful respectability, surrounded by fringe-dwellers and reprobates such as shepherds, Jesus begins his life in total obscurity. Forget for a moment the angels and the heavenly chorus singing their heads off - for these frills are only Luke's way of saying God is mixed up somehow in the event - and the sheer ordinariness of this birth is overwhelming. And for all Luke's window-dressing, he actually does nothing to disguise this truth. Indeed, he goes to considerable lengths to state the facts quite baldly.

First, this is a real birth, not some fairy-tale. It can be dated quite precisely: it happens when Augustus is Emperor of Rome and Quirinius is Governor of Syria. Secondly, it happens in humble circumstances, away from home, with no proper accommodation or assistance, and while the child is wrapped tightly in the traditional manner from head to toe in strips of cloth to protect his fragile limbs from harm, his improvised bedding is an animal's feeding trough.

The whole thing could hardly be more pitiful or more prosaic. It is only because we have surrounded it with tinsel and twinkling lights that this impoverished and positively dangerous scene appears to sparkle, but there is nothing at all special about the original sign.

"This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Well, so what? What sort of crummy sign is this? It happens every day, and we've all seen it at one time or another. Yet what more do we think we want; what more could there possibly be? The baby in the manger shows us that the birth of Love with a capital L, the surfacing among us of that Love which moves the earth and the other stars, is no more and no less miraculous than any other birth. It happens here at this particular

moment in human history in an unexpected place and entirely without fanfare; indeed, it happens continually all over the place without fanfare. The birth of baby Jesus, like the birth of every other baby, offers us all a brand new start, a fresh beginning, the chance of a better world. This birth and every birth is a poised moment, a moment when we stand together on the threshold of promise, a moment of opportunity, a moment of hope for the future.

Justice Michael Kirby, soon to retire from the High Court of Australia, startled a batch of commerce and law graduates last week when Griffith University gave him an honorary doctorate. First, he said something God might well have said that first Christmas: "In life, never be predictable. It's so uncool." Then, passing up a ready-made opportunity to talk about tax and business law, Justice Kirby shared with them what he called a most precious jewel. "I refer to love. Love for one another. Love for our community. Love for others everywhere in the world. Love transcends even scholarship, cleverness and university degrees. It is greater than pride and wealth. It endures when worldly vanities fade. I have always thought that the essential underpinning of fundamental human rights is love. They reflect empathy for fellow human beings. Feeling pain for the refugee; for the victim of war; for the prisoner deprived of the vote; for the child dying of cholera in Zimbabwe." He said Australians had not loved women or indigenous or Asian or gay people in the past, but we were getting better.

It sounds so simple, so ridiculously simple, but Christmas shows us how simple things matter most, and demonstrates how human weakness and vulnerability are in the end stronger than brute power and force. As we light our Christmas candles, the Jewish side of the family is lighting the candles of Hannukkah, rejoicing in the victory of good over evil, celebrating the triumph of light over darkness. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks offers this observation – "The two greatest tyrannies of the 20th century, Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, were thought by their followers to be invulnerable. The Third Reich would last a 1,000 years. The Soviet Union would transform the very terms of history itself. Today they are gone. The Jewish people, tiny, vulnerable, lacerated, having stood face to face with the angel of death, still survives, and prays, and gives thanks to God. Somehow faith outlines every attempt to destroy it. Its symbol is not the fierce fire that burns synagogues and sacred scrolls and murdered lives. It is the fragile flame we, together with our children and grandchildren, light in our homes, singing God's story, sustained by our hope."

An angel of the Lord stood before a bunch of shepherds and said, "This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace." www.joondalupanglican.com



The Naming & Circumcision of Jesus

28 December 2007
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Numbers 6:22-27; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 2:15-21

Every Jewish baby boy is circumcised on the eighth day, grafted physically into God's covenant with Israel, incorporated before he can know anything about it into his ancient heritage, into his glorious birth-right, initiated into a living relationship with the source of all life and love. So Jesus today is inducted into the process of becoming truly human in a particular human community, part of a particular faith, a particular world view.

We Christians, of course, do the same thing a little differently. We use water and oil and light, and the ceremony is not restricted only to little boys. For us, baptism is the beginning of the journey, the first step on the long journey of making a particular kind of human being, what we call a 'Christlike' or 'christened' human being.

Today's baptism, in other words, is a discrete event, a once-off happening, never to be repeated, whereas 'christening' is a lengthy process; indeed, a lifelong process of growing into the mystery and growing up within the mystery. It doesn't happen automatically or magically or casually. Indeed, it may never happen at all. In the end we all choose to embrace or reject what has already been done for us. In the end it all becomes a matter of degrees, a matter of personal intention, of freely chosen discipline – and it depends more than we can ever know on the company we keep.

Principally, of course, becoming Christlike, being 'christened', swings on keeping close to Christ, and this means being part of his living body the Church. We do this by devotion to Christ's bread-body at the eucharistic table, and we do it as members of his breathing-body who gather again and again and again around the table. This means living in a community where we have no say about who our sisters and brothers might be, living in a community where we don't always get our own way, where we learn the art of compromise - to accommodate the needs of people very different to us. As we see the bread broken continually, only ever receiving a small fragment of the whole, we learn about belonging, taking our place gracefully in a larger company, discovering our identity in communion with fellow travellers.

This is not just about being part of this little local church, but finding our feet as well in the great Church of the ages – the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of the creeds. Our companions are not simply those who sit beside us week by week. We walk hand in hand with all the faithful, all the doctors and saints, both the living and the living dead, walking alongside everyone who has ever sought truth and justice and mercy and peace, alongside everyone who takes up the cross and follows Christ – whoever they are and wherever they may be. In this spacious household, in this large room, we know ourselves accepted and forgiven and endlessly loved in all our frailty and promise. Here in this safe place we explore together the mystery of faith, hearing the scriptures together, studying the sacred text together, living out the gospel together, all the while pooling our experience of God's goodness.

On the day of his circumcision, Jesus received his name – a Hebrew name which means 'God saves.' On this day of her baptism, Hannah is also named – she is given another Hebrew name, this one meaning

'graced' or 'favoured' or 'chosen' by God. Notice where the initiative lies – none of these things can she do for herself, all these qualities are gifts of the Giver. Like the Baby of Bethlehem, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in the manger, all the best things are pure gift, originating in God's loving heart.

All that is down to Hannah as a result of her baptism, and all that is down to us as a result of our own baptism, is how we respond.



The Epiphany of the Lord

4 January 2009

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Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

The other evening, just after dark, standing on my balcony, I noticed a single brilliant star in the western sky, and directly under it the crescent moon. It was an arresting sight to say the least, one of those unexpected moments of pure poetry. At this time of year, of course, we are particularly aware of stars thanks to Matthew's story of the magi, those strange exotic foreigners who follow a star all the way to Bethlehem. This star too is pure poetry. We are not to waste our time wondering if the story is literally true, troubling ourselves over questions about whether or not stars can really behave in the way Matthew indicates. This star hanging in the night sky is intended to add to our sense of mystery, evoking that primal sense of wonder when we stand in awe of the divine presence in everyone and everything. The star of Bethlehem is pure poetry, a wondrous sign that God's whole creation is pure poetry; a sign too that our own lives can be narrative poems written by way of response to the God who breathes us and all things into being. For beneath all the extravagant detail, all the elaborate embroidery, today's gospel like all the Christmas stories, is yet another tale of divine giving and human responding. God gives the brilliant star which fills the magi with such joy, and they in turn offer their gifts at the manger throne: gold for the new-born king, myrrh for the saviour who suffers and dies, and incense for the Lord who alone may be worshipped and adored.

It is a beautiful story as Matthew tells it, and immensely popular, but what if we tweak it a bit? Here, then, is the same story as it was staged in a struggling black township in the final years of apartheid South Africa. After the wise men have come and gone, three more strange characters arrive on the scene. One is dressed in rags, hobbling along with the aid of a stick. The second is naked except for a tattered pair of shorts, and shackled in chains. The third has a whitened face, and wears an unkempt grey wig with an Afro shirt. As they approach, a chorus of men and women cry out, "Close the door, Joseph, they are thieves and vagabonds coming to steal all we have." But Joseph says, "Everyone has a right to this Child – the poor, the rich, the unhappy, the untrustworthy. We cannot keep this Child to ourselves. Let them enter."

The men enter and stand staring at the Child. Joseph picks up the gifts the magi left. To the first strange man he says, "You are poor: take this gold, buy what you need. We will not go hungry." To the second he says, "You are in chains, and I don't know how to release you. Take this myrrh, it will heal the wounds on your wrists and ankles." To the third he says, "Your mind is in anguish. I cannot heal you. Maybe the aroma of this incense will soothe your troubled soul."

Then the first man speaks to Joseph: "Do not give me this gift. Anyone who finds me with this gold will think I've stolen it. And sadly, in a few years, this Child will be called a criminal too." The second man says, "Do not give me this ointment. Keep it for the Child. One day he will be wearing chains like these." The third man says, "In the country of my mind there is no God. Let the Child keep the incense. He will lose faith in his Father too."

Then Mary and Joseph cover their faces, as the strangers address the Child: "Little one, you are not from the land of gold and incense. You belong to the country of want and disease. You belong to our world. Let us share our things with you." And the first man takes off his ragged shirt: "Take these rags, one day you will need them when they tear the garments off your back and you walk naked." The second man says, "When I remove these chains I will lay them at your side. One day you will wear them, and then you will really know the pain of humanity." The third man says, "I give you my depression, my loss of faith in God and in everything. I can carry it all no longer. Carry my grief and loss with your own."

Slowly, the three men walk back into the night. "But the darkness was different", says one outside observer. "Something had happened in the stable. Their blind pain was diminishing. There had been a kind of epiphany. They were noticing the stars now."

Today in baptism we bring three young children – Grace, Dylan, and Siobhan – to this unlikely place of enlightenment, to the manger bed, to the Child with his mother Mary, and together with all who arrived ahead of us we do him homage. It sounds pretty grand, this homage, something reserved for royal courts and palaces, but in fact it can happen almost anywhere. An old priest who spent himself establishing a famous parish in Alaska tells the story of a young boy who went with him one day for a walk into the Alaskan wilderness. As they stood on a high hill looking over the vast emptiness of what lay below them, the boy suddenly said, "Father, do you see it?" "See what?" said the priest. "The glory, Father, the glory – its everywhere!"

There in that vision of what is we have the catholic faith. Following Christ is all about learning to see again, learning to recognise who is beckoning us at every turn of the road.

"There, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy."

For the black South African take on the visit of the magi, I gratefully acknowledge an article in The Tablet, Christmas Double Issue, 20/27 December 2008 p.4, by Fr Daniel O'Leary, "Shock Waves of Bethlehlehem"



The Baptism of the Lord

11 January 2009
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Genesis 1:1-15; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

These Sundays following Christmas are opportunities to explore the identity of the baby born at Bethlehem.

First, there is the Naming and Circumcision, a story from Luke's gospel, underlining the truth that Jesus comes not as a bolt from the blue but emerges within Judaism.

On the day of his Circumcision he is grafted into the enduring covenant with God's chosen people in precisely the same way every other Jewish baby boy is initiated, and given a Hebrew name which means 'God saves.'

The shepherds come to Bethlehem, where, Luke tells us, 'they found the child with Mary his mother' - a seemingly insignificant detail, which turns out to be essential - Mary is deliberately included because Jewishness is inherited through the mother.

We are never to forget that Jesus is a Jew.

Secondly, there is the Epiphany, with Matthew's story of the visit of the wise men, the magi from the East.

It is always assumed there were three of them, but in fact Matthew never says so; he mentions three gifts - gold, incense, and myrrh - but nowhere says each has its own bearer.

These magi, of course, are to say the least mysterious, and not just in number.

We know very little about them, except that they are foreigners.

Everyone else in the Christmas story is Jewish, but this child is not limited to Judaism.

So these non-Jews, these Gentiles, follow their own star.

They know nothing of the Hebrew prophets, and share none of the Jewish longing for a messiah to deliver God's people from oppression.

The magi ask directions only when they are very close to their journey's end, as if their Navman suddenly conks out and they have to turn to scripture to get their bearings again.

But in fact the star is much more knowing, for the Jewish scripture scholars can only tell them the name of the expected birth-place, while the star takes the magi straight to Bethlehem, as if the street and house number are somehow programmed into it.

As Matthew has it, the star rather than the bible eventually says, in effect, 'destination on the left!'

And after they have done homage to the infant king, the magi disappear as mysteriously as they have come, and we never hear of them again.

Did they go back home and build a church, or did they go back to their own religion and live it somewhat better they had before?

We don't know, because what happens to them is no part of Matthew's purpose: he simply wants to highlight the truth that the light in this baby is for all the world's dark places, it is for all human beings regardless of colour or race or religion, Jesus comes to enlighten absolutely everyone.

Thirdly, on this day the Child of last week, now suddenly a fully grown man, is baptised by John in the Jordan.

To underscore the Naming and Circumcision and then the Epiphany, the church takes this third story from Mark, for here we have Jesus himself making it plain that he stands shoulder-to-shoulder in solidarity with us, that nothing human is foreign to God, that human hopes and fears matter to God, that 'religion' includes every aspect of real life - from the basic necessities like food and clothing, to education and health care, to honest banking practices and care of the environment.

So today, on this third staging post on our journey into the truth of the Wordmade-flesh, God declares 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.'

You are my Son, you are the apple of my eye, I endorse you as my legate, my ambassador, my representative standing in my place.

You Jesus, not you John, not this one or that one, but you Jesus, you are my Son, you are the very embodiment of my love, you are my love fleshed-out for all to see.

The English priest and commentator, Giles Fraser, suggests that one consequence of all this, one consequence of these and all our other explorations into the reality of God-in-the-flesh, is that we have active and functioning phoniness-detectors.

He means we must always be on the look-out to sieve our religious imaginations for self-delusion, that we should be able to navigate between good and bad religion, away from beliefs which are destructive and cruel toward belief that is life-giving and generous.

It also means that there can be no truly adult expression of faith apart from a well-oiled scepticism – active and functioning every single day.

Yes, we are invited to be childlike, to trust God with our lives; but we are not asked to be childish or credulous.

Being faithful and hopeful and loving, cultivating the virtues of patience and forgiveness and compassion, has got nothing whatever to do with being dumbly naïve.

The heart of Christianity is the conviction that the divine is also human – God is a human child in Bethlehem, an adult standing today in the Jordan, someone at last stretched out on a cross - and this

locates religion in the everyday world where people laugh and bleed, in the grubby world of jobs and mortgages, of unemployment and interest-rates, of war and peace.

There is nothing theoretical or escapist about our faith; here, supremely, God gets real.

It follows that here, supremely, we get real as well.

Here the heavens are torn apart, as the Spirit, like a dove, descends on us all.



Second Sunday after Epiphany

18 January 2009

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Genesis 28:10-17; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

Some years back I came upon a very odd meditation on the Nathanael of today's gospel by a quite well known American priest. She rather cleverly presented him as a sort of bigoted or presumptuous teenager, talking his silly head off before he thinks, making wise-cracks like "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" No doubt this made for an entertaining sermon, but it is not just wide of the mark, it is positively dangerous. To get side-tracked for whatever reason into speculating about Nathanael's adolescent psychology, spinning imaginative webs in thin air, might be an amusing ploy, but it is seriously to miss the point of John's story.

For the question Nathanael poses is not as it sounds, a disparagement of Jesus' small-town origins. On the contrary, it springs directly from Nathanael's patient learning as a devout student of sacred scripture. Nathanael is right to question whether Jesus can be the one 'about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote', for Nazareth is never mentioned in the Hebrew bible by Moses or anyone else. The faithful Israelite knows scripture and looks for its proper fulfilment. This is why Jesus says of him, 'Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.'

So, Nathanael is honest, and Nathanael hesitates, and this is wise. After all, he cannot easily agree with Philip's gushing claims. His question is not flippant, not sarcastic, but genuine and thoughtful: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" In other words, how can something so completely unlikely happen? How can the Messiah, the Christ, the hoped-for deliverer of God's chosen people appear as it were from nowhere at all, from somewhere without any pedigree, without any distinction? These are good questions, but then learned and cautious Nathanael unexpectedly goes one crucial step further, for in spite of his reservations he is nevertheless willing to 'come and see'. Nathanael, in other words, is open to whatever God may do. He knows his bible, but he has not turned ink on paper into an idol. Yes, the ways of God can be discerned in and through sacred scripture, but God is not exhausted or bound by scripture, never bound by our interpretation of the text, however orthodox this may appear to be. Indeed, God is always doing a new thing; indeed, God is always full of surprises, and not least for the pious who have a peculiar tendency to think we know all about God.

So what God looks for in us is never dry knowledge; what God looks for in us is living, trusting faith - the sort of faith which depends on knowing scripture and reverencing tradition, fully alive to salvation history, yet wide open to the future in a genuine spirit of adventure.

So Nathanael and those like him, so Nathanael and all of us, are never to take anything on the say-so of others, no matter how apparently holy. Nathanael and all of us are always being invited to 'come and see' for ourselves - only to find when we do begin to see that we have already been seen; only to find when we begin really to know God, that we are already known. Jesus sees Nathanael coming and says to his companions, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.' 'Where did you get to know me?' 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Seeing is believing, but the reverse is also true: believing is seeing.

It is as if we have had our eyes shut all this time and have just now woken up – like Nathanael before us, and like Jacob before him. Jacob saw a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and the angels of God ascending and descending on it. Nathanael is promised a similar vision, for he (and we) will see the ladder as Jesus himself, Jesus crucified between earth and heaven. 'Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the human Son.' Now stop long enough to notice something strange about this, a tiny strangely telling detail. Notice how these angels first ascend the ladder and only then come back down again. We might have expected it to be the other way around, but we would be wrong. The angelic traffic begins on earth with us, they begin right here beside us, they are to be found even in Nazareth - or in Joondalup or Soweto or Harare or Gaza City.

All through Christmas-Epiphany we have been pondering the true identity of the Baby of Bethlehem, and this pondering goes on as long as we go on. Little by little we come to see that Jesus is not only the Son of God, the King of Israel, as Nathanael confesses; Jesus is the house of God, the tabernacle and temple, God's dwelling place among us, God whose proper name is both the unutterable I AM who I AM, yet at the same time Emmanuel, God-with-us. In other words, God is not far away, but near at hand - nearer indeed than we ever dare to believe. To 'come and see' this truth changes absolutely everything, for if God is mixed up in every last detail of life as we know it, how can we possibly live just for ourselves a moment longer?



