

Reading the Bible  
for  
Life-Direction  
on the  
Scholarly Path

(At whatever stage ...)

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# For the Grace of God has Appeared for the Salvation of all People

*A Series of Three Sermons  
on Paul's Letter to Titus  
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These Sermons seek to expound the book of Titus. I find it to be a neglected New Testament book but with its own distinct message. The three sermons are meant as expositions of the text and move through the text sequentially. The sermons follow the three chapters of this book.

- i. Setting things Straight.
- ii. The Social Setting of Sanctification.
- iii. Knowing Our Place in the Present Age.

## Titus 1 - Setting Things Straight

### **Introduction :**

*1. Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness*

This letter begins with Paul's statement of credentials. In response to a sermon like this we may be asked to formally declare our faith in the words of the Nicene creed. But here Paul boldly states his position. He confesses his faith. It is as if this is his letterhead right on top of the page. No one can mistake what this means. Here are three

great truths by which Paul turns the attention away from himself, and focuses his adoration, and our attention, to where it should be.

The elect of God live by faith, they walk in the truth, they seek godliness without which no-one shall see God. Faith and knowledge are here bound together but note that the faith referred to is nothing other than the human response to the knowledge of what God has done to make our godliness possible. Faith is not God; and neither is faith at the centre because that would put us at the beginning and the end of our faith. No God is the centre of our faith because He is the one who has made it possible, the One who has given faith to us as a gift.

*2 a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time,*

This is stated to emphasise that this faith has the whole cosmos within its scope, it derives from the faithfulness of God who keeps His promises, and it is hopeful ... it is open to the future, a future in which God will bring His purposes to fulfillment. Consider just how important it is that this is how Paul starts his letter. God has been working and will continue to work since

*3 at His appointed season He brought His word to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Saviour ...*

Paul is not just talking about the Christian faith in a vague and general way. He is specific - it has a personal dimension. It is his life he is talking about. And this life, the service of God for the sake of God's elect, has a particular historical location. It might have the potential to be historically formative and world-changing but Paul leaves that up to God. He is a man under orders. The word "preaching" means we are not to expect Paul's own story since the message is not his own. It has not only been given to him, to give him a knowledge of his own deliverance, it has also been given to him by command by God to do a work that God wants done.

You might say that this is heady stuff, and you would be right. Paul opens his letter formally but who could say this is cold and without life? Paul is aware of his readers - he writes to Titus and gives a Christian greeting

*4 To Titus, my true son in our common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Saviour ...*

It is also clear that it has been written in the knowledge that this letter will be read by more than just Titus. Hence the statement of credentials in verses 1-3. Paul does not just write in an *ad hoc* or random fashion but to a particular person, at a particular time and place, at a particular stage in his ministry, with particular and definite goal in mind. That then is how the letter begins.

## **The Principle Purpose for the Letter:**

*5 The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.*

In another version this reads “that you might mend what is defective”. Titus seems to have been something of a “fixer” as the other references in the New Testament indicate. Paul's comments in 2 Corinthians are filled with his great pleasure for what Titus achieved. These were some of the earliest instances when the church needed straightening out as it has always needed straightening out. Paul reminds his colleague of the ongoing strategy - the emphasis is upon the “you” - as I directed you - and so v.5 indicates that Paul insists that order in the life of the church on Crete is a matter of high priority, but it is Titus's task, not Paul's.

But do you think that Titus might have forgotten this? It's not likely is it? But this is written so that Titus can act, and also be seen to be acting, on Paul's advice by the others who read and hear this letter. Paul does not pass up the opportunity of conveying to Titus some of the wisdom given him by God. And that was also part of his motivation in writing the letter. There is an important principle here; Paul recognises Titus as the one “on the spot” - this does not mean that Titus is a law unto himself. On the contrary, it is his responsibility to choose those who fulfil the criteria of Godliness – no doubt Paul had confronted similar problems elsewhere and he knew that Titus needed support in his work amongst the people of God.