Third Sunday after Epiphany

25 January 2009

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Jonah 3:1-10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

As we begin our 2009 journey through Mark's gospel, I believe it is essential to pay close attention to the sacred text, never expecting it to yield its truth without something of a struggle.

Today, only a small struggle is involved, arising from the text, but taking place within us, a struggle of the imagination. In verses 18 and 20 of his first chapter, Mark begins using his favourite word, the word 'immediately'. Jesus calls Simon and his brother Andrew, he tells us, 'and *immediately* leaving their nets they followed him'. Then Jesus comes upon James and John, the sons of Zebedee, 'and *immediately* he called them, and leaving their father in the boat with the hired servants they departed after him'.

This all sounds extraordinarily easy, not to say unbelievable. Apparently, when Jesus strolls by, when Jesus calls, everyone drops everything, and some drop everyone! So Simon and Andrew suddenly abandon their fishing business, while James and John break all the commands of God and drop like a hot stone their poor old father, leaving him sitting stunned in the boat! In other words, 'immediately' really means 'immediately'; Mark means immediately without any qualification at all.

But is this descriptive of what actually happened that day by the lake? Is it Mark faithfully recording a moment in history which has little if anything to do with us, or is he trying to tell us something we need to know, a truth we need to grasp about all Christian discipleship? Is he interested in reporting a striking detail of what it was like once upon a time, or is he opening our eyes to something crucial about our own following of Jesus in the here and now? Does 'immediately' really mean without any delay whatsoever, or is 'immediately' Mark's code word for underscoring the urgency of God's call on our lives, insisting that we immediately rearrange our priorities so that love and service trump selfishness and hardness of heart?

Raising such rhetorical questions, of course, suggests that each and every one of us needs to decide where we stand. When the kingdom of God comes near, do we re-orient our lives, or do we just plod along as before? Do we encounter Christ each and every day as a shock to the system as well as the solid rock at the heart of everything, challenge as well as comfort, or have we long since tamed the lion of Judah into a domestic pussy cat? Do we ask what God will have us do at each one of life's turning points, or is so-called common sense our only teacher?

Not only does Mark keep saying 'immediately', but he also underlines it with another word today. This second word is the word 'leaving'. 'And immediately leaving their nets they followed him'. 'And immediately he called them, and leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, they followed after him'. In other words, repentance is costly, it demands sacrifice, it requires renunciation. Christian discipleship is about letting go of the past, and looking to the future. At bottom, Christian discipleship is all about falling in love, and as with all real love this one involves giving up and giving away, surrendering what we think we own so that God can shower us with gifts we've never even dreamt of before.

Dying in order to live sounds positively crazy to us - dangerous, foolhardy, ungrateful, even disloyal. We usually lack the imagination necessary to venture beyond our comfort zones into the unknown. We are temperamentally more inclined to be settlers than pioneers, preferring the tried and true to what is yet to be. But Christ comes along to disturb our dust, preaching the big idea, God's brand new thing. 'The time has been fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news'. The choice is before us: do we go with Christ wherever he leads us, or are we content to be left behind?



Third Sunday before Lent

8 February 2009
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Isaiah 40:21-31; 1 Corinthians 9:16-39; Mark 1:21-39

The reason for that rather lengthy gospel is that I've included last Sunday's gospel as well. Due to the fact that we were celebrating Candlemass, we missed the start of Jesus' ministry, and we really can't afford to do that. We need the beginning if we are to make sense of what happens later, for Mark opens his story as he means to go on. So, what is the first thing Jesus does? Well, like any good Jew, he goes to synagogue on the Sabbath day. He goes there to learn, to encounter God in the faithful community, to worship and to teach. In addition to all this, right from the word go, we also see that he is concerned to cast out demons and heal the sick.

Now perhaps we are a bit inclined to set these demons to one side; after all, we simply don't believe in demons any longer. We side-step the little blighters, thinking Mark a bit naïve, sticking within our comfort zone where the Lord heals the sick. But even with these healings we often think in terms of epilepsy being cured, or perhaps some emotional deficit or psychological disorder being put right. This, however, is to do the text some violence, for Mark means real physical healing, just as he means actual demons. Jesus is assaulted by a host of unclean spirits in this first gospel, unclean spirits who need to be overcome, demons who need to be exorcised and cast out. Matthew and Luke will cut these demons down to size and dispense with most of the exorcism stories, while John will get rid of them altogether, but Mark's text is positively crawling with them.

Now the key to what is going on here comes down the track a little bit in chapter three, where the scribes (who should be teaching the truth about God but are not) accuse Jesus of casting out demons by Beelzebul. At this point he asks the rhetorical question, 'How can Satan cast out Satan?', and goes on to tell a little parable – 'No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first binding the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.' So Jesus is coming to plunder the house. He is the one who will break into our lives, he is the one who will bind the strong man currently in possession, only to take possession himself.

If those little demons worried our contemporary sensibilities, this image of Jesus the invader probably shocks us more. No gentle Jesus meek and mild for Mark. Mark's take on the coming of the kingdom, the coming of God's reign and rule, involves open warfare between one strong man and an even stronger man. Immediately, the battle is on, and by sprinkling the text with a few more 'immediatlys' the urgency of what is at stake is deliberately underscored. There is absolutely no time to waste, so here we have 'a new teaching – a new teaching with authority!', and demons obey this teacher's voice. In other words, the children of the father of lies recognise the truth-teller; the unclean instantly know holiness when they meet it. 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be quiet, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.' Note the odd mish-mash of individual and plural pronouns: evil is one and evil is many, and evil is real and personal and dangerous and destructive and ultimately deadly.

Now let me assure you that I still don't believe in demons or Beelzebul or Satan or the Devil in quite the same way as Mark seems to do. Twenty centuries separating us make that quite impossible. Mark's world and our world are light-years apart. Yet I can unequivocally attest to the reality of evil. What is happening in Zimbabwe is evil. What is happening in Gaza is evil. Evil happens to each and every one of us at various times in our lives, and we know in our heart of hearts that we have been and can be active agents of evil ourselves – yes and, oh, so easily! Evil is all around us and within us, and evil is always and everywhere without exception real and personal and dangerous and destructive and ultimately deadly. We might shy away from demons, but I don't think we fully shy away from the demonic – not if we are honest, not if we are paying attention, not if we are keeping company with the truth-teller.

So if I was asked what today's strange and somewhat lurid gospel offers us, I wouldn't hesitate for a moment: in a word, it offers us confidence. Faced with all kinds of evil as we are, we gather here at the Lord's table to be strengthened by the Christ, to listen to the truth-teller, who alone teaches with authority, who alone offers us authenticity. Deliver us from evil, we pray, and the Holy One of God does deliver us from evil – taking away our fears, replacing fear with faith; overcoming anxiety, swallowing up our anxieties in hope; conquering the ancient hatreds (hatred of ourselves and hatred of each other), defeating hatred with love. Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching and casting out demons, Mark tells us, and if we go with him you and I can do the same.



CANDLEMASS

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple

2 February 2009
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Malachi 3:1-4; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

On Friday afternoon I went to see the newly-released movie about the life and times of Harvey Milk. Harvey Bernard Milk was born in New York on 22 May 1930 and was murdered in San Francisco on 27 November 1978. He was the first openly gay person elected to public office in the United States. Harvey Milk was by no means a professional politician. He ran for San Francisco city council because he felt ordinary people were being pushed aside by the powerful and the rich. 'It takes no money to respect the individual', he said. 'People are more important than roads.'

In office he fought consistently for human rights, especially for those without a public voice – labourers, the elderly, racial minorities, and sexual minorities. He was what we would call a visionary, someone who really believed justice and freedom and peace were achievable. Harvey Milk was someone who believed in the light, but he was certainly not blind to the forces of darkness. On the day of his election he sat by himself and tape-recorded his last testament, convinced he would probably die young and die violently. Sure enough, just eleven months later he was shot five times at close range by another politician, infuriated by Harvey Milk's honesty and integrity. Along the way there had been many noisy protests, but that night, over 40,000 people – women and men, young and old, black and white, straight and gay – marched silently on City Hall with lighted candles in their hands, a vast crowd united in pain and in love. The streets of the city became a river of light, as all sorts of people said their own 'Yes' to the struggle, yet all you could hear were shuffling feet.

In our own small icon, Harvey Milk is shown as a martyr, holding a candle himself, keeping vigil for ever for all the oppressed peoples of our world. He wears a black armband with a pink triangle - the infamous Nazi brand for identifying homosexuals. Six million Jews perished in the Holocaust, but upwards of 100,000 homosexual men were also imprisoned, tortured, and murdered. The Nazis were not particularly interested in homosexual women, believing they were still good for breeding the 'master race', but many lesbians also suffered. These days, the pink triangle represents anyone victimised because of their sexuality, and even as homophobia dies away the number of victims grows each year. For nothing so enrages the beast as the demand that it give up its prey, and yet for all its fury the beast cannot possibly win.

Every speech Harvey Milk gave began with exactly the same words, 'My name is Harvey Milk, and I'm here to recruit you.' It became his signature: I am here to recruit you: stop hiding, stop pretending, stop apologising, come out and be yourself. In his own suffering he identified profoundly with others in their suffering, so becoming in a sense their priest – a side of him the movie brings out very well.

Now there is, of course, something strangely Christlike about this. My name is Jesus, and I'm here to recruit you. And while this recruiting is not to implement any set program, it is to implement the generic program which is human rights, so it becomes very concrete and specific indeed. I am the Lord, and I am here to recruit you as human beings. So live together humanly, live humanely day by day, knowing that whatever you do to the least of these sisters and brothers of mine, you do to me. Come with me, be light-bearers with me in all the dark places, carry the light of revelation, carry to all in need the light of hope. The final words of Harvey Milk's testament are, 'You gotta give them hope', and his enduring legacy is that he spent his life doing just that as best he could.

Forty days after Christmass, forty days after Light is born in a stable, Luke tells us the Child grew and became strong, that he was filled with wisdom, that the favour of God was upon him. So it can be with us, as God's work is done through us, as we carry the Light in our hearts, following faithfully the Way, spending ourselves in the service of Truth. This is the real Candlemass, for what we do in church today is no more than a rehearsal for who we are to be and what we are to do out there.



Second Sunday before Lent

15 February 2009

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2 Kings 5:1-14; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45

When we prayed last Sunday for those who had lost their lives overnight in the fierce Victorian bushfires, we really had no idea. Over 200 people dead, over 7000 people homeless, whole towns wiped off the map, whole towns listed as crime scenes, refrigerated lorries serving as temporary morgues. Shock, grief, frustration, fear, the agony of knowing but not knowing. For most of us this horror comes no closer than the television screen; what it is really like up close is beyond our imagining. We do, nevertheless, come here again today with heavy hearts, terribly sad about what has happened, our own anxieties surfacing with every terrible image we see, emotions raw from every heart-breaking story we hear.

At first sight, however, it might not look like there is much for us here in terms of clarity or comfort. At first sight, the gospel story of Jesus cleansing a leper seems light-years away from where we have all been this week and where we are sure to be for a very long time yet. That is certainly how I felt when I opened today's gospel. Frankly, it seemed to me to be hopelessly wide of the mark, hopelessly irrelevant. There is no word for us here, I thought, nothing at all to address us where we are, nothing pertinent to what we are feeling. It was only as I looked again, as I looked at the text a bit more closely, as I listened a little more carefully, that I began to think maybe this strange little story might not be so foreign after all.

Faced with a leper begging to be cleansed, Mark tells us that Jesus is moved with compassion, churned up inside, agitated. The Greek word is very, very strong, and very strongly physical. It actually means that Jesus' guts shift, that deep down inside his innards turn over with empathy, that he feels pity in his very bowels. But not all ancient manuscripts of the Mark's gospel use the word compassion. Some sources say he is moved with anger. And when you stop to think about it, this figures. For anger and compassion are not so far removed. Indeed, anger and compassion often enough are two sides of the same coin. There has been a lot of anger and compassion floating around this week – anger that so much tragedy can happen so quickly, anger that so much destruction can come so terrifyingly out of nowhere and wreak such havoc, white hot anger alternating with gut-wrenching compassion for the victims, feeling for and feeling with those whose lives are lost and those whose lives are shattered.

Not that this is the only place where today's gospel touches us in places we can recognise, because of course what Jesus does in cleansing a leper is to bring an outcast back into the heart of the human community. A leper in first century Palestine is, by definition, someone pushed to the fringes, forced to live on the margins of society, homeless, forced to exist without the company of family and friends in frightening isolation. So if this story is about anything at all, it is about the fact that we are made by Love for love, that we are all made for each other, that we cannot live apart from each other. And if this week

has shown us anything, surely it has shown us the power of companionship, demonstrating our absolute need of each other in the face of disaster, revealing the strength of community still available to us in what very often appears to be an atomised society and a hopelessly divided world.

For all our differences, it is still true that what unites us is more than what divides us. We see it in what the Prime Minister has called 'the rolling miracle' – the rolling miracle of volunteers, emergency services, churches, who without being summoned or organised simply appear out of thin air and get down to work. We see it in the fact that \$30 million was contributed to the Red Cross just in the first forty-eight hours; I've lost track of it now, and some of us are only just getting around to contributing. We see it in those providing shelter and meals and clothing and counselling, in those offering toys and entertainment and care for traumatised children. We see it in doctors and nurses and social workers and psychiatrists and chaplains and police, and all the rest. We see it in people from every corner of this land, even those up to their necks in water in far north Queensland, as well as beyond these shores as other countries pledge solidarity with us in our time of trial.

This, of course, is where the real healing happens. Jesus heals a leper immediately, but the real healing is never that quick; it is carried forward and completed in community. God touches us and heals us as we touch and heal one another, as we embrace one another physically, as we welcome one another emotionally, as we care for one another in every tiny detail. A leper comes to Jesus begging him, and kneeling he says to him, 'If you chose, you can make me clean.' Moved with anger, moved with compassion, Jesus stretches out his hand and touches him, and says to him, 'I do choose ...' Jesus chooses, God chooses, but we must choose as well.



Last Sunday before Lent

22 February 2009

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2 Kings 2:1-12; 2 Corinthians 4:3-12; Mark 9:2-9

I find it hard to remember what it is like to be twenty-five. That is how old I was when, thirty years ago this past week, I walked into St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne for ordination to the priesthood. Who on earth did I think I was? What on earth did I imagine I was doing? Where on earth did I imagine this would take me?

It is impossible, of course, to replace now with then, today with yesterday, but if I'm honest I'd have to say that I'm pretty sure my understandings and motives and dreams were as mixed up then as they are still. If I dare to be a bit more honest still, I guess I'd also have to admit that I was a bit of a dreamer, a somewhat romantic personality, and certainly attracted by the glamour. Some are converted by the beauty of holiness, but I have never disguised the fact that I was converted by the holiness of beauty!

Do such admissions make me shallow? Maybe they do, and looking back a good deal seems fanciful or even absurd at this distance, at least with the exception of the holiness of beauty. I stick with the holiness of beauty because I must. First, I stick with it because it is true, because my heart was touched as a teenager by beauty, by holy beauty, and particularly the holy beauty of liturgical worship. Secondly, I stick with it because this beauty has only widened and deepened in all directions and become more self-evidently holy with the passing of time. When I say widened and deepened in all directions, I mean to include all sorts and sundries, most of which seem to be about as far removed from what happens in the sanctuary as it is possible to be. But if I have come to know anything, it is that this seeming disjunction is fundamentally misleading, that liturgy and life in fact belong together and cannot do without each other even when we are too blind to see. So I would describe my journey as an eye-opener, and I want to share with you a few other things I have discovered along the way.

I started out convinced that a priest is primarily teacher, pastor, and minister of the sacraments. 'You are not ordained as religious journalists to pontificate on every subject under the sun', one of my own teachers used to say, 'tell people about God.' Well, I did have things to teach even at twenty-five, but I quickly discovered I had everything to learn. I had some book knowledge to be sure, but I was too young to know how little I knew, and I have been discovering that ever since. The longer we live and the more we learn, the more we realise how little we understand, how much remains mystery. I am more grateful than I can say for the patience and understanding and nurture and sometimes encouragement and sometimes correction of those who listened when I spoke of God, but who already knew God far better. I was sent to teach and authorised to teach, but in the teaching I have been taught and taught again, and in parish after parish, and year after year.

Not that there is any teaching known in Anglican tradition apart from pastoral care - the intimate sharing in people's lives which makes any real teaching possible. The Book of Common Prayer 1662, still in use in

1979, makes the ordaining bishop's words sound a bit quaint – 'Receive the Holy Ghost for the office and work of a priest in the Church of God now committed unto thee by the imposition of our hands; whose sins thou doest forgive they are forgiven, whose sins thou doest retain they are retained ...' Listening, walking alongside, consolidating and releasing, engaged in the business of letting go and letting be – this is who the pastor is and this is what the pastor does. I am conscious that by grace I have managed many times to be and to do what was possible; at other times it has been beyond me. I am also conscious that whatever I give is little enough by comparison with what I receive.

All this is a way of saying that there is no pasturing or teaching apart from the living-breathing-acting Body of Christ, the eucharistic community. 'Whose sins thou doest forgive they are forgiven, whose sins thou doest retain, and be thou a faithful dispenser of the word of God and of his holy sacraments.' Pre-eminently, the priest is to be a sacramental person, what some have called a walking sacrament, a focus or prism of Christ's Spirit in the Church, representing God to the people and the people to God, for the essence of priesthood is that to and fro between earth and heaven. This means there is no better way for me to mark thirty years of priesthood than by standing at the font as we baptise Logan today, than by breaking the bread and blessing the cup as one hungry family we gather around the Lord's table.

Sunday 18 February 1979 was certainly a transfiguring moment for me, but only in the same way that today is a transfiguring moment for Logan, in the same way that every Eucharist is a transfiguring moment for us all. Open your eyes, look around, for we stand together today on the holy mountain, awed by the dazzling glory in Christ, flanked by Moses and Elijah, Peter, James and John beside us, caught up in the great cloud of witnesses no one can number. Not that this is the full Christian vision by any means, for off in the distance we can just about see a lesser hill, no more than a rubbish dump really, a place of execution outside the city wall. Planted there is the cross which alone is our sign, and nothing makes sense until the Son of Man is risen from the dead.



Ash Wednesday

FIRST DAY OF LENT

25 February 2009

Father David Wood
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Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Twenty years or so back I led a parish pilgrimage to the Holy Land. For two weeks we were based at St George's College in Jerusalem beside our cathedral there, venturing out each day on trips to the holy places. Palestine is a small country, so this is easily done. It also meant that each day could begin before breakfast with the quiet cathedral Eucharist, an essential factor in us remaining pilgrims rather than tourists. However early I arrived in the cathedral, the dean was always there ahead of us, altar prepared, candles lit, fully vested already and sitting in his chair, centring himself in silent prayer. When he kindly invited me to preside one morning, I naturally followed this pattern, not because it was expected (it wasn't), but because I thought it sensible and found it attractive – a way of being still, of focusing, letting go all this usual distractions so that I could concentrate on what we were about to do.

When I came home it seemed natural to continue the practice, and when I moved from one parish to another I continued it. When I came to Perth, this habit of sitting quietly for a time before beginning the liturgy naturally travelled in the hand-luggage, but I was in for a shock. One day a rather nasty woman grabbed me as I came out of church and started upbraiding me for not doing what Jesus tells us. According to her, I should have been praying in secret, not in public; I should have been locked up in the sacristy, or in my office or bedroom where no one could see me. On her reading of the gospel we have just heard, only invisible prayer is authentic, only private prayer is worth anything, which means common prayer is a temptation, possibly even an occasion of sin. It seemed to me bizarre that she should have so completely got hold of the wrong end of this stick, but I put it down to her own endless unhappiness and tried not to let it get to me. For she was getting at me, patently trying to run me, definitely trying to get me to re-align myself with her understanding, plainly trying to get me to behave as she expected. To earn her approval, I must stop doing it my way and in future do it her way. Now if our enemies can lay this stuff on us and we can find ourselves dancing to their tune, how much more those we admire?

We all need approval because we are social animals who in large measure take our identity from those around us, which means it is very easy indeed to be run by others, by individuals and by groups. It is usually easier (not to mention, a whole lot safer!) to just go with the heard, to hunt with the pack, thinking the 'right' things, saying the 'right' things, doing the 'right' things. Barry Humphries says he had to escape Australia in the fifties because 'right' meant 'nice' – only ever thinking 'nice' thoughts, only ever saying 'nice' words, only ever doing 'nice' deeds. In order to find himself, in order to be himself, he had to get right away from this all-pervasive pernicious atmosphere and breath a different air. This is actually getting pretty close to what our Lord invites us all to do today when he says go into your room and shut

the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. The shift Barry Humphries needed in make to be true to himself is what our Lord asks of us, except, of course, we are not merely invited to replace one culture with another culture, one group with another group. The Lord is telling us that far more radical surgery is required is we are to discover our real identity, for our real identity is God-given, and this happens as we meet God in prayer.

We are each to encounter God in our own room, and the word for 'room' in the text does not mean my bedroom. It means the store-room at the heart of any first-century Palestinian house, something akin to the wine cellar for us, a room without a view, a place where food and wine are kept away from the destructive effects of fluctuating temperatures. In Lent we are to enter this room so that God and no one else but God can run us. We are to pray in such a way that God's idea of who we are might take root in our heart of hearts – God's idea rather than that of our adoring public, God's idea rather than that of our enemies. Here we can be honest with God about who we think we are and what we think we need, because prayer is never about thinking only 'right' thoughts, or saying only 'nice' words. With God we can stop all our pretending, because God knows what we are thinking before we say anything, because God also knows what we need before we ask, because God and only God knows what is best for us, with knowledge better than our knowledge, and so much better than what anyone else could possibly know.

If we try this over the coming forty days and forty nights, it may just be that we can die to our false selves so that our true self can show its face. A store-room or wine-cellar at the heart of the house is not so very different from a tomb hewn in the rock-face, which reminds us that together we are entering a place of death and re-birth. It all begins to make sense, doesn't it? Perhaps now it becomes clear why we sing James Phillip McAuley's hymn tonight, and every Sunday for the next six weeks -

*As we keep this Lent with prayer
and from pleasures are withdrawn,
minds and bodies we prepare
for the joy of Easter dawn.*



First Sunday in Lent

1 March 2009

Father David Wood
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Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15 ‘

And **immediately**, coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart, and the Spirit as a dove descending towards him, and there was a voice out of the heavens, 'You are the son of me, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.' 'And **immediately** the Spirit drives him out into the wilderness, and he had been in the wilderness forty days tested by Satan, and he was among the wild beasts and the angels were ministering to him.' We are already getting a feel for the breathlessness of Mark's gospel, and here it is again, Mark's favourite word **immediately**. Of the 51 times this word is used in the New Testament, fully 41 of them are to be found in Mark's gospel. Precisely as Jesus comes up from his baptism, Spirit blessed, identified as God's beloved Son no less, precisely the self-same Spirit tosses him out like a piece of garbage into the wilderness. The language is rough and the urgency is inescapable, there can be no delay, there is no honeymoon period for basking in divine approval, there is no time to lose, for this beloved Son must instantly get down to work, he must hit the ground running precisely because he stands-in for God, so whatever else he has to do he is immediately joined in battle royal against the forces of evil in our world.

Because he is who he is, Jesus is **immediately** with the wild beasts as we are all with the wild beasts, and angels minister to him as angels minister to us as well. In other words, the powers of evil cannot ever cut us off completely from the power of God's love and the persistence of God's care, however much it sometimes feels like it. If we are joined in battle between good and evil, darkness and light, hatred and love, the good news is that goodness and light and love will have the last word. This is the gospel we are invited to believe. This is the gospel news we are asked to act out in our lives, sometimes against all the odds. As the newly baptised and tested Lord says to us today, 'The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe the good news', we can still feel the smudge of ashes on our foreheads, and the sacramental words echo fresh in our hearts, 'Remember you are dust and to dust you will return, repent and believe the gospel.' Lent is time not for escaping the challenges and dangers of the real world, but for more committed engagement with them. Lent is time not so much for dieting as for fasting, not messing around with trivia like giving up chocolate or milk in your coffee, but time for looking evil in the face and striking whatever blows we can for justice, time we might say for spitting Satan in the eye and for telling the truth.

On Friday afternoon I interviewed for The Anglican Messenger the parish priest of Ramallah in northern Israel, Fr Nael Abu Rahmoun, who is visiting Australia as Lent begins for the Anglican Board of Mission. The routine humiliations and daily horrors he and his people face as Palestinians in the State of Israel are almost beyond describing, yet I found Fr Nael positively bursting with life and energised by faith. In talking with him, it was clear that regardless of all the evidence to the contrary, he is convinced that the Kingdom of God has drawn near and it is not too late to repent. Repentance, complete turning around, thinking again and thinking beyond past bitterness, is clearly what is needed from the principal players,

and not least from the newly elected right-wing government of Israel. Repentance, genuine opening up to future possibilities, whatever the provocation, is also required from hard-line Palestinian politicians.

We can and should pray for such repentance in others, but what of ourselves? Isn't some repentance required of us as well? The answer to that must surely be that we must repent of our tendency to give up on the peace process, that we need to re-double our prayers for peace and our actions for equality and dignity for the peoples of the Holy Land. We can do this each and every day, but of course we also get our chance to spit in Satan's eye on Good Friday when the collections in our churches is for the work of the Church in Jerusalem. We will have our chance to stand up with Fr Nael and his brave friends, the good Jews, Christians and Muslims who work to build bridges instead of dividing walls, those who refuse to capitulate to evil, who decline to be defined solely as Palestinian or Israeli, who insist to the end that we are all first and foremost fellow human beings. The last thing to die, Fr Nael told me, is hope. You and I are not nearly as helpless as Satan the father of lies would have us believe in this business of keeping hope alive. Lent is time to repent of falling so easily for such lies; it is time to tell the truth. But there is another matter in which we are susceptible to lies. It is what has been called 'compassion fatigue', where we mistakenly think we have done all we can, and can do no more. In launching their Lent appeal for Zimbabwe, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, say - 'We have been witnessing the slow death of a people.

And slow death is only intermittently newsworthy; nothing to report except more of the same, so that the temptation is to switch off. But this doesn't mean that the need for hope is any less urgent on the ground.' We have already given generously for Zimbabwe at Christmas; how easy it would be to forget now and leave it at that.

Remembering Zimbabwe, like remembering Palestine takes determination, but might we not do this remembering and repenting as we use our weekly ABM Lent envelopes? – and not just for disposing of small change, but as serious offerings of generous spirits? Then, of course, even closer to home, there is the pressing demand on us of the Victorian bushfire appeals. Easy there as well to think we have done what we can; again, the choice between forgetting and remembering.

All this and more – and it easily seems overwhelming, so much so that depression takes over, compassion fatigue sets in, and evil or hatred or darkness can win the day. Except perhaps for one small thing that Satan didn't bargain for; except for the fact that the Kingdom of God has dawn near, except for the fact that ordinary people like you and me believe the good news, and this means the last thing to die is hope. Yes, there is no doubt about it, we do face wild beasts, yet all the while the angels of God minister to us. As we walk these next seven weeks in the way of the cross, there is ample time for us to repent, so that again and again we become *immediately* the Lord's agents of hope.



Second Sunday in Lent

8 March 2009

Father David Wood
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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Sometime in the 1960s, the Welsh priest/poet R. S. Thomas, wrote a haunting little piece called simply ***Jerusalem***.

*A city - its name
keeps it intact. Don't
touch it. Let the muezzin's
cry, the blood call*

*of the Christians, the wind
from sources desiccated
as the spirit drift over
its scorched walls. Time
devourer of its children
chokes here on the fact
it is in high places love
condescends to be put to death.*

Right from the start of Lent and all through these forty days, our focus stays steady on Jerusalem, Jerusalem 'where love condescends to be put to death.' Like Jesus himself, we set our face toward Jerusalem, for there is no avoiding it. Our journey to this destination and our eventual arrival at Golgotha, the place of a skull, will all be little more than an elaborate religious charade, however, unless we get two things clear. First, we must get clear in our minds the fact that Jesus goes to his death as a victim of human evil, but also of his own free will. Secondly, we must be absolutely clear about another fact: namely that he goes into the darkness and nothingness of death like all of us, without any special guarantees at all. In other words, the crucifixion is a real human tragedy, and the characters in the drama are in every sense of the word real human agents. By this I mean that they are not puppets dancing on a string, they are not actors playing set parts, and neither are they toys of fate who have no serious choices to make. Most important of all, Jesus, the central figure - the still point around which the whole drama of betrayal and torture and death rages - is himself never just some puppet or play-thing in the hands of a cruel God.

Now to sort this out in our spiritual imagination takes some effort because of the way the gospels are written. They are, as we know, written backwards, backwards from the resurrection, written from the far side of the cross and the empty tomb, so that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John see absolutely everything that happens in the clear light of Easter. In other words, they and we know the end already. They and we already know that 'the Son of Man must undergo suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.' They know it, and we know it, but Jesus and his followers did not know it. They did not know it and could not know it for the simple reason that it hadn't happened yet, but they also could not know it because there was no certainty that it ever would happen. It seems fairly clear from today's text that Peter, and presumably others of Jesus' companions, spent a lot of time kidding themselves that nothing really bad would eventuate. This is why Peter rebukes Jesus for talking openly about suffering and rejection and death; because he and the other disciples are choking on the fact that love might condescend in the high places to be put to death. For their fantasy and our fantasy is that truth is always welcomed, goodness always triumphs, effort is always rewarded. Commonsense tells us that in this world whatever we give out is what we get back in return. Only the Lord is a bit more realistic. He alone is clear that those who live by lies do not welcome truth-tellers. Selfishness is not interested in the common good. The rapacious have no time for the gentle. Nothing threatens guilt so much as innocence, and the 'might is right' brigade get very nervous indeed when someone comes along preaching justice for everyone.

So Jesus starts to prepare his dim and naïve followers for the inevitable. He knows he must face the music. Indeed, he actively chooses to face the music rather than avoid it. In doing this he is only too familiar with what happened to the prophets before him, so all bets are off about what will happen to him as well. If he goes on behaving as a free child of God, if he goes on teaching this same freedom in defiance of the elders and scribes and priests and politicians, it is almost certain that he also will come to a sticky end. Rejection, suffering and death went with the territory back then, as they so often do still today. All of which means that the story leading up to the crucifixion is a completely natural story, a fully human story like any other, an all too familiar tale of ordinary everyday actions and reactions, of choices and decisions and events and their consequences. Our Lord knew enough about selfcentredness and greed and fear to understand why he stirred up such violent opposition, so he knew that in this sense the Son of Man had to suffer and be rejected and killed. In this sense, he had to be broken if he was really to stay true to himself; in this sense suffering and rejection and death were more than likely to be the price to be paid for staying true to his vision of God. Undoubtedly, too, he trusted God to vindicate his way and his words and his deeds, trusting absolutely that he was doing God's work and living God's will come what may. But he did not know, and could not know, more than this. If we allow ourselves to believe he could and did know more than this we turn him into God disguised as truly one of us – truly human, as the creed has it - rather than God as one of us, and this means we fail to take his suffering seriously, failing to let the brute tragedy of it really touch and trouble us.

Unless we face the tragedy of Jesus, unless we face the terrible waste of his life cut short, the sheer wonder of his dying for love and in love is lost on us, and we remove him to some other realm where he has little or nothing to do with the real world. So, whenever we hear that almost liturgical refrain about the Son of Man suffering, about him being rejected and killed, and on the third day rising again, let us not mistake it for a formula Jesus knew and used. It is not some mantra he used late at night to soothe himself in the face of his approaching ordeal. Resurrection is not a consolation he administers to himself to draw the sting of what feels like crushing defeat - so that somehow his agonising death isn't really death at all, so that he is spared the commonness of death as the final and absolute enemy of life. Jesus goes to the cross not because he wants to and not because he has to; he goes freely as a result of his own understanding of what is required of God's servants, God's daughters and sons in every age. He goes to the cross because he is more aware than we will ever be that the way to real life in the real world is always through self-giving, always through letting go, always through self-oblation, always through sacrificial love. This is why he invites us to take up our cross. In taking up our cross we embrace his own carefully mapped out way as our own way. He could simply tell us that only those who lose their life for his sake and the sake of the gospel will save it, but he does something better. He doesn't just talk to us, he shows us the way, and because he goes ahead of us we know we walk this road also.



Third Sunday in Lent

15 March 2009

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Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

Once upon a time in another place I belonged to something called 'Word on Tuesday.' The idea was to gather for an hour every Tuesday evening around the scriptures set for next Sunday's Eucharist. We began by hearing the three selections, then we sat together in silence for a while so that the word might rest in us and work in us, and whatever time remained was spent in round-table discussion. I remember quite clearly sitting with today's three readings, wondering what on earth to do with them. The first and the last are widely misunderstood, and the church has never really believed the middle one! The Ten Words, as Jews refer to them, have been turned by Christians into Ten Commandments, a moral code dished out by God to humankind pretty much at random, always and everywhere applicable. In fact, however, as the Jewish name makes clear, these 'words' are revelatory – this a story in which God's face is glimpsed, in which God's voice is heard, in which God speaks with the chosen people. Paul says we preach a weak, foolish, crucified Christ as the definitive picture of the eternal nature and likeness of God - but the church has never found this humble, suffering God palatable, and has insisted on trying to fit the cross into philosophically acceptable images of God. As for the gospel, I confess that I had then and I have still really no idea what the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple is all about.

I'm pretty sure the gospel can't be what it appears to be, because the sellers of animals for sacrifice were going about their necessary and lawful business, and the money-changers were only exchanging Roman coinage with its idolatrous image of the Emperor for acceptable Jewish money. Perhaps Jesus simply objected to the exchange rate. Actually, that's a reasonable inference, human beings being human beings, and the first three gospels hint at it, although John doesn't. I'm also sure that this is not a story about Jewish traditions being replaced or superseded by something new. Much as he challenged the traditions of his people like other reforming prophets before him, as a faithful Jew, Jesus continued to worship all his life in Temple and synagogue. The fact of the matter is that this story, like so many others in the gospels, has long since lost its footing in history, and we know this not least from the fact that Mark, Matthew and Luke put the story at the end of our Lord's ministry, while John alone puts it at the beginning. Here is a clearer indication than we usually have that meaning is always valued over mere history; scripture stories are always stories for us, not just mildly interesting tales about people who lived thousands of years ago. First and foremost they are stories about God, and while God acts in human history, God is certainly not trapped there. God is eternal, always our contemporary, always out there ahead of us, always calling us on, always dragging us forward, always inviting us to launch out into the deep.

With all this in mind, I want to pick up three phrases, one from each reading. From the first: 'God spoke all these words'. From the second: 'We proclaim a crucified Christ... Christ the power and the wisdom of God'. From the third: 'He was speaking of the sanctuary that was his body'. Now, let me suggest a way in. God speaking words is engaged in self-disclosure, but we know that God can never be adequately revealed in stumbling human words. Revelation is not only in words, not even the words of the Bible, locked up within the covers of a book. Revelation in the Christian sense means God speaking in the birth, life, and death of a human being; in the teaching, healing, and bread-breaking Jesus of Nazareth. So the tablets of stone on which God's words are written and the great blocks of stone from which the Temple of God's presence is built, are eventually fulfilled in something living, in someone living. Jesus said, 'Destroy this sanctuary, and in three days I will raise it up' – but he was speaking of the sanctuary which was his body. This fourth gospel is the gospel of the Word made flesh, who again and again John has speak the unspeakable divine name, the great 'I Am' which is never to be found on mortal lips - 'I am the bread from heaven', 'I am the good shepherd', 'I am the light of the world', 'I am the way, the truth and the life'. It doesn't happen today: instead it is acted out physically in a very public scuffle. By driving out the Temple merchants and turning over the tables of the money-changers, Jesus is clearly saying, 'I am the Temple of God'. I am God present to you, more solid and more lasting than these hallowed stones. I am God's presence with you always, even to the close of the age. This human flesh is where God tabernacles among you now.

But what can this possibly mean? What is the actual content of this little word 'God' we bandy about as if we already know the answer? This is where Paul breaks into the conversation. 'We are preaching a crucified Christ' - an obstacle to some, madness to others, but God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Now let's be honest: we don't much want this foolish, weak God, who is pushed out of the world and on to a cross. I have not met anyone yet, including myself, who, when the chips are down, really wants anyone but a fairy-godmother God. We want God with a magic wand, the divine fixer who heals disease, magicing away pain and distress, the genie in the bottle who can do anything, God who is ready and willing to intervene, ready and willing to do whatever we ask. A crucified Christ is definitely not this sort of interventionist God. At the cross we find God pinned down, utterly helpless, for God's hands are tied by love, and God it seems is incapable of doing anything at all except to go on loving. At the cross we meet the Creator of the messy world of pleasure and pain we know so well, where human beings are genuinely free agents, where God respects us too much to come rushing in to solve our problems or bail us out, where God answers our prayers by showing us what we ourselves can do. Here, nailed up for all to see is God, the only God there is – God who never stops desiring our good, God who refuses ever to abandon us, God who 'temples' among us, God who suffers alongside us, God whose heart breaks and bleeds for us, God who comforts and soothes and heals with wounded hands.