Presumably resistance to godly leadership is deeply entrenched. Christians have to take responsibility for the local forms in which their faith is expressed, but as followers of Christ they must rule their lives according the commands of the same Lord. Hence lawlessness is ruled out.

*6 An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man*

*whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.*

The “eldership” is to be shaped by specific principles. It is a public office, implying high moral standards. It is not for those running away from their familial and husbandly responsibilities. Paul can spell that out in principle and it is up to Titus to choose those who fulfil these criteria. Titus was a Greek convert but this did not stop Paul from formulating principles quite consistent with the overall teaching of the Old Testament. This does not mean that they have somehow left the Gospel and returned to a life of law- or works-righteousness. Paul had appointed Titus according to these principles and Titus is to appoint others in the same way. Paul's Old Testamental perspective is a crucial part of a strategy to correct the defects in Christian discipleship on Crete.

*7 Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless - not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain.*

What qualifications should such a bishop have? He must be blameless, above reproach! Paul gives us a list of what he shouldn't be like. This is a strange turn of phrase but it is a matter of doing God's “public” work; Paul is assuming a symbiosis between a leader's familial and public responsibilities. This does not mean that they are one and the same. But it is the one life of obedience to God's requirements that shape both and knit them together into one life. Those critics of Christianity who glibly accuse Paul of hating women because of some verses read out of context, should note that Paul is here arguing that the Gospel simply does not tolerate moral behaviour in public as a cover for violence in the home. The Christian has a seamless web of responsibility before God in the kitchen, the dining room, the bedroom - throughout in the household - and in the public square, the street, the market place. Paul then gives a list of what an elder should be like.

*8 Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.*

To say it again: an elder's life must be a seamless web of integrity. He must be able to function in public life and lead by example. This cannot be done if - as intimated in v.6 - his domestic life is in disarray, or his personal habits and dispositions are anarchic. Some might use

this text to keep women out of office, but that is not what Paul is addressing. That question had not arisen. Instead Paul is doing two other things here: he is stressing that it is important to get the right person for the job; it is most important that this kind of job is available to the right person. Paul is giving the criteria Titus must use as he sorts through the list of possible candidates.

*9 He must hold firmly to the reliable message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine, refuting those who oppose it.*

He must know what he believes; but more than that he must be able to defend the truth on which the Church of Jesus Christ is based. The incumbent needs to adopt an offensive posture because the job is more than mere defence.

These same principles remain in effect today. Paul is writing to Titus because certain things had been left incomplete; some things were seriously defective. These defects had not occurred overnight. Nor did they just happen without any cause. They arose for specific reasons and the implications were potentially disastrous not only for the church on Crete but for the company of followers of Jesus everywhere.

Paul addresses Titus as one who should know what is going on. The refutation of erroneous teaching must be based upon a knowledge of true teaching, of what it all means; and as such the ones who are to develop the pure doctrine must be knowledgeable.

It is not a matter of defining those in office as the ones who know. It is a matter of appointing those who know and who are able to discern the spirit of the times according to the Gospel. They are the ones who need to be appointed to the office. It is the knowledge of the truth of Jesus Christ leading to godliness, and that is the kernel of the job specifications Paul lists for Titus.

But what specifically was going on in the Church in Crete?

### **The Application :**

*10 For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group.*

The future of the Christian witness on Crete was at stake here. And it was not only at Crete; the entire Christian community was under threat from the “circumcision party”. The impact of erroneous teaching can not be simply located in the “church”; it has an invasive character in the entire fabric of our lives. Sometimes when we read the book of Acts we are not sure exactly how, for instance, Peter and Paul related; at times it seems as if the church was “on the verge” of supporting and encouraging people who were missing the Gospel entirely. The structure of the social life of the people of God was under attack and that is why Paul in Chapter 2 writes specifically about the everyday offices in which Christian people are to work out their salvation. There is no hint that the people of God – “God's elect” - have to order their lives along familial, ethnic and tribal lines. But this, in effect was what the circumcision party, was on about. The circumcision party held to a divisive teaching which would re-orient the Christian way entirely.