As we journey deeper into Lent, we need to look long and hard at the crucifix, long and hard into the eyes of the crucified. For when we put away childish things, when we finally come to our senses and start behaving like adults, and believing like adults, and trusting like adults, we see that God's foolishness really is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness really is stronger than human strength. From such a God we may expect nothing at all. From such a God we may expect everything.



Fourth Sunday in Lent

22 March 2009

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Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Seeing is believing, we say; to see is to believe the evidence before our eyes. Sometimes, however, we turn this around and say believing is seeing, meaning that belief allows us to see what is true, and in more penetrating ways than simply accepting what lies before our eyes. Believing is seeing suggests that our vision somehow penetrates below the surface; a bit like reading between the lines, believing is seeing refers to a newly acquired ability to see in depth, cutting through surface effects to the heart of the matter.

In the gospel of John everything swings on how we look at things; faith comes from looking (seeing is believing), but faith also allows us to look around us with fresh eyes (believing is seeing). The bronze serpent lifted up by Moses in the wilderness brings healing to the chosen people suffering deadly snake-bite when seeing leads to trust in the One who can save them from death. In the same way, our looking on the Lord lifted up, looking on the Lord crucified between earth and heaven, looking on the Lord brandished before our eyes, opens our eyes and floods us with light and life. Both these signs of contradiction give healing and health only when they are read and received by us, when they become part and parcel of how we view and interpret God's world. St John is claiming that the crucifix makes explicit what is implicit in the shape of reality, implicit in the texture of reality; meaning that this lifted up sign is the indispensable clue to identifying the direction in which the grain of reality actually runs.

If this is so - if it is true that giving rather than grasping is the secret of happiness, that selflessness rather than selfishness sets us free, that tenderness and tears trump terror and treachery, that sacrificial love triumphs over all its enemies - then it matters hugely whether or not you and I accept the cross as our God-given eye-opener and go with the grain rather than against it. It matters hugely that we discover how to live in ways that do no violence to ourselves or to each other or to the world God is endlessly creating. What I'm really suggesting to you here is that this accounts for the language John puts into the mouth of Jesus today, language which otherwise is wide open to dangerous misinterpretation. Listen again, but listen now with this understanding in place -

'God so loved the world that God gave God's only on, so that everyone who believes in him (everyone who sees him) may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him (those who see him) are not condemned; but those who do not believe (those who remain blind) are condemned already, because they have not believed in (are blind to) the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.'

It's true, isn't it, that these words sound rather different now? When first we hear it out of context the statement seems quite arbitrary, which is why it has all too often been taken to mean that only Christians can be saved, that everyone else on earth is damned. But can it really be that only those who sign on the dotted line and keep their membership fees up to date are acceptable to God? To be as blunt as possible, can it really be that having eternal life or perishing means going to heaven or going to hell? Is salvation only about our destiny beyond the grave, or is the focus firmly on the life we enjoy here and now? Needless to say, all these are rhetorical questions. The answers are self-evident, and we need waste no time spelling this out. Those who love darkness rather than light, those who prefer blindness to sight, we are told are condemned already - condemned not by God, but by their own wrong choices. The cross shows us how much God loves us; God loves us this much, and this much means that God's love for us knows no bounds. 'Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him (whoever sees him) may have eternal life.'

On this mid-Lent Sunday we might ask ourselves, are we beginning to see? Do we see Christ crucified, in the words of Australian poet Bruce Dawe, like a diver just about to leave the springboard, arms spread wide over the whole damned creation?

Silenus

*held the spike steady and I let fly
with the sledge-hammer, not looking
on the downswing trying hard not to hear
over the women's wailing the bones give way
the iron shocking the dumb wood.*

*Orders is orders, I said after it was over
nothing personal you understand - we had a
drill-sergeant once thought he was God but he wasn't
a patch on you*

*then we hauled on the ropes
and he rose in the hot air
like a diver just leaving the springboard, arms spread so it seemed
over the whole damned creation
over the big men who must have had it in for him
and the curious ones who'll watch anything if it's free
with only the usual women caring anywhere
and a blind man in tears.*

(Bruce Dawe, *And a Good Friday Was Had By All*)

Are we that blind man in tears, or do we see? Do we see, and do we believe? Seeing is believing. Believing is seeing.



Good Friday

10 April 2009

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Isaiah 52:13-53:12; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; John 18:1-19:42

*And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look, he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, a river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.*

*On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many people
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.*

I would be content to stand here and read poetry today. Supremely, this is a day for poetry, not for propositions, for we contemplate things too great for us, things too deep for words, truths beyond our imagining. Poets are our best friends today because poets evoke the mystery, because poets enter into the dazzling darkness, feeling their way, without pretending to answer questions or explain. That poem, from the Welsh priest-poet R. S. Thomas, who died 'full of years' almost a decade ago, is called simply 'The Coming'. The serpent-river, uncoiling, 'radiant with slime', speaks of the wreck we have made of God's creation, making R. S. Thomas an unlikely Greenie before his time, although of course it goes way beyond global warming. This poem speaks of human hatreds and violence, and in our ears all this time later it can even speak of bushfire and earthquake, of economic greed and financial melt-down. R. S. Thomas is nothing if not severely and unflinchingly honest. Our world looks and feels anything but redeemed. There is no doubt that we still live in a Good Friday world. There is also little doubt that all too

often we Christians are not very obviously Easter people. The cross, with all its shame, often seems just a shame - a lost cause, a sign of ultimate failure, proof of complete defeat. Undeniably, the crucifix is the strangest god-image of any religion: the crucified man, rejected, outcast, tortured, nailed-up and nailed-down. Here is R. S. Thomas on another day -

*Enough that we are on our way;
never ask of us where.*

*Some of us run, some loiter;
some of us turn aside
to erect the Calvary
that is our signpost, arms
pointing in opposite directions
to bring us in the end*

*to the same place, so impossible
is it to escape love. Imperishable*

*scarecrow, recipient of our casts-off,
shame us until what is a swear*

*word only becomes at last
the word that was in the beginning.*

As last evening we strained to see God's mercy-seat only to find God kneeling at our feet with water and towel, so today we come to the imperishable scarecrow, the calvary that is our signpost, the cross which is our touch-stone. This is something we do physically, something we do bodily, not as disembodied spirits, not even as disembodied brains. Today as well God requires of us a leap of action, rather than a leap of thought. The rite and ceremony of the church's liturgy is not about thinking harder, but about acting generously, allowing God to act generously in us - for us and for our salvation. For over twenty years I was accustomed to carrying the cross into church, making three stations before reaching the sanctuary. At the third station, the whole congregation would gather round for the veneration, touching the holy wood, through this sacramental action seeking enlightenment, attempting love, offering secret longings. Like the foot-washing last night, however, this doesn't work here. Here there is no distance between us, just as there is no distance between us and God. It also makes no sense for the cross to come in from outside the circle. The cross, the imperishable scarecrow, is with us always, for it is impossible to escape love. At the heart of our common life the calvary swear-word is always becoming the word that was in the beginning. However much we stuff up, indeed, the more we stuff up, Christ says to his Father, 'let me go there'. So the cross is here already, waiting to be unveiled, waiting to emerge in our midst, ready to be revealed. Already, we are very close, but today we come closer still, to look, to touch with hands and eyes, to meet the Lord again for the first time. Lying here before us, down at our own level, even below our own level, is the only accurate picture of God the world has ever seen.

This is why, in today's passion, Jesus cries out in triumph 'it is accomplished', for the yawning chasm between our notions of humanity and divinity is bridged once and for all. If Jesus shows us the Father, then the Cross is the event that settles who God is and how God acts in the world. The Cross is the supreme eye-opener. God reigns - but in this quiet, unexpected, unassuming kind of way that does not constantly draw attention to itself. God's love finally wins the day - yet there is no pushing of God's cause in the flawed and off-putting way of those who are 'full of themselves.' God triumphs in the end - but without compelling a human response, without forcing God's self on us; on the contrary, by being entirely at our disposal. To think of God's action in terms of spectacular power and coercion that compels assent would be to mistake love for something else. The sign-language of the Cross shows us that the Christlike God is simply not that kind of God. God is no vindictive moralist, no hanging judge, no self-concerned ogre hell-bent on obtaining due satisfaction. Nor is God just a wonder worker, throwing the

divine weight around, and rendering people speechless by impressive feats of power. Rather, God operates in a way that the world calls weakness.

In the suffering and death of the humiliated one, the marginalised and despised one, the one thrown on the scrap-heap and written off as nothing, we have the clue to the way God always operates. Love is as love does. Around the cross this afternoon, this is what we discover: divine Love at its most poignant and most powerful, forcing itself on no one, embracing everyone. Forcing no one; embracing everyone. In the Cross this is achieved; in the Cross it is accomplished!



Easter Day

12 April 2009

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Romans 6:3-11; Mark 16:1-8

It may already have occurred to you as we listened to Mark's brief account of the resurrection that absolutely nothing happens. There is, as it were, no resurrection moment. Really, there is nothing to describe, nothing we could photograph. Perhaps we might expect a blinding light, but there is nothing like this at all. Perhaps we think resurrecting a dead and buried man is impossible anyhow, but if it were possible surely it would be something like a nuclear explosion? But no, wrong again; absolutely nothing spectacular occurs. In fact, there is no drama of any kind, no fuss, no razzmatazz, nothing we could call evidence, nothing even resembling proof. There are no witnesses, perhaps because there can be no witnesses, for this improbable one-off event is totally beyond our comprehending. We have no categories in which to understand this event, no language to talk about what we probably regard as a ridiculous idea.

So Mark's story is really about what is not there, rather than about what is, for the women find themselves looking in the wrong place, looking in fact for the living among the dead. Whatever the resurrection is, it happens in secret, and it has happened already, some time between Friday's burial and the women arriving on Sunday to embalm the corpse. Mark suggests that these women are deep in conversation, looking within themselves possibly, looking sideways at one another maybe, looking at the ground certainly so that they don't trip and fall in the uncertain first light. He also makes it crystal clear that they have no hope of finding anything other than the dead body, if, that is, they can gain entry to the tomb. Why are they on their own, we might ask? Why are they only now wondering who will roll away the huge stone for them? Why are none of the male disciples around to help? Are they still looking out for themselves, watching their backs, making damn sure they keep out of danger? Whatever the explanation, they are nowhere to be seen, and the three brave women know they can rely on no one but themselves. Eventually, they look up, and what they find is an already opened grave and an empty space, a blank where their friend should have been, an absence instead of a presence. On this point Archbishop William Temple's commentary on St John's gospel is true of the other three as well.

'The conflict of Light with Darkness is finished. For a moment Darkness seemed to prevail. But the fight was fought out and the victory won. The date of the triumph of love is Good Friday, not Easter Day. Yet if the triumph of love had ended there, the victory would have been barren. What remains is not to win it, but to gather in its fruits. Consequently Saint John does not present the Resurrection as a mighty act by which the hosts of evil are routed, but rather as the quiet rising of the sun which has already vanquished night. The atmosphere of the story has all the sweet freshness of dawn on a spring day.'

All the sweet freshness of a spring day in the northern hemisphere, no doubt, but we will want to add all the sweet ripeness of an autumn day here as well! Across these three great days, Thursday's foot-washing, and Friday's crucifixion and today's Easter light tell one and the same story, proclaiming one singular reality. I never see the Maundy foot-washing without thinking of a grand dame in another parish: very dignified, always elegantly dressed, conscious of her bearing as a well-known professional woman. When a pretty ordinary young mother was very sick and unable to look after her family, I was amazed to discover quite by accident that my grand dame was secretly doing all the household washing for her! Love is as love does, and nowhere of course do we see the reality of this love better than on the Cross, where Jesus literally gives his all for all of us.

A picture I have in mind this Easter is helping me understand - I think more than ever before - what this sacrifice is really about. At the age of 79 Clint Eastwood has recently made a fine movie called *Gran Torino*, named after the 1972 model Ford. In this film Eastwood plays a Korean war veteran named Walt who thinks the world is going to the dogs. Walt's Detroit neighbourhood has been taken over by Vietnamese, he seems to be virtually friendless, relationships with his family are disastrous, and his beloved wife has just died leaving behind a bitter old man who thinks he has nothing left to live for. But redemptive love turns out to be right next door in the shape of one of those hated Vietnamese families, and - to his own and everyone else's surprise - sour old Walt's growing friendship with the troubled teenage son becomes something not only to live for but to die for. In a climactic scene, Walt deliberately sacrifices himself to save the boy and his family, and we see him dying cross-shaped on the ground, blood trickling from his hands. After such an explicit reference to Calvary, of course, Eastwood has only poor metaphors to evoke any kind of resurrection, but it nevertheless becomes clear that from this lonely death bursts new life and fresh hope.

In raising the slaughtered Jesus, God gives back to us a crucified and living human being, the first-born of many from the dead. In Mark's story-without-a-body, the angel sitting by the empty tomb tells the two Marys and Salome, 'He has been raised; he is not here... he is going before you into Galilee; there you will see him...' Galilee, of course, is where these disciples come from, Galilee is home, Galilee is where they live, just as Galilee is the real world where each one of us lives. What Mark is saying could hardly be plainer: the crucified and living Lord is not to be found in any graveyard; he is to be found only in the rough and tumble of everyday life. On Easter Day and every day you and I are invited to live like him, invited to love like him, in our own way and our own time to actually be him, and then go on being his heart and eyes and hands and lips - blessing, strengthening, comforting, healing - until absolutely everyone is able to join us in saying 'Christ is risen!'

Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!



Second Sunday of Easter

19 April 2009

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Acts 4:32-35; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

Our companion every year on this Second Sunday of Easter is St Thomas, the disciple who turns up late. In this, of course, Thomas is very like us, for we ourselves are all running late. One way or another we all come late to the reality of the Resurrection, even those of us who have celebrated dozens and dozens of Easters.

Some of us think we have the Resurrection taped, of course. Resurrection, we are sure, is the miraculous resuscitation of a dead body, meaning that Jesus walks out of the grave on Easter Day in perfect health, leaving the tomb physically empty. Anyone who fails to believe this as a fact of human history is deemed unorthodox, an enemy who is dangerously distorting the plain truth at the heart of genuine Christian faith. This is one end of the spectrum, and it is hardly surprising that those determined to prove that resurrection is as real as crucifixion often sound more like archaeologists than theologians. Their concentration is on the first Easter Day and what happened back then, because they are convinced that this is indispensable if the household of faith is not to collapse.

At the other end of the spectrum stand those who simply cannot swallow the idea of a dead body being resuscitated and returned to life. Any such notion is considered ridiculous, impossible, possibly superstitious, belonging to a primitive world which needs to be left well and truly behind. The Resurrection, they say, is not some crude conjuring trick with bones, they are agnostic about the empty tomb, and should the skeleton of Jesus be unearthed some day in Palestine their faith in the living Lord would hardly miss a beat. Needless to say, sceptics like these don't waste much time raking over the past, because Easter is something that happens now or not at all, it is a life-giving event for us rather than our ancestors.

Between these two extremes I dare say we can each locate ourselves - at different times in our lives, as our needs and understandings change, moving closer to one or other end of the spectrum. After all, hard-line conservatives and hard-line liberals both have insights worth sharing, even if their bloody battles against each other tend to generate more heat than light. This is one reason why I am inclined to leave them to it. For the Easter stories are themselves much more compelling than sterile intellectual debate in a vacuum. Our task, after all, is not to decide whether resurrection is a priori possible or impossible and then proceed to damn those we can't persuade for perversely disagreeing with us. Our task is to pay close attention to the evidence, letting the sacred texts live in us and have their way with us.

When we do this, we are all in for some surprises. There are surprises for those of us who are still trying to decide where we stand, but also for the hard-liners among us who think we already have everything figured out. Today's gospel is a classic case in point. The disciples are huddled together behind locked doors, terrified that they could be crucified next as collaborators and supporters of Jesus. Then, suddenly, the dead Jesus is standing alive among them. His presence seems perfectly ordinary, yet he has somehow arrived in a sealed room, and if he can do this it must mean resurrection is not just a conjuring trick with bones. He is physically there with them, yet he remains unrecognised by friends who know him best, which surely means that resurrection is not simply resuscitation? But this is not the only strangeness confronting us. The disciples only see who it really is when he shows them the marks of crucifixion - hands torn by nails and the gash in his side from the spear used to make sure he was really dead. This is true for those disciples gathered on the evening of that day, the first day of the week, but it is equally true for Thomas one week later. There is no recognition, no identification, there can be no eye-opening apart from these wounds, and their physicality is underlined when the living Lord invites Thomas to touch and handle them. Even though Thomas doesn't actually need to do this when the time comes, it is quite clear that he can do it if he wants.

As we might say, stranger and stranger! There is certainly nothing straightforward about these resurrection appearance stories, so I hope we are rather more confused than we were before! Yes, resurrection is not mere resuscitation; yes, resurrection is not just a miraculous conjuring trick with bones. On the other hand, however, resurrection is not less than this; on the contrary, resurrection is always more than this. Fundamentally, it is as crucified Lord that Jesus is risen. Another way of saying the same thing is to say that the risen Lord is the persecuted-and-risen Lord. The crucified and risen Jesus was not only crucified as a human being, but rises as a crucified human being. As the contemporary theologian James Alison says, 'When Jesus died, it was a fully human being who died completely, and when Jesus was raised from the dead, it was a human being who was given back to us. Given back as a crucified and living human being.'

In other words, whatever else the Resurrection is, above all it is God's way of indicating the Cross, God's judgment that the Cross is victory rather than failure, God's definitive 'Yes' to all that Jesus is and says and does in the course of his living and dying. And if the self-giving Jesus, and supremely the self-giving Jesus on the Cross, is in fact the perfect self-expression of the Father, it follows that his way of living and dying must become our own way, just as his mission in the world becomes our mission. 'As the Father sent me, so I send you.' Late comers that we are, this very day he shows us his wounds and breathes his very own Spirit into us, sending us out to love and serve in his place.



Fifth Sunday of Easter

10 May 2009

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Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-10

It has never struck me quite so forcibly before. Early on a Tuesday morning I went to Lake Monger, just down the road from where I live, to cut the palm fronds we needed for making palm crosses. The following Sunday – as we can all testify - they were still bright green and full of sap, supple in our hands, plainly still alive and full of life. On Easter Day I knew I would be celebrating the Eucharist at Pineview Village after we finished here, so I thought of taking the left-over palm crosses with me. I would pass them around the little congregation there and ask people to hold them while I gave my little Easter homily. But it turned out to be impossible. Before then the oily palms of Palm Sunday were dry and brittle, fading already from their initial vibrant green to a sort of deathly grey. It had taken only ten days, but already they were fit for the fire. Cut off from the tree, cut off from the supply of nourishing sap, cut off from the plentiful lake water, they shrivelled quickly and turned to compost.

The Easter Jesus says to us today, 'I am the true vine, and my Father in the vinedresser. I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit... Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers... If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in the Father's love.'

Over and over and over, variations on this same little word: abide. Those who abide in me as I abide in them bear much fruit. We are the body of Christ. We are the body of the crucified and raised Lord in today's world. In the waters of baptism we were plunged into his death, and with him we rose from the nothingness of the grave to newness of life. Grafted by grace into this living vine, the question is: what happens next, what happens now? Do we fundamentally remain the same, meandering through life as we did before, or is it a case of all change?

Embracing the new life, embodying the truth, walking in Christ's way – all this is possible only as we abide in or remain connected to the One whose aliveness we share. Indeed, it is possible only as we abide in or remain connected to one another. The image of the body of Christ and the image of the true vine hold up to us a vision of diversity in unity, of individuality in community. An independent Christian as we all know is a contradiction in terms; he or she would be a realised impossibility! There is no such thing as an isolated, solitary disciple. A limb or organ on its own is nothing more than meat. A branch on its own soon withers; a palm cut from the tree crisps and turns in on itself and dies.

Take ourselves away from Christ in the church and the same thing happens to us. Without the abiding, the remaining, the connecting which is happening right this minute we quickly lose focus. Unless together we are tapping day by day and week by week into the bottomless well of grace, actively remaining within hearing distance of Christ's voice, eating with the eucharistic community at the family table, we are unattached and drifting. At first we may not even notice; we may think we're doing just fine, but the fact is we start to shrivel and shrink almost immediately. We may think we can go it alone, but the truth is that we live for each other and from each other, just as together we live for Christ and from Christ.

This means that the pattern of beginning each week around the Lord's table is, strictly speaking, not negotiable. We start out from this holy place and return to this holy place because we must, because we begin to die otherwise. We start out here and return here, and between times we spend ourselves, being God's Easter people, loving and serving the Lord in everything we do, loving and serving the Lord in everyone we meet. The liturgy ends and the service begins, until this loving service flows back into liturgical worship once more.

Eucharist is both the source and summit of the church's life, our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving by which through us the world is transformed and transfigured, restored, and healed.

As we break open the scriptures together, as we share the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation, as we go about the ordinary business of Christian ministry, may your word live in us and bear much fruit to your glory.



Sixth Sunday of Easter

17 May 2009

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Acts 10:44-48; 1 John 5:1-12; John 16:16-24

I wonder if you ever find yourself praying in the car? Here is a short prayer you might try when you are getting close to your destination: Hail Mary, full of grace, let there be a parking space. On the other hand, possibly you prefer to bring in the whole family: in which case you could use this formula: Jesus, Mary, Joseph and Anne, find me a park as fast as you can. We may laugh, of course, but I have known people who hang on to equally crude ideas about prayer. After all, the Lord does say in so many words: 'If you ask anything of the Father in my name, the Father will give it to you.' This can and sometimes does lead people to imagine that God's principal task is to rearrange the world to suit believers. If we acknowledge God humbly and ask very nicely or at least persistently, strings will surely be pulled to make things easier for us.

I remember an elderly woman in another parish years ago who seriously assured me that the good Lord always made sure there was a parking space just when she wanted it. This is pretty easy to send up, of course, because she was an arch-manipulator and she treated God like everyone else. But what of the intelligent lawyer who recently told me that he was disappointed because he believed God would fix his broken marriage and God let him down? 'If not for the two of us', he said, 'wouldn't you think God might at least have done something for the sake of the children?' As a result, he had lost his faith: 'I've been a practicing Christian all my life, but I just can't see the point anymore.'

Now my suspicion is that there is a bit of this in most of us. Practicing our faith, saying our prayers, celebrating the Sunday Eucharist, can all be seen as keeping God sweet, getting God on side, storing up credit for a rainy day. We rarely spell it out in so many words, because it sounds ridiculous, but it can be there in the background none the less, and at a very deep level, influencing our behaviour – at least until the crunch comes. When the crunch comes, such faith collapses.

But listen to the gospel text just a little more carefully. 'If you ask anything of the Father in my name, the Father will give it to you.' If this means anything, it obviously means something rather more than using the holy name of Jesus as a sort of good luck charm - a bit like dangling a crucifix or a rosary from the rear-view mirror of the car? Actually to ask the Father in Christ's name is to ask as Christ himself asks; it means to pray in the very same spirit as Christ himself prays. Far from opening the cosmos to our plundering, asking in Christ's name actually constricts what we might pray for and how we might pray, drastically circumscribing our shopping list.

If we start out as greedy self-centred infants, praying as Christ prays gradually turns our gaze inside out, opening our eyes to the needs of others and calling us to take responsibility rather than pass the buck. The fact is that it wasn't for God to fix that broken marriage, however hard my friend prayed that it would happen. The only people capable of fixing that marriage were the two adults involved, and the truth was

that while one had the will to do so, the other plainly did not. It is not God's job to stop the war in Sri Lanka or the violence in Afghanistan or make a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Self-evidently, these are human obligations, and we know perfectly well that we have the remedies in our own hands. Likewise, it is not for God to cure lung cancer or magic away every other imaginable disease. It might help if we stopped smoking. It might help if we funded scientific research more generously, or if pharmaceutical multinationals were more interested in curing the sick than making colossal profits.

To really ask and to really pray in Christ's name throws some very unwelcome light on our own failings. To really ask and to really pray like Christians has more to do with changing human hearts and strengthening human wills than waving a wand and fixing human mistakes. Prayer changes things by softening us up and opening us up to new possibilities, perhaps to possibilities we could never imagine left to our own devices, tapped as we are inside our own orbit. So to live and move and have our being in the crucified and raised Christ who now prays in us and acts through us undoubtedly redeems the world and heals the nations, but there is absolutely no magic involved. The fact is that God makes us make ourselves, blessing us with all the resources to do so, which means that more often than not we are the answer to our own prayers. The fact is that God cannot and will not protect us from harm, but it is a fact also that God is with us always to love us through whatever comes – even to the close of the age. 'I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, the Father will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name.' Such asking by God's Easter people is somewhat overdue.



Ascension Sunday

Seventh Sunday of Easter

24 May 2009

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Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Mark 16:15-20

The gospel text given to us this Ascension Sunday is problematic. For starters, it is a second century afterthought tacked on to Mark's authentic text by someone who didn't think much of Mark's original ending. One recent Australian commentator describes it as 'a rather colourless digest of several traditions appearing in the resurrection stories of the other three gospels. Its bald summaries lack the warmth and drama attending the resurrection stories in the remaining gospels ...' (Brendan Byrne SJ).

These pale echoes of Matthew and Luke and John are uninspired and unremarkable, but then there are strange additions nowhere to be found in the other three evangelists. These appear as signs that will accompany every believing response to the apostolic preaching. Expelling demons is no great surprise for those who have been reading Mark, for Mark sees good and evil in very black and white terms. Likewise, speaking in tongues and healing the sick through the laying on of hands are familiar across the New Testament. The really odd material has to do with handling snakes with impunity and drinking poison unharmed, which has led in a few isolated fundamentalist circles to crazy and sometimes deadly behaviour.

Then again, of course, we might be forgiven for thinking that enthusiasm about the Ascension of the Lord always depends on some fundamentalism or other. The Ascension, after all, is about physical movement in space, physically moving from one place to another, physically rising up from the earth into the heavens. 'When Jesus had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.' In a flat earth world with heaven above and hell beneath this, of course, made perfect sense. So today you can visit a small Christian chapel on the Mount of Olives where you will be shown what is alleged to be Jesus' footprint in the rock as he shot off like a space-ship into the wide blue yonder. If you go to York Minister or Norwich or many another gothic cathedral you will see roof bosses where a pair of feet are shown dangling out of a fluffy white cloud – a final glimpse of the disappearing Jesus. We find this stuff pretty amusing, of course, but it would be a big mistake to think our parents in faith were a bit simple-minded. They may have had a threedecker universe in mind, but their doctrine of the Ascension was always more sophisticated and subtle. Alongside any ideas about spatial movement, the heart of the matter has always been about what a colleague of mine calls 'now you see me, now you don't.'

Simply as a matter of fact we know that the historical Jesus of Nazareth was seen and heard and touched by only a handful of people. If those who did see and hear and touch are to be believed, to be with him in Galilee and Jerusalem was to find yourself nearer God than anywhere else on earth; it was about finding yourself more fully alive than ever before. When he looked at you it was a terrifying experience, because

you were seen and seen through, but above all there was the joy of knowing yourself loved and welcomed, forgiven fully and accepted completely. In so many ways, his touch brought healing from sickness and life to the dead. It was a wonderful time, a unique encounter, but of course it all had to end; it could not simply go on and on for ever. For whatever else we say of Jesus of Nazareth, he is first and foremost a real human being, a real human being like us in every way. Like every one of us, he belongs to a particular time and place, limited to a moment in history which is disappearing very fast into the past. The thirty years or so of incarnation, of God embodied or en-fleshed in this faithful and courageous Jewish man, have their beginning and their end.

From conception to death, Jesus is one of us; as we say, 'from the warmth of Mary's womb to the stillness of the grave.' Indeed, even beyond the grave, for all the Easter stories attest that he continued appearing to his friends, radically changed to be sure, yet also radically the same somehow. Then, at some point, we don't know quite when, these resurrection appearances cease.

So the Ascension is seen a turning-point and a cut-off point, a moment when one door closes and another opens. Now you see me, now you don't. This, however, is not all there is. It is not just a case of now you see me, now you don't; it is a case of now you see me, now you don't, now you see me again. 'In a little while you will no longer see me, and again a little while and you will see me.' For the physical absence of Jesus is the prelude to a whole new set of presences, just as commonplace, just as matter of fact, just as real, but apprehended now by those with eyes to see and ears to hear. Once upon a time a few thousand people saw and heard Jesus and found themselves touched by his presence. Now he is seen and heard and touched by people of every race and language and nation, millions upon millions of us all around the world. Once he spoke to a few dozen people on a hillside or by the lake, at most to a few hundred at a time. Today, in gatherings just like this one, in houses and fields and office buildings, in parish churches and cathedrals large and small, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, he is seen alive in the sacramental signs, his voice is heard in the gospel proclaimed, and hearts are moved and lives are changed – our hearts and our lives.

This is what we celebrate on Ascension Day, that truth that the Easter Jesus, the crucified Lord, lives forever in the universal presence of God, the truth that God is Christ-like, that in God there is no un-Christ-likeness at all. As the Letter to the Ephesians has it - 'God raised Christ from the dead and seated him at the right hand of power in the heavenly places, far above every rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And God has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.'



The Day of Pentecost

31 May 2009

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Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:22-27; John 16:4b-15

On the Day of Pentecost it is perfectly natural for us to look back to the cross and the empty tomb.

Christianity is, after all, an historical religion, not just a collection of legends; Christianity is firmly based on real events in human history.

No reputable scholar doubts that Jesus of Nazareth was born into the world as a baby and died by crucifixion as a young man.

For all the weight of faith we place on these events, we can trace our origins with a fair degree of certainty, and the basic facts are really not in dispute.

Regardless of whether or not someone is convinced by what we Christians say about the ultimate significance of Christ, every impartial observer acknowledges our beginnings in Good Friday and Easter.

So we look back to where we have come from, and after fifty days of celebrating the resurrection these solid foundations sustain us.

But if it is true that we always look to the past it is equally true that today and everyday we look to the future.

'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, the Spirit will guide you into all the truth; for the Spirit will not speak on its own, but will speak whatever it hears, and the Spirit will declare to you the things that are to come. The Spirit will glorify me, because the Spirit will take what is mine and declare it to you.'

Every new day is a fresh adventure for God's Easter people, for we look with confidence to the unfolding of God's truth as we journey into the unknown, the daily revelations of God's infinite truth as we finite creatures travel through life. Each day we trust that we will learn more. Each day we pray that we may be open to fresh ideas, open to new people, facing the unfamiliar without undue anxiety, gloriously free of crippling fear. Whatever is around the corner, we know that we go with God and that we go to God, for we know that God is out there beyond our reach calling us forward.

What we have in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is not all there is to know of God or the universe. The record we have in the books of sacred scripture is not a complete or exhaustive compendium of divine truth. We do not claim that these sources are exhaustive: there is, of course, more to be said; there is always more to discover.

As we grow older youthful certainties give way to recognition of how limited our grasp of reality actually is, and our arrogant posturing about what we think we know is inevitably humbled. The fact is that we do not know nearly as much as we make out, and as we face the mystery of life we must choose between what is real and what is fake, between what is ephemeral and what is lasting, often enough choosing between one truth and another truth. Not everything is helpful or valuable or true or real, but we are never left entirely to our own devices in choosing between different paths for we have the gift of the pentecostal Spirit.

The centrality of Christ in the economy of redemption means that in every circumstance he is our litmus test for judging where we are and what is happening to us and where we should go next. Like a good map, the ministry of Jesus and the record of this ministry in sacred scripture keep us grounded. We are not at risk of floating off into the ether because all the novelty in the world cannot dislodge our conviction that God is Christlike, and that this Christlike God is faithful and reliable whatever may come.

If we humbly learn from other religious traditions like Judaism or Islam or Buddhism, as we gratefully learn all that scientists and artists have to teach us, we find ourselves sifting such discoveries in the ultimate security of the pierced hands of Love. This means that we accept some things as true and reject others as untrue as the Spirit takes what is Christ's and glorifies him again and again, as the Spirit reminds us of things unshaken, established, eternal as the heavens.

On this day, then, we extinguish the great Paschal Candle which has been burning here across these fifty Easter days and carry the light in our own hands. This flickering Easter light is all we need to see by; it is all anyone needs to see by. 'All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that the Spirit will take what is mine and declare it to you.' Christianity is an open-ended exploration, for the catholic Church really hasn't happened yet, and the best is yet to be.



The Most Holy Trinity

7 June 2009

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Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

Whosoever will be saved:
*before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholick Faith.
Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled:
without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.
And the Catholick Faith is this:
That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the
Persons; nor dividing the Substance.
For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son:
and another of the Holy Spirit.
But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one:
the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal.
Such as the Father is, such is the Son: and such is the Holy Spirit.
The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate: and the Holy Spirit uncreate.
The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible:
and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible.
So likewise the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty:
and the Holy Spirit Almighty.
And yet there are not three Almighties: but one Almighty.
So the Father is God, the Son is God: and the Holy Spirit is God.
And yet there are not three Gods: but one God.*

This is the language of the Creed of St Athanasius, found in The Book of Common Prayer and its derivatives, and directed to be recited on thirteen holy days each year. It is a directive never obeyed by anyone any more, and for an obvious reason. Reciting the Athanasian Creed is to be convinced of the old joke: "The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, the Holy Spirit incomprehensible, the whole damn thing incomprehensible!"

We Christians actually have no one to blame but ourselves for turning God into a mathematical puzzle no one can understand. One reason Islam so easily conquered many well established Christian communities in the ancient world is that the Muslim vision of God is perfectly simple. God is one, and there is no other. 'There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his prophet.' Absolutely anyone can understand that. How, by comparison, are we to navigate the tortuous waters of catholic Christianity's central doctrine?

Paradoxically, we must first rid our minds of the whole notion that we are celebrating a doctrine or dogma dreamt up by smart theologians to confuse the rest of us. Second, we must keep in mind that Trinitarian

language is first and last the language of human experience. We speak this way not because we want to but because we must, because our experience in Christ is that God is Love. This, in fact, is catholic Christianity's central doctrine, and we don't just believe it from the neck up, with our brains, in our heads. God is Love, and we trust this with the whole of our lives, with all that is above the neck and all that lies below. Saint Athanasius, or whoever actually wrote the creed that stands in our prayer books, really ought to have said, 'The Catholic Faith is this: that we worship one God who is Love, and we speak of Father, Son and Holy Spirit because this is our experience of Love.' The Catholic Faith is this: God is Love: God beyond us – the Lord high and lifted up of Isaiah's temple vision; God with us – in the birth and life and teaching and death and resurrection of Jesus; God within us – the Spirit bearing witness with our own spirits that we are adopted children of God, making us cry 'Abba! Father!'

Only Christianity says this, that God is Love: the Giver, the Given, and the in-othered Spirit. Other religions, of course, affirm that God is loving, that God does justice and acts lovingly, that God acts mercifully and compassionately in the world. Christianity alone, however, claims that God actually is Love. God on the inside is pure Love; God as God is all Love and nothing else but Love, and Love means sharing, interchange, reciprocity. In other words, long before anything else exists, God as God - the one true God, the only God there is - is a communion of Love; within God there is an eternal tide of giving and receiving, where Love is expressed and welcomed and enjoyed, Love flowing back and forth in complete harmony. If this is true, then not to know the truth is to be like Nicodemus in today's gospel story. It is to be in the dark. Whatever else we think we know, until we know that God is Love we are just stumbling about in the dark. In the strange language of Athanasius we are indeed perishing everlastingly, for it is God's true identity that gives life, and this reality alone. 'For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.'

So it is that we are birthed from above, baptized into catholic reality, drawn into the dance of Love itself, born again of water and the Spirit, the wind that blows wherever it chooses. In the words of the poet –

*Love's ultimate reality, gazing at the Son
proclaims 'I AM'.
And He, as love's obedience,
responds 'I will'.
And the Spirit, love's delight,
says 'look and see'.*



Third Sunday after Pentecost

21 June 2003

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1 Samuel 17:32-49; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

It is horrifying to see that boys in Scotch College uniforms were taunted and abused by train passengers this week as possible carriers of swine flu. Some senior boys were even pressured into leaving the train by passengers who feared being exposed to the virus. Yes, this is horrifying, but not entirely surprising. The recent beat-up over swine flu has been pretty relentless, and it is hard to know who is to blame: the media or government or both? Certainly, government and media have been egging each other on. By the alarmist style of their reporting the media create widespread panic, so the voting public demands government action. But did the media start the cycle, or did the government? I have heard it said that the Australian government is deliberately using the swine flu virus as a distraction from a worsening economic situation, deliberately fuelling public anxiety to divert our concerns about more serious matters. We can only sincerely hope this is not the case. We have seen government fear campaigns before, most recently the entirely unjustified fear campaign over refugees – shamefully, it went on for years because there was political mileage in it. One disgraceful result of that episode was school girls of Asian appearance being spat on in the streets of Perth.

Fear is a positively insidious beast, something that brings out the very worst in some of us, paralysing all of us one way or another. Once let loose, fear is certainly far more contagious and far more destructive than any virus. The opposite of fear, of course, is the trusting disposition of the human spirit we call faith. The antidote to fear is in fact the sort of faith proclaimed in today's gospel story.

In the first scene, Jesus suggests to his disciples that they cross to the other side of the lake, to the Gentile region on the eastern shore. The disciples take him with them in the boat. Mark's comment that they take him 'just as he was' suggests that they readily do as he asks, whether or not it is advisable to make the crossing as evening is falling. One detail peculiar to Mark is the information that 'other boats were with him.' We learn nothing more about these other craft, but we know that 'to be with' Jesus is a technical phrase for discipleship in Mark's gospel. In other words, there are more disciples here than just the inner circle of the twelve, and as one commentator suggests, we might place ourselves imaginatively in these other boats. The gospel stories, after all, are never simply about other people; they are always stories about us as well.

A 'fierce gust of wind' disturbs the progress of this little flotilla, stirring up the waves to beat against the boats, threatening to swamp them. Water out of control is a standard image of chaos in biblical literature, harking back to the creation stories where the act of creation is represented as God's victory, the victory of order over chaos. Meanwhile, sublimely oblivious to the storm, we have the lovely picture of Jesus

sound asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat. When the terrified disciples wake him, this sleeping child is suddenly transformed into a headmaster who rebukes the wind, saying to the lake itself 'Be still!' As suddenly as the storm came upon them, now the disciples find themselves at the centre of 'a great calm.' In the perennial contest between the Strong One (Satan) who is behind the storms that hit us, Jesus once more in this text is proved Stronger.

It is at this point, of course, that questioning begins about the disciples' fear and lack of faith. 'Why are you cowardly? Do you still not have faith?' In times of widespread anxiety, disciples of Christ should really not be swept up in the panic, or swept along by the anxiety. We should certainly not be found among those fuelling the groundswell of ignorance and selfishness and mindlessness behind the nasty abuse defenceless school children. We can say this not because we are silly enough or selfish enough to imagine believers have some special claim on God's mercy, or because we are naïve enough to think God can wave a magic wand and protect us. There are times when the Lord seems to be absent or asleep, times when faith is put to the test, times even when the forces of darkness and death prevail only too easily. The Lord who rescues the disciples from drowning will not always preserve us – just as the Father does not rescue his Son from the cross, but raises him from the dead when his 'obedience unto death' has run its course.

This story calls us who place ourselves in the boat with Jesus to faith in the God who saves through and beyond the grave, but not necessarily from it. Here is the ultimate security, here is the great calm at the heart of the storm – feeling God's presence closer than breath itself, God-with-us always; knowing that come hell or high water we are held moment by moment in Christ's pierced hands. With such radical trust deep in our hearts we can face whatever comes, calmly sharing our faith with others instead of fanning their fear.



Corpus Christi

13 June 2003

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Exodus 24:3-8; 1 Corinthians 10:14-21; Mark 14:12-26

In thinking about this festival of the crucified and living Lord with us, embodied in the Eucharist, I came upon three studies on the role the family dinner table plays in childhood and adolescent development. The first is from Columbia University in New York City, where they found that teenagers who have dinner with their families at least five times each week are 42% less likely to experiment with alcohol, 59% less likely to smoke tobacco, 66% less likely to try marijuana, and 40% more likely to achieve good results in school. The second study, by Harvard University in Boston, concludes that few things have as great effect on developing a child's verbal and communication skills as regular participation in the family dinner time. And the third study, from the University of California, finds that having regular family dinners is the No. 1 contributor to the development of healthy eating habits and the avoidance of eating disorders later in life.

With these hints in mind, I wonder if any of us noticed a very tiny detail, twice repeated, built into today's gospel text? I would guess the answer is almost certainly not, because the detail I refer to sounds like a throw-away line; it is so obvious, so utterly prosaic, so seemingly unimportant. To be honest, I'd not noticed it myself until fairly recently when someone drew it to my attention. 'When it was evening, he came with the twelve. And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.' There it is the first time, and then a bit more of the story follows, and sure enough the phrase is repeated a second time. 'While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.' Everything happens while they are eating.

Religion is not about this or that high spiritual moment; faith is not confined to great occasions - when we happen to be in the mood, on our best behaviour, all primed and hyped and revved up as it were. Religion is about everyday reality; faith has to do with the obvious, the prosaic, the seemingly unimportant. We betray Christ in passing, without even noticing, without fanfare. It is never a grand moment of apostasy, or rarely so. In a thousand little ways that we sell our souls to the devil. And yet, knowing full well that we are all casual betrayers, the Lord gives himself to us. And it happens at table, while we are eating. In the ordinary course of events, when we are going about our daily chores, happy and free or tired and irritable, the gift is given. 'Take; this is my body ... This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.' Not just in church when we are ready for it, not only around this altar-table where we expect it, but at the breakfast table too, and the coffee table, at dinner in the restaurant and the picnic in the park as well. The real presence, the living reality of Christ crucified, cannot be safely confined to this Eucharist, for the whole of life is and can be and should be eucharistic. The four-fold

action of taking and blessing and breaking and giving happens anywhere, even in the most unlikely places, for we are all priests to ourselves and to each other. The purpose of what we do here ritually week by week is to open our eyes to what we do everywhere, for there is no place at all where God is not. 'While they were eating, he took a loaf ... and ... a cup ...'

At New Norcia earlier this week I bought a slim book of poems by Kilian McDonnell, a monk of St John's Abbey in Minnesota. What initially attracted me was the great title, *God Drops and Loses Things*, but in it I found this wonderful reflection, based on yet another throw-away line of Mark –

Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table. Mark 16:14

The door locked, we're mouthing
Passover lamb scraps. James raises a cup
of therapeutic wine. Before we drink,
a light so intense we gasp, like stepping
off a cliff, or the rush of mad love.
The master we saw die naked
two days ago, now beside the bread
crusts and dirty dishes, presto,
garbed in white brighter than the sun, hands
outstretched for bread crumbs like a beggar.

He always comes when meat and Esau's
mess of pottage are on the table,
as though banqueting in paradise
on manna the archangels baked
is too gauzy, table talk too expurgated.
Up there no biblical bickering,
no one filches drachmas from the purse.
No one in the boat doubts when the waters rage
or asks for resurrections from the dead.

Above, no brassy sons bring pushy
mothers to grab the thrones beside the king.
The cock need not crow.

Why then does he come?
Mercy hungers for our treacheries.



Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

28 June 2009

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2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

We have just listened to a classic Markan sandwich story. Mark has this fondness for beginning one story, interrupting it with another, then rounding off the episode with the end of the first story. One story brackets the other, beginning and end like a pair of bookends; one story sandwiches the other. Such stories say 'look at me', but they also say 'look at both of us together.' Look at us very carefully or we will deceive you; pay close attention to us and we will share our secrets with you.

This is one of those days when we hear the sacred text as the subtle vehicle it really is for the word of God. The fundamentalist simply sees two miracles and concludes that this is a proof text for the divinity of Jesus, agent in this world of an interventionist God who occasionally intervenes in the running of things to work some special magic tricks. My stock response to such readings is 'who cares?' Who cares if Jesus did a couple of miracles one day long ago, when we know only too well that it doesn't happen now?

Even if we remain open-minded about mysterious cures like that of the woman with the haemorrhage, we know absolutely that dead little girls are not restored to life no matter how strong our faith, no matter how hard we pray. An occasional miraculous cure long ago or close at hand proves only that God is hatefully immoral and cruelly capricious - acting to save this favoured individual here or that favoured individual there, while neglecting millions who are born into violence and live in torment and die in pain.

But if the surface meaning is not good news, what is? What on earth are these interwoven stories really about? When we take a closer look, we see that in each case the setting is crucial. Jesus and the woman with the haemorrhage are in a crowded public place. This probably seems unremarkable to us, but in fact something very odd is going on here. A woman out in public unaccompanied by a man is engaged in scandalous behaviour; she is cutting right across the grain of Palestinian culture. This woman is clearly desperate, defiant and dangerous, as her next moves makes perfectly clear. For not only is she transgressing all social custom, she also proceeds to break religious law as well. Her twelve year long flow of blood - the text actually calls it a fountain! - renders her unfit for human society; she is ritually impure, she is polluted and polluting, she is irremediably unclean. She shouldn't be out in public in the first place, let alone touching anyone. Yet here she is and she reaches out and touches Jesus, and astonishingly he praises this shocking anti-social behaviour, celebrating her clear violation of scripture and tradition, as evidence of faith!

Strange, we might think, to say the least. But then there's the twelve year old girl. Twelve and twelve, you see - twelve year old blood, twelve year old child. No wonder these two stories belong together in

Mark's scheme of things. Just as Jesus is closeted in the crowd with the outcast woman – just the two of them are in focus, every other character is blurred or invisible - so now we find him closeted with just a handful of people in a room with a corpse. And what does the text say? 'Little girl, to you I say, arise, and immediately the little girl arose, and she was walking around.' Mark is choosing his words very carefully and deliberately. The words he uses are words reserved in the gospels for speaking of the resurrection. These are not commonplace words for everyday happenings, as English translations usually propose. The text does not say that Jesus tells the little girl to get up and that she gets up! This is not some fanciful tale about a dead child being resuscitated. This is a story about old life and new life, about rejection and embrace, about crucifixion and resurrection.

These stories make an important pair, with illuminating parallels and contrasts: a woman and a girl; a twelve year old malady and a twelve year old who dies inexplicably; the unclean woman and the unclean corpse; the public crowd and the private house; someone touching Jesus and rendering him unclean, Jesus touching someone and making himself unclean. Clearly, the listening, attentive church is being called to take the same risks. This is an invitation to us, an invitation to trusting faith beyond religious rules and regulations. Purity codes and fear of contamination are swept aside, dismissed as distractions from and substitutes for the real thing; they are beside the point. In their place we are invited to real human contact with one another and real human compassion for one another. Religion which is real, religion which is worth anything, isn't about keeping ourselves nice. Religion which is acceptable to God is about going out on a limb to be kind and gentle and understanding in our dealings with each other – and, for that matter, with ourselves; it is about taking all the risks involved in coming alive together beyond the predictable safety of our tombs.

We are being called beyond respectability, to give up our role as God's minders, guarding the in-crowd's holy feast, like religious thought-police forever on patrol. The Lord's bread is for all the hungry without exception, for the needy and the sick, for failures and sinners, for the unclean and the unworthy, for Christ is comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. Today's gospel comes as both judgment and promise - for we are being pushed by grace, prodded to become gracious, to become open-minded and open-hearted and open-handed. Judgment and promise urge us forward into God's future which is more diverse and more inclusive and more glorious than we can even begin to imagine. Our deadness is confronted, and Christ crucified says to us arise! The Lord of all life invites us to get up and be about God's work, so that God's will may indeed be done on earth as it is in heaven.



Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

12 July 2009

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2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Ephesians 1:1-14; Mark 6:14-29

By any standards, the death of John the baptizer is a blood-curdling yarn. The line to really chill the blood, for me at least, is when Mark tells us that King Herod is deeply grieved to be asked for John's head, 'yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests' he nevertheless goes ahead and orders his execution. How casually human evil erupts and takes over! Not wanting to lose face, not wanting to appear weak, we are inclined to weak and irrational attitudes and actions. What a monument this story is to human jealousy and deception; what a monument to human stupidity and vanity!

But for once it is not really the gospel that interests me this morning. For beginning today, and continuing over seven more Sundays, we hear the Letter to the Church at Ephesus. It would be a very rewarding discipline if every one of us undertook to read the whole letter in one sitting, so that we listen expectantly week by week, ready and waiting to be given some of the most beautiful theology in the bible. Read it as a song about the freedom and grace of God, and just let the poetry cascade over you, bathing you in God's love and peace.

To suggest that you just lie back and enjoy the waterfall is not, of course, to deny that there are stumbling points, words and phrases to trip us up and stop us in our tracks. Indeed, in this very first chapter we come across one instance of this. Twice, the word 'destined' appears. 'God destined us for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ... In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purposes of the one who accomplishes all things according to the divine counsel and will...' On the strength of passages such as these a doctrine known as 'predestination' was constructed by some great theologians – principally St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, and the 16th century reformer John Calvin. God chooses, they are agreed, God elects, God selects, God destines and God predestines. Before the adventure of time begins, God already sees the end. Before the foundation of the world we are blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, chosen to be holy and blameless before God in love.

All this sounds like sunlight, and so it is. Except that Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin also let the clouds in. For, according to all three, predestined means that some are destined for heaven but others for hell, some for salvation but others for damnation, some for life but others for death. And in the inscrutable – not to mention, arbitrary and tyrannical! – will of God, all this is determined ahead of time, before we even exist. Now it is probably true to say that few of us think in these terms any longer, but it is also fairly obvious that traces of this nasty doctrine continue to infect popular views of God. It is commonplace for people to imagine God welcoming some while rejecting others, as if only a chosen few are gifted with faith at the expense of everyone else, dividing the washed from the great unwashed, and all from an infinite distance.

It took the passage of four hundred years and another great theologian, probably the greatest theologian of the 20th century, Karl Barth, to see through this nonsense and set it aside once and for all. For Barth

noticed what his predecessors somehow missed, and he did so as he allowed today's reading to speak to him. Listen again – 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before God in love.' Predestination, says Barth, is not primarily about us. Predestination is primarily about God; predestination is an expression of the divine nature.

Christ is the chosen, elected, selected, destined, predestined one. Yes, Christ, and Christ alone. Christ - and Christ alone - is holy and blameless before God in love. Christ, and Christ alone, and in Christ all of us as well. For in Christ, in Christ the man-for-others, God is for us, totally for us, totally on our side in all things, imagining all what we have it in us to be, imagining all we can become as we share in the faithfulness of Jesus. We are chosen in Christ, and Christ's own election includes within itself the election of all others. As we sometimes sing, 'Look, Father, look on his anointed face, and only look on us as found in him...' To use Karl Barth's own words: 'God has chosen us all in Christ: at the deepest level we are all called Jesus in the eyes of the Father.'

God's plan is nothing less than to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. This is the gospel we proclaim, this is the good news we bear for all the earth: not that some are saved while others are not, but that God is for us all in Christ and the gate of life stands wide open to absolutely everyone.



Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

9 August 2009

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2 Samuel 18:5-9, 14, 31-33; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

About nine months, perhaps a year ago, someone I've known a long time called out of the blue. He had just discovered he was dying. He sat me down beside him, put a tumbler of Scotch in my hand, and said: 'You know I don't hold with all that religious stuff, but I respect you, so you will have to do the job when the time comes.'

Well, the time came yesterday, and Rob has had quite a journey between then and now. When he had no strength left for anything, his wife Anne took him something he always enjoyed, some bananas. Asking if he would like some, she was pleasantly surprised when he said yes he would. So she broke off a piece and fed it to him. 'Good' he said, 'very good; but you have some too.' So they sat and ate together in silence at the bedside. 'There is a just small piece left, would you like it?' 'Yes, but you have some too.' Next day, Rob died.

'It was a holy moment', Anne says, 'it was holy communion.' Yes, it was. Liturgy and life go together. They are two sides of a single coin, two sides of one reality, for what we do in church is just a ritualised or formalised version of what we do every day of our lives. The sharing of food is fundamental to communication and communion, whether it be around a messy breakfast table with the family with food flying past your nose or an intimate candlelight dinner for two in an expensive restaurant. One way and another we break bread together as an expression of our need for company, for friendship, for love. The word 'companion' means quite literally someone who shares their bread with us. We make time to eat together because this is where connections are established, where relationships are strengthened and deepened, where care is offered and received. These are holy moments, these are moments of holy communion, just as today's celebration of baptism and eucharist is a holy moment.

As the Lutheran sacramental theologian Gordon Lathrop reminds us –

'Water is our first need as living animals; it is our first need in the church as well. Before its use in the ordo, before the teaching and the name and the words are set next to it, before a candidate comes to be examined, stripped, anointed, illuminated, and clothed beside it, the water is a symbol. We may behold it and find, namelessly, both our dreams and our communal experience of hope, for life and fear of death drawn toward it. We may see it as a birthing place, a watery sipapu, a magic pool, or our connection to mountains and streams away from here, our hopes for a more cared-for and cleaner earth.

'We come into church and find water for washing, bread and wine for a meal, words used as story and chant, as name and good-spell.

'In the food, which itself can be called eucharistia, 'thanksgiving', we receive the gift that places us before God, the saving body and blood of Christ crucified. In eating the food we eat the meaning of the prayer.

In praying 'the prayer of the word which is from Christ' (Justin, 1 Apology, 66) we find the food 'thanksgivingized.' The prayer over the food is given us by Jesus Christ, takes place through Christ. The food of the prayer is the presence of Christ. The whole, prayer and food together, is gift. Through it we receive what human beings need: food, love, and the restoration of creation. We do not give anything to the gods or to God. Rather we receive what we ourselves need – to stand before God as we share our food, with a wider horizon around us than we could have given ourselves.'

Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*
(Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1993) p. 95, 99, 153

Yes, this is what we are about today. We welcome Darcy and Lachlan into the community of the wide horizon, into the eucharistic community, into the Body of Christ, and in doing so we too look up and look out afresh at who we are and whose we are. We are not, after all, atomised, lost or abandoned individuals, divorced from one another and at war with ourselves. The truth is that we belong together and we need each other. For all our differences and divisions we are family, sisters and brothers, daughters and sons of one Father. And although Jesus our elder brother speaks strange words to us, we know he speaks the truth: 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.' www.joondalupanglican.com



MARY Mother of the Lord

16 August 2009

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Revelation 12:1-6; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 1:26-38

It is wisely said that there is a sense in which we are all feminine. We are the Virgin who – as the poet has it - is made pregnant with the Word which comes with the wind. In the New Testament, Mary is obviously one of the principal players, yet no one is interested in her as a mere individual. From first to last she appears as a representative, a symbolic figure. Mary is all of us who respond to God's initiative. Mary's word is our word, Mary's trust our trust, Mary's gift our gift. Mary is all of us who say "Yes" to God in however small or tentative a fashion - and we are also her. Mary is the response of the whole creation to God's love outpoured. Just as Mary's emptiness once upon a time was filled with the divine presence, we are all pregnant here and now with the Word which comes with the wind. We love Mary and depend on her prayers because the first among the faithful shows us the way, because she accompanies us on our journey.

The earliest reference to Mary in the New Testament is that strange little verse in Paul's letter to the church at Galatia. "When the fullness of time was come, God sent forth the Son, born of a woman, born under the law." It sounds like a throw-away line, but it sets the scene perfectly. The fully human Jesus has a fully human mother like the rest of us, and can trace his ancestry. Like all of us, he belongs. He is not some bolt from the blue, a cuckoo inserted into the human nest. He really is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. In Paul's shorthand, Jesus is Jewish because he is born of a Jewish mother; he is a true child of the covenant established like a rainbow between God and God's chosen people.

Matthew and Luke have other interests; they celebrate Mary's virginity, not to proclaim her purity, but to rejoice in her poverty, her sheer availability. Mary is the barren one, the empty vessel who longs to be filled with new life. In her spaciousness the Spirit is able to kindle life. The empty womb and the empty tomb are both alike.

On this little Easter in the depths of winter, it is impossible to imagine any form of authentic Christian faith apart from this archetypal image of Mother and Child – a mirror in which we catch glimpses of who we are becoming as we follow the Lord. The Madonna cradling the lifeless body of her Child taken down from the cross, what we call the pietà, our Lady of Pity. The Madonna with Child, cheek to cheek, our Lady of Loving Kindness. The Madonna with Child praying in the depths of her body – our Lady of the Sign, the image we live with most closely here in this church. Or the Madonna with Child seated in state on her knee – our Lady, Queen of Saints. Or even the Madonna holding the standing Child, his arms outstretched cross-wise to embrace the whole creation – our Lady of Calvary.

This woman teaches us to care here and now as she cares; she shows us how to look after each other as she looks after her baby. As Mary gives herself completely, so we learn to give ourselves. We lift our eyes to see her going on ahead of us, living the poem we are yet to write, clothed with the sun, the moon beneath her feet, on her head the crown of twelve stars.

This is the destiny and dignity to which we ourselves are summoned; this is the astonishing vocation we share, if only we dare believe it.

For we are all of us equally clothed with the sun and full of the Son. In a word, we are all feminine: every single disciple, every last one of us. As the poet says, we are all of us the Virgin; we are all of us the Virgin made pregnant with Word which comes with the wind.



Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

23 August 2009

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1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Because the teachings of Jesus were uncompromising and uncomfortable, he was not as popular or successful as he might have been. As T.S. Eliot famously remarked, 'Humankind cannot bear very much reality.' Indeed, most of the time we prefer to be distracted, amused, excused and entertained, rather than asked to face up to the real world and live in it like responsible adults. So we are not all that surprised to learn that right from the start of the Christian movement people were voting with their feet, and we get a strong sense of this today. In so many words, John tells us, 'Many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.' So Jesus asks the twelve, those closest to him, his inner circle of devotees, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Perhaps it is all too much for them as well? Perhaps for them too things are not really working out as they expected?

It is Peter who answers, of course, because Peter in the gospels is always their spokesman; he is always the leader and voice of them all. And his response is hardly a ringing endorsement - 'Lord, to whom can we go?' This rhetorical question is nevertheless a real question, and polemical back then as well as now.

In first century Palestine, there were, after all, many wandering rabbis like Jesus, many reform movements within Judaism. Without having to travel very far at all, there was plenty to choose from. And so it is still. Indeed, it is probably true to say that we now have more choice than ever before. 'Lord, to whom can we go?' Well, we could try the Buddah, as many do, or perhaps the prophet Muhammad, or any number of contemporary gurus. We could do as lots of people are doing and shop around until we find someone or something that excites us, someone or something to light our fire, someone or something to turn us on.

As you will gather from what I have written about Ramadan which began yesterday, there is much about Islam that is praiseworthy and attractive. I certainly admire the dedication and single-mindedness of our Muslim neighbours who will be fasting so strictly from dawn to dusk and praying in such a disciplined way every single night through this coming month. They believe that Muhammad has the words of eternal life, not Jesus, and they believe it in their bones, worshipping with their bodies as well as with their hearts and their minds.

Their undoubted commitment challenges us: how serious are we when we say to Jesus, 'You have the words of eternal life'? Do we really mean it? Have we really come to believe and know that Christ is the Holy One of God, the living bread from heaven who gives life to the world? Is this just a Sunday thing for us, something we take up or put down as it suits us, an optional extra we have inherited, or is our faith in Christ the definitive truth about us - opening our eyes, determining how we read the world, transfiguring every moment of every day?

Much as I admire my Muslim friends, there is no way I could ever join them, and if I am honest I can only say that this is because Jesus will not let me go. He is the magnetic pole that draws me. His words are spirit and life. Beyond all the words, beyond every prophecy, he is the living Word, not simply the transmitter of divine speech but divine speech itself. Jesus is not simply another prophet but the proclamation embodied and fleshed out in a human life and death.

Peter speaks for us and for every Christian: 'We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.' In this holy month of Ramadan I hope we will keep the millions of devout Muslims close to our hearts in prayer; praying specially, of course, for those we know personally. May their shining devotion refresh and rekindle our own, and may we live together in peace.



Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

6 September 2009

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Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

It is all in the geography. Here is the key to unlocking the two scenes in today's gospel story. "From there Jesus set out and went away into the region of Tyre. Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis." If you know anything about these locations, Jesus is wandering around in circles, and this makes little sense. To Mark, however, the odd geography says it all. Jesus is venturing outside the confines of Palestine, outside the confines of Judaism, venturing into the pluralistic pagan world beyond. Mark is making absolutely certain today that we see his thoroughly Jewish Jesus surrounded by Gentile people and Gentile culture in Gentile places. As one commentator points out, this is one of the most striking moments in the gospel when the situation of the later church – our own church – washes back over the portrayal of Jesus in his own lifetime. The desperate woman who argues with Jesus and the man he later heals both represent us – you and I who are Gentiles, you and I who are not Jews, you and I who belong to God's chosen people only by adoption and grace.

Tyre, of course, was the most important seaport of Phoenicia, a leading city in Syria, a cosmopolitan place of mixed population where Jews lived as a threatened and oppressed minority. The odd journey on from Tyre via Sidon into the Decapolis is a long, roundabout pilgrimage taking Jesus north to Sidon, then east across the north of Galilee, but this works well in communicating the fact that Jesus is outside his comfort zone in a foreign society and culture. Mark is brutally honest about this; he puts no spin on it at all. Jesus is not relaxed; he is very uncomfortable here. Indeed, he is hiding out in a private house, hoping no one will notice his presence. Yet he cannot escape because the rumour mill instantly starts working overtime. Our desperate woman soon hears about the mysterious visitor's renowned healing powers and comes to beg help for her daughter.

This woman is a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin, that is, a Greek born in Phoenicia in Syria. Mark rates her as a rank outsider, someone with no claim on the Lord's time and attention whatsoever. Far more shockingly, however, Jesus insults her as simply a dog. To him she is not even someone, she is no one, almost sub-human, and her suffering hardly even registers with him. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

In other words, his mission is to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, not to dogs like this. At least his mission was only to Jews right up to this moment, for the anonymous woman's wit, and her rebuttal of his racist sleight, opens Jesus' ears and changes Jesus' mind, so that love pure and simple – God's own love – is able to flow from his heart to embrace her and heal her daughter. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs

under the table eat the children's scraps as they fall.' Then he says to her, 'For saying this you may go – the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone." Something so similar happens with the deaf man with the speech impediment that we hardly need labour the point, except to note that just as an impertinent Gentile woman opened Jesus' ears, so he now blesses a Gentile man in the same way - restoring his hearing and unbinding his tongue exactly as he frees us all.

Discovering the depth of God's mercy and the range of God's love happens piecemeal. It was a gradual discovery even for our Lord himself. We are told that Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and the people. The word 'grew' is one used of a blacksmith hammering red-hot metal fresh from the furnace, extending it and shaping it into usefulness. So it was with Jesus, so it is with us: whenever we think we have drawn the circle of God's concern for the world as wide as we can, God pops up on our doorstep as someone we are excluding, distressingly disguised as someone we still despise, refusing to be shooed away, demanding to be let in. We too are on a journey way beyond our comfort zones, and when I say 'we' I mean the whole Church, the Anglican Communion of Churches and every other church besides. We are all on a journey with Christ who stretches us almost to breaking point. We gather around the Lord's table. There are no strangers here.



Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

13 September 2009

Father David Wood
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Proverbs 1:20-33; James 2:18-26; Mark 8:27-38

We appear to be in the realm of geography again! You remember how last Sunday the gospel reading's meaning was bound up with the fact that Jesus was wandering around in circles, first visiting Tyre and then going by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee into the region of the Decapolis? Well today we find him in Caesarea Philippi, the northernmost point of his travels as recorded in the gospels. From here he will turn around and begin a long journey south that will take him to the very gates of Jerusalem. In other words, having preached the good news and healed the sick in Syria and the cosmopolitan world just beyond the confines of Palestine, now he begins to return to the very heart of his own country and people. Alongside this lengthy physical journey runs a deeper journey into the mystery of his identity and mission, a journey which continues for you and me as well all these centuries later.

So it is that 'on the way' to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples the crucial question, 'Who do people say that I am?' But the answers are all wrong-headed, so the question is then sharpened and readdressed direct to the inner circle: 'Who do you say that I am?' This is, of course, the question put to us all. Who is this? Is this just another prophet, or can it be that Jesus is something more? In a nutshell, this is the age-old dispute between Christianity and Islam. Our Muslim friends readily admit that Jesus is one of God's prophets, like John the Baptist or Elijah or Isaiah or Jeremiah, and they reverence him as a prophet. In the end, however, another few centuries down the tract, they believe that the prophecy of Jesus is eclipsed by the definitive prophecy of Muhammad. Through the prophet Muhammad God is understood to be dictating a final word, whereas our Christian view is that Jesus himself is God's ultimate word spoken to the world – and not in more words, but in human flesh and blood. To the Muslim, the idea that God can be revealed in a human being is somehow beneath God's dignity, and in particular they reject the notion that God's prophet can be executed like a common criminal.

In this, strangely, they are at one with Peter in our gospel. Peter rebukes Jesus because he too thinks it is impossible that God's servant should undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed. It is something we all struggle with, and this is why Mark devotes the second half of his book to opening our minds to this possible impossibility. Jesus is the Christ, God's anointed servant and son, precisely because he enters into pain and suffering; precisely because he enters into our own pain and suffering. If God is really above the bloodiness of the world as Peter believes God must be, if God's absolute otherness shields God from all the trials we experience, what on earth is that to us, what use is that to us? Only as we follow Jesus, as Peter is told to do, only as get behind him rather than stand in his way, do we begin to welcome the truth. God is not so high and lifted up as to feel nothing. God is not so divorced from the life of this world that none of our frustrations and disappointments and fears and dreams ever register. Rather, God's heart is wide open to us, and breaks for us and with us. Because God is so mixed up with everything that happens to us, so enmeshed in the very fabric of human life, every single happening, however brutal, can be transfigured and redeemed.

The Cross at the very centre of our religious consciousness speaks of pain and death, but also, and simultaneously, of love and life – deathless love and endless life. There simply is no darkness which lies beyond the reach of Christ's light; no deadness which is immune to Christ's sheer aliveness. Unlike others who locate God far away in splendid isolation, we who follow Jesus know that God is right here with us, bearing our burdens, sharing our joys, healing with wounded hands, walking beside us on broken feet.



Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

20 September 2009

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Jeremiah 11:18-20; James 3:1-12; Mark 9:30-37

As estate agents like to say: location, location, location. Location is everything. Never mind if the house is falling down, it is still a good buy because of its location: in a nice neighbourhood, close to shops and schools and public transport. As we have been discovering over the past few Sundays, location is also important to understanding the gospel. After his sojourn in foreign territory, today we find Jesus setting sail south, setting his face towards the political and religious capital of his own country, journeying back toward Jerusalem. Passing quietly without fanfare through the Galilee region, Mark tells us he avoids public notice because he is focusing his efforts on teaching his disciples. This is hard work because they are both eager to learn and yet afraid to learn. Saying 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed he will rise again' is emphatically not welcome news. The Lord's anointed messiah is supposed to conquer all, ending the Roman occupation of the land, ushering in a time of peace and glory. They hope that God's kingdom will come with power, fully expecting to share in that power themselves.

So having discussed on the road who is the greatest, who can be considered Jesus' right hand man, who deserves most of the spoils, no wonder they are more than a bit sheepish when Jesus starts to turn this childish scenario on its head. Mark's comment that 'They did not understand what he was saying' obviously means they half-understood, and – half understanding - they are afraid to ask in case Jesus confirms their worst fears. He proceeds to do just that, of course, but in a way they would never in a million years expect. Having said as plainly as he can that 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all', astonishingly, he calls a young child, sets the child in the middle of the squabbling disciples, and takes the child in his arms. None of his adult followers receives this singular mark of affection, while this anonymous child is unfairly given the lime-light of centre stage. To grasp the full force of Jesus' action, we have to put aside the idealization of childhood that arose in the nineteenth century.

In the ancient world children were undoubtedly precious to their parents, but they had no social status or value whatsoever. Until adulthood they were simply nobodies. So for someone outside the family to welcome a child is to turn prevailing values and social mores upside down. All our ideas of status and dignity and self-importance are set aside, as we are invited to meet this child as an equal, child to child as it were. This, says Jesus, is how disciples must live. In doing so we will welcome him, and not only him but the Father who stands behind his entire life and mission, which is not one of dominance and being served but one of service, destined to culminate in the supreme service of giving his life in love for the world.

It is hard to exaggerate the significance of this gesture of divine identification with a child. Not only does it challenge the disciples' notion of messiahship, it goes to the heart of our understanding of God. Is God to be thought of as some kind of extraterrestrial Ruler to whom nothing but fear and service is due? Or is the God revealed by Jesus a God whose primary gesture toward human beings is that of One who serves, One who envelopes us in affection? Jesus' hugging the child in front of everyone shows more powerfully than any words the preciousness of each and every human life in the sight of God

- no matter how small, no matter how insignificant, no matter how broken, no matter how lost. We are all -in our littleness rather than our achievement – hugged by God in this moment.

When I was on retreat, I read a book called Basil Hume: Ten Years On, a collection of essays published to mark the death ten years ago this year of Basil Hume, the Benedictine abbot named by Pope Paul VI as Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster. On a number of occasions Father Basil referred to a story he had been told as a child. A small boy had gone into the larder and seen a large pile of apples. He knew he was not supposed to take an apple, and there was nobody there to see him. But there was one person who was always watching – and that was God! Basil Hume says, “It took me 40 years to recover from that story. For many years, I thought of God as somebody who was watching me to see if I was getting it right, and catching me out when I got it wrong. It was not until I became Abbot of Ampleforth that I discovered that God was the sort of person who would nudge me and say ‘take two apples!’ God is always watching us but it is because he loves us so much that he cannot take his eyes off us.”

William Charles (Ed), Basil Hume: Ten Years On (London: Burns & Oats 2009) p. 101

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. Whoever welcomes one little child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me.” We are about to welcome Eve and Grace and Alexia and Mikayla into the community of God’s anointed servant and Son, Jesus the Christ, baptising them into the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of the ages. May they and we feel God’s loving eyes on us and God’s loving arms around us, today and all our days. Amen.



Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

27 September 2009

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Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; James 5:12-20; Mark 9:38-50

If you're having a bad day, try this little exercise. Picture yourself lying on your belly on a warm rock that hangs out over a crystal clear stream. Picture yourself with both your hands dangling in the cool running water. Birds are sweetly singing in the still mountain air. No one knows your secret place. You are in total seclusion from all the pressures and stresses of life. The soothing sound of a waterfall is music to heal your heart. The water is so clear that you can easily make out the face of the person you are holding underwater.

I gather you know the feeling! Unlike the avalanche of sentimental twaddle landing on our desks each day, this adult humour draws blood. While it is not quite up there in the same league as today's gospel with its frenzied amputation of body parts and plucking out of eyes, it certainly belongs to the same genre. For Jesus too is something of a comedian, it is just that we usually miss the mocking tone of voice and the twinkle in the eye. Yes, Jesus too is a comedian with a prophetic edge. His teaching confronts deeply serious issues, but with an outrageous lightness of touch, ambushing us just like that suggestion for rescuing a bad day. And he needs to be wily in making us see all the good going on outside the Christian community, as well as the bad we are often capable of perpetrating within the household of faith. In a word, we Christians have no monopoly on goodness.

There is such a thing as objective goodness, which means others are casting out demons, healing the sick, rescuing the lost, and doing God's work without even knowing it. Or perhaps they do know it but under another name - because millions of faithful people of other religious traditions as well as many atheists and agnostics also give of themselves to make the world a better place. The proper name for such selflessness may well be Jesus the servant Lord whose entire life is gift, yet it is not for us who know this to look down on others because they are not one of us, and Jesus is never greedy for the credit. Indeed, in giving ourselves exclusive airs and becoming proprietary, we betray the Lord of glory, becoming stumbling blocks. In the Greek New Testament the word is skandalon. It really is no laughing matter, but because we become stumbling blocks in the path of God's 'little ones who believe' Jesus says we deserve millstones for boat anchors!

Scandal, scandal, and more scandal – if your hand causes you to stumble cut it off, if your foot causes you to stumble cut it off, if your eye causes you to stumble pluck it out. We are not here to have our needs met, or to feel important, or make life difficult for our sisters and brothers, or look down on outsiders. All that matters is entering the Kingdom of God together. How on earth can we do it? Jesus says give this a try: 'Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'



Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

11 October 2009

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Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:13-27

As Jesus continues on his journey to Jerusalem, a long sequence in Mark's gospel bears on the question of possessions. What is real wealth? Where is real security to be found? Do we own things or do they own us? Is who I am more than what I have? These are all pertinent questions, of course, as we approach our annual Thanksgiving Sunday in a couple of week's time, as we look once more to how much we give to God's work through this parish. But if such questions are pertinent as we consider Christian stewardship of resources, the fact is that they are always pertinent. What makes us who we are? What is lasting and true? What is ephemeral and what is eternal?

The rich young man who runs up to Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life interests us because he is so like us. So often our focus is on ourselves, and the questions I've suggested we might be asking run the obvious danger of making us even more self-centred than we normally are. The man in the story assumes that there is something he must do to enter God's kingdom, to gain eternal life here and now. And, of course, there is something he must do, but this involves taking his eyes off himself and looking up and looking out. What he must do is more a change of attitude, more to do with opening his eyes than with striving harder. Our Lord is signalling this when he takes issue with the young man calling him 'good teacher'. "Why do you call me good; no one is good but God alone." This is not so much deflecting goodness from himself as attempting to shift the man's attention from what he must do to the goodness and generosity of God.

Before we can do anything of any value at all we must catch a glimpse of the sheer benevolence of God toward us, the forgiveness of God preceding all our thoughts and actions, the love of God going before us in every circumstance of life. If only we will relax in the warmth of this sunshine, if only we will stop our navel-gazing and look up and look out at the goodness and generosity of God all around us, we will find ourselves more than half-way home.

This is underlined by the fact that when Jesus starts listing God's commandments, the ones he chooses are what we call the 'social' commandments. In other words, these are not the commandments personal to each one of us as individuals, but those concerned with how we treat each other. "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother." Get over yourself! Look up, look out, look around.

"He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.'" What a sad remark this is! All these commandments kept, yet still his life is empty. But, Mark tells us, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him ..." It is not, of course, that Jesus loves him for having kept the commandments. God looks on us and loves us regardless. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'" In other words, trust the truth of God's love, sell what you own, think of what you can give to the poor rather than what you can grab for yourself, go beyond your many treasures to the true treasure, surrender yourself to that treasure which will still be yours when all other treasures evaporate; then come, follow me. Here is the

crunch for all of us. Do we really trust God? Can we really trust God with our lives? Can we put our money where our mouth is?

It has to be hugely significant that this encounter with the rich young man is the only occasion in the gospel when Jesus' call is rejected. The man does not follow, he goes away sorrowful, and Jesus lets him go. Love will not manipulate, love does not control. There is no pressure, no compulsion, nothing more than an invitation. "Do you turn to Christ?" is the question asked of us, and we are perfectly free to say no, just as we are perfectly free to say yes.



Saint Francis of Assisi

18 October 2009

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Mark 10:42-45

Saint Francis talked to the birds.

You may know the wonderful fresco of this scene by Giotto in the Upper Church at Assisi, the great two-decker structure built over his simple tomb?

All the birds are assembled on the ground, and Francis stands before them, his head inclined slightly towards them, his hand extended in blessing, bowing to them as he speaks.

Just what he said we don't know, just as we don't know how long he spoke. I'm no expert on the attention-span of birds, but I imagine this was a pretty short sermon.

Francis also seems to have been good with wolves, but I imagine they become restless fairly easily as well.

With this in mind, I will be very brief.

Jesus says, 'Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.'

This is the key for unlocking the mystery of Francis.

He wanted above all things to imitate Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve.

One of Francis' first companions says: 'He bore Jesus in his heart, Jesus on his lips, Jesus in his ears, Jesus in his eyes, Jesus in his hands, Jesus everywhere. Everything he said and did seemed to me to exhale God's perfume.'

Loving the world as Jesus loves it - the birds of the air, the flowers of the field, reverencing everyone we come across, especially the poorest and the most needy, the 'lepers' and outcasts whoever they happen to be - in all this there was a whiff of God's perfume about Francis, a sense that through Francis things are being put right somehow.

And so it is to be with us, as with all disciples of the Way.

We too are to be gentle and careful and wholesome and humble.

We are to know when enough is enough so as not to live greedily.

Let our prayer be that in everything we say and do, especially in our care for God's earth and God's creatures, by the intercession of blessed Francis, we too may give off a whiff of God's perfume.



Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

25 October 2009

Father David Wood
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Grace Anglican Church
Joondalup Perth, Western Australia

Jeremiah 31:7-9; Hebrews 7:21-28; Mark 10:46-52

As Jesus continues on his journey to Jerusalem, today he reaches Jericho where he heals the blindness of Bartimaeus and opens his eyes. As we continue on our journey with Christ, today we reach our annual Thanksgiving Sunday when we make our financial commitment for the coming year. This is a coincidence in that we chose this Sunday simply for its convenience, and the story of Bartimaeus just happens to be the gospel for the day. In other words, we didn't check in advance, and we certainly didn't choose the gospel text to fit our purpose. Nevertheless, today's story fits our purpose hand in glove, and this is yet one more example of the way the gospel enlarges our vision and lights up our path time and time again.

Our Lord's encounter with Bartimaeus is the last event on his journey, immediately before he enters Jerusalem, and perhaps we need to remind ourselves that it is one of Mark's book-ends. The journey begins with the healing of another blind man at the pool of Bethesda (8:22-26), a difficult two-stage cure, and ends with this very different instantaneous healing of blind Bartimaeus. With these bookends, Mark is making the point that this whole journey is an eye-opener: opening the disciples' eyes and enlightening us about who Jesus really is; opening the disciples' eyes and enlightening us about who God really is. Seeing and understanding is also, of course, what Thanksgiving Sunday is all about: opening our eyes and enlightening us about our response to this vision of the Christlike God.

Pitching what we do together today in terms of curing blindness might seem a touch dramatic, but it is in fact pretty close to the mark. For today isn't just about edging up our weekly giving a notch or two, grudgingly deciding to increase what we give because we know the parish isn't exactly breaking even financially. Today is really about leaving past ways behind, looking at things with new eyes, and embracing an entirely fresh vision for the future. The crux of this is a fundamental choice – the choice between giving God our left-overs and making God our first priority in our handling of money. By making God our number one priority, I mean determining in advance what we can and will give week by week and sticking to it. By giving God our left-overs, I mean fishing around on Sunday morning to see what remains in our purses and wallets after we have looked after ourselves and discharged all our other responsibilities. This is the small change approach in giving to God, and most of the cash peeping out of church collection bowls is in this sense small change – even when it includes the occasional \$50 or \$100 note. After all, it is easy to be generous occasionally or dig a bit deeper when we actually come to church, but it takes real commitment and real love to live generously and give generously each and every week whether or not we happen to be here. That is why I say that none of us who belong to this community of faith and make our spiritual home here should be content with being open plate givers. Open plate cash-giving is really for visitors. Weekly giving envelopes and direct debit are for those of us who belong – and this includes families and individuals and also our children. Adults who use weekly envelopes or direct debit know that this decision sets them free of money worries because there is only one decision to be made rather than endless little decisions. It is a bit like my car registration arriving in

the post this week: my only decision is whether or not I will continue to drive; if the answer is yes, then I simply pay the registration fee without question. This is not a perfect analogy by any means, but you get the idea: being a driver is part of who I am just as faith is part of who I am; I am not deciding week by week if I will drive my car, just as I am not deciding week by week if I am a Christian or not. We belong to Christ and the Church, and therefore we give – not because this is who we are, but because this is who we are becoming as we follow the One who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a way of life.

We can talk about all this in terms of taking responsibility for ourselves and the life of the church, and this is fine so long as we remember that taking responsibility really means the ability to make a mature response to something or someone. Unfortunately, we tend to hear 'responsibility' as a rather heavy word, more to do with duty than with love. It is this misunderstanding which is fundamental to our blindness. See responsibility as responding to Love with love, however, and the whole equation is transformed and transfigured and flooded with light and joy. Remember today how we touch lips and eyes to the wood of the cross on Good Friday; look to the cross as you make your pledge, look into the eyes of Christ and allow Christ to look into you – then it is simply a matter of putting your money where your heart is, and like wide-eyed Bartimaeus following the Lord on the way. Nothing more is asked of us, but also nothing less.



All Saints' Day

1 November 2009

The Reverend Dr Elizabeth Smith
Mission Plan Co-ordinator – Development Diocese of Perth Anglican Church of Australia

Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

Thank you for the invitation to preach at Grace Church today. I preached at an Anglican church called Grace once before, but that was in the wilds of the diocese of Western Michigan in the USA, in a town called Holland. Appropriately, Holland was a hotbed of dozens of Dutch Reformed churches with just one lone Anglican parish in the midst of them. The occasion was the ordination sermon for a young woman who'd lived next door to me in the dorm of the seminary in Berkeley, California while I was doing my PhD in liturgy and feminism and biblical hermeneutics, and she was doing her studies in ministry and theology. That young woman priest fell in love with another woman, a couple of years later. She said it was an example of God's sense of humour, that she'd spent three years doing solid theology in gay and lesbian heaven in the San Francisco Bay Area, but it took three years in a deeply conservative protestant town in a rural backwater for her to come to terms with her sexuality. Grace Episcopal Church in Holland, Michigan, was an inclusive church before the category was invented in the C of E in 2003. My friend could not only be accepted as a member there, but also as an ordained leader in ministry. So I am glad to know Grace Church in Joondalup, Western Australia, also wants to be an inclusive church.

Today at Grace we are celebrating two once-a-year special events. In the liturgical calendar inside Anglican churches, there's the feast of All Saints' Day. In the major events calendar of the region, there's the WA Pride Festival. At Grace, we have both the feast, and the festival. Now there's a challenge for the preacher! Even for a preacher who came back from her own time in the San Francisco Bay Area in proud possession of a badge that says, "I'm straight but not narrow!" Well, a wise preacher often starts with the bible readings, rather than with either the cultural context or the liturgical theme. So what do today's bible readings offer us? The first reading gave us the marvellous mountaintop picnic. God is promising a sit-down, slap-up, al fresco gourmet dinner, with food and wine matching and all the trimmings. The picnic won't be rained out even by death or disgrace, and even when there are tears before bedtime, God is going to wipe them all away. The second reading gave us the celestial city homecoming, the new Jerusalem. God is promising the intimate indwelling, the ultimate urban renewal, with water feature – the spring of the water of life. In the city, as on the mountaintop, there will be no place for death and grief and pain, and again, the citizens will have their tears wiped away by God in person. The third reading gave us not a vision of a gloriously perfumed future that we might very probably like to sign up for, but instead a snapshot of a very smelly and rather terrifying moment in the past. The corpse of Lazarus stinks, as Martha so sensibly reminds her friend Jesus. And there's the emotional hot-house of the sisters, the friends, the neighbours, the hangers-on all after more than a week of hope and rage and grief, of temper and tears. God's not wiping away the tears in this story. In this story, God in the flesh is too busy weeping.

So let's suggest that the tears – shed or unshed, wiped away or flowing bitterly, tears of anger, grief or sheer shock when the body of the beloved brother comes walking, bandaged, out of the tomb – the tears are the biblical key to today's two themes of the Pride Festival and the All Saints' feast. Yet this is strange, because surely there are not supposed to be tears at a festival. There are not supposed to be tears at a feast. Everyone is supposed to be happy, right? It's a celebration, right? I looked up the Pride WA website and it says the goal of the organisation is to "encourage the cultural expression and celebrate, champion and support the rights and freedoms of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersex

and queer" people in WA. And I don't have to look up a website to know that the Christian feast of All Saints is about the triumph of good over evil; it's about the saints who joyfully go marching in. It's supposed to be party time! The Church says it's party time – look at all those saints triumphant in bright array! And the Pride community says it's party time – maybe you even went to see all those GLBTIQ people in bright array at the parade last night!

But neither for the saints of Christian history, nor for the lesbian and gay people of our Perth community, is there a party without tears. Not yet. Those two bible readings where the tears are wiped away are dreams of what we hope and long for God to do; they are not descriptions of where we are right now. Where we are right now is somewhere between the friends and the sisters weeping with Jesus at dead Lazarus' grave, and the friends and the sisters trying to help resurrected Lazarus off with his burial bandages, with tears of shock and strangeness to add to the tears of loss and loneliness. The tears of joy do flow from time to time, as love is found and truth is spoken; but please God, the Church will never be a place where you can only come if you've got a plastic smile glued to your face and you think you're already living in the happy-ever-after of easy salvation. Even at the feast we share at the Lord's table today, we remember a death.

This is what the saints of the Church through the centuries have taught us. They didn't get to be saints by being kind and mildly cheerful through all life's little ups and downs. The saints raged and wept: raged over the world's evil and injustice, and wept over their own sins and shortcomings. The saints worked themselves up into a storm of prayer, or teaching, or giving, or hands-on washing of the feet of their smelliest and least grateful

107 neighbours. The saints did not get to be saints by dressing up in borrowed holiness. They ran and fought and thought and sweated their way till they were fit to wear the holiness that God wanted to clothe them with. The saints wept; and because they learnt through all their struggles to love their neighbour from their heart, they still weep for us, when they see how far we are from our own authentic holiness. And I think the lesbian and gay and bisexual and generally queer people of our community also teach us that there's a lot of tears still to be shed between here and heaven. If you're a same-sex attracted person in Australia today, you probably have not got here by going with the flow. The flow expects everyone to marry or at least partner with someone of the opposite sex, and have children and produce grandchildren. The flow demands everyone fit into nice tidy categories, and preferably nice tidy predictable couples. Yet the gay men and lesbians I know tell of the necessity and the cost of going against the flow. The risk of telling parents and friends that children and grandchildren are not going to happen, and why. The fear of discrimination in the workplace and violence in the street. The anger about the stereotypes and the unfunny jokes that target lesbians and gay men. And for same-sex attracted Christians, there are two more flows that you need to go against. First, the flow of the Pride community which, like most of Australian society only more so, expects gay men and lesbians to renounce and denounce the Church as one of the key institutions that stands against their "rights and freedoms." And second, the flow of the Church community, where even moderately sympathetic fellow church members are likely to blame on you the fraying of the fabric of the Anglican Communion. I don't think you call your whole community "Pride" unless you have had to live through a lot of "Shame." I don't think you give 2009 the theme of "homecoming" unless you have spent a lot of years, and a lot of tears, in exile.

So what do all these tears mean for a genuinely inclusive church? An inclusive church clearly needs to be well supplied with listening ears to hear the tough stories, and with plenty of handkerchiefs for mopping up the tears along the way. An inclusive church needs to be able to find God's humour in the midst of a crisis. An inclusive church needs to be willing to work hard at personal and collective holiness.: to think hard about theology, mixing intellectual and spiritual sweat with the tears of struggle and pain. An inclusive church needs to do something more than just open its doors to people who may have been rejected elsewhere. That's a start; yet we also need to become an active advocate for changes to the systems, the institutions, the habits and the rhetoric that caused and keep causing that rejection.

So by all means let's pause for a picnic with some fine wine and some rich food occasionally. And by all means let's wipe each other's tears gently away, until we finally arrive at the heavenly city where God will do the final mopping-up of all the sadness and pain. But let's also go where the pain is, and do our best to touch it with the suffering of Jesus Christ. Because that suffering brings great healing with it. Let's go where the conflict is, and do our best to address it with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. Because that

wisdom brings real power for transformation with it. And let's go wherever relationships of human love are forming, and connect them with the heroes of holiness, the saints of God. Because the saints bring such depths of hope and sacrifice with them. Thanks be to God.



Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

15 November 2009

Father David Wood
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Daniel 12:1-3; Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25; Mark 13:1-11

We are very near the end of the Christian year, in fact only one week away, and the gospel language gets dramatic. This drama is delivered to us in fantastic poetry. Now, when I say fantastic, I mean it. This is fantastic in the sense of being right over the top - darkly impressive, striking, memorable, frightening images. It is marvellous to read and marvellous to hear, and there is hardly a playwright who would not be proud to claim authorship. Whoever Mark was, he could certainly write! But it is fantastic too in the sense that it is not for a moment to be taken at face value. So when I call this apocalyptic language 'poetry' I mean that as well. This **is** poetry, and that means that the truth it carries is in no way literal, prosaic truth. The truth this fantastic poetry bears is of another kind. So we must listen with the ears of our heart, with all the powers of our imagination, being as attentive as we can to the mood and the mission. Then we will have some chance of picking up on the essential clues.

After the first roll, where there are wars and rumours of wars, nations and kingdoms rioting, earthquakes and famines, we are given this footnote - "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." Swamped by the poetic imagery, worried by what on earth it all means, we might very well miss this - "the beginning of the birth pangs." Then, buried at the heart of the second burst of beatings and betrayals, we suddenly find this - "The good news must first be proclaimed to all nations." This is why God the Spirit who temples within each one of us will give us the right words to say when we are in extremis, for here is Christ speaking up for himself when we are struck down and struck dumb. Regardless of the situation in which we find ourselves the charge laid upon us is always proclamation, offering the good news.

Now, in a sense these clues are one and the same. The urgency of this proclamation of the gospel, the good news of God's love, is our business. The church, it has been said, exists for those who are not yet members of it. We cannot hoard to ourselves the riches we have found in Christ. We cannot help sharing this wealth. If it is true that Christ comes that we might have life in all its fullness and abundance, then we want everyone to share this aliveness. The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning. Whatever the circumstances, our task is to get on with God's mission, proclaiming the way and the truth and the life.

It is not our task to worry about the apocalypse, fretting about the end of the world, or plotting the actual date. Sitting on mountain-tops, waiting for the Lord to come and smash things to smithereens, swallowing up all the sinners we are sick of putting up with, while saving us and those like us, is not the game plan. This is the religion of cranks, and Mark could not be plainer that it is a dangerous waste of time. We are not to be diverted from quietly and persistently living the gospel, working for justice and peace, celebrating the sacraments, proclaiming Christ graciously in word and in deed. "The good news must first be proclaimed to all nations." This alone is the mission - God's mission, our mission.

And the mission is matched by the mood of Mark's text. For there is a palpable sense of assurance here, a vital mood of trusting faith, absolute confidence in the faithfulness of God. Even if the poetry of our text turns out not to be poetry, even if the dark days actually come upon us, this will still be good news. Appearances notwithstanding, all things are secure in the hands of God; all things are held together in

the pierced hands of Christ. What looks and feels like disintegration and death is “but the beginning of the birth pangs”, which lead to new life. To a small church, lacking numbers, short of money, worried about the future – Mark’s church, our own church - today’s gospel is a shot in the arm.

This gospel calls us again to faithfulness and calls us again to authenticity. All that God requires of us is that we really live out our faith day by day so that others meet Christ in us. We gather together around the table of scripture and the table of the sacrament to be nourished for this ministry and mission. It is not always possible to believe that God really cares about us and our world: so much militates against such a vision. As we make Eucharist together Sunday by Sunday, however, sharing food for the journey, it is easy to trust that past, present and future really do belong to God. Fear corrodes and corrupts all our efforts in the name of Christ and the Church. Faith alone will win the day, giving birth to that new day, the glorious day of the Lord.