The sound doctrine which clearly refuted this ideology of ethnic superiority was to be taught so that insiders and fringe members, Jews and gentiles, Cretans and foreigners, were left with no doubt. It was not simply the outsiders who had come under the influence of this teaching. Jesus had warned his disciples that the enemies of the flock would come from within their midst as much as from outside; Paul here stresses the extensiveness of the problem they faced then and who will deny that we face it now?

*11 They must be silenced, since they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to - and all for the sake of dishonest gain.*

For Paul, an elder must be a person who can stand up and be counted - it is no minor matter. When Christian households are threatened, the life of the people of God in all dimensions is under attack. The issue is God or mammon. And the dishonest gain is not only in terms of possessions, houses or goods. It can be a dishonest gain if you assume public office for yourself when you are not qualified for it, or you keep others out of such office because they are qualified for it and you are not. You then allow your own selfish ambition to become the rule. This, says Paul, has devastating effects and it can ruin entire households. We should learn to expect and recognise the kind of deviousness which twists the Gospel for its own

purposes; but that tendency is also in our own hearts, in our own circles. We need to learn to resist it. Deceit has to be nipped in the bud, cut off at the roots. Deceivers have to be silenced. It is part of the awesome task of the people of God to participate fully in this, by having our own act cleaned up and by standing for the truth. But what was the teaching which had to be silenced?

*12 Even one of their own prophets has said, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons." 13 This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith.*

The group to which Paul was referring required circumcision for all, or at least that the church be ruled at all times and in all places by circumcised males. Those who were circumcised were to have the established and privileged positions among the people of God - a class structure was developing within the company of the faithful - it was tying faith in Christ to a social life-style in which a particular ethnic background had privileges not shared by the rest of the Church. This is the dishonest gain which the circumcision party sought. Not that the uncircumcised would be cast out - they would be needed to swell the numbers and open their wallets - but the Gospel was transformed according to an ideology in which faith in the coming of the Christ had been compromised. And women are thereby rendered second-class also by definition. Another principle for their life together was being suggested. This undermined the truth in a radical way, supplanting faith in Jesus Christ by a mythical, ethnic and gender stereotype. Living by such stereotypes is out, says Paul. Why? Because the major lines of division among the people of God are not ethnic or gender lines of demarcation; they are the lines drawn by faith, truth and godliness.

Such teachers of falsehood need to be taught a lesson. Maybe they will turn away from their errors and believe the truth - but the rebuke needs to be a sharp one. Not a hateful one; not a combative one; recall the standards expected of a bishop - *v.7 not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain*. The refutation has to be a godly refutation and must derive from the bishop's adherence to the truth. The bishop's trustworthiness (v.8) must derive from the trustworthiness of the Gospel itself, and because of this, the aim of the refutation is clear. Those taught *14 will no longer pay any attention to Jewish myths or*

*to the commands of those who reject the truth.* The avoidance of such erroneous myths pertaining to Jewish ethnic spiritual superiority is actually a qualification for those who are taking on leadership of the flock. Paul is totally opposed to grafting any “ethnic stereotypes” onto the Gospel, and does not resile from referring to faithful followers of Jesus Christ as God's elect. They are God's because they have been born of God by His Spirit - “born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or will, but born of God”.

Paul's teaching should cause us in the Church of Jesus Christ in Australia at the beginning of the 21st century (note Paul's future perspective v.2!) to seriously reconsider the way we view the knowledge that is required of Christian leaders – our learning, scholarship and professional expertise. We are not going to combat the erroneous myths of ethnicity, gender, religion and ideology only by appointing wise elders in our Churches. That has to be done. But you will note that Paul is concerned in this book about how the Christians were living in Crete; the concern for right teaching is geared to the Christian life - we hear very little about the internal organisation of what we today call church-life. But even though we are not on Crete, and our society is more complex, the battle is basically the same. Combating those who refuse the Gospel and who foment all manner of erroneous teaching based upon ethnic, gender and class myths requires much application and a great increase in our devotion to the truth. What does it mean to follow Jesus Christ in the professional areas of our complex life where doctrines opposed to His Rule lead many up the garden path?

Such refutation can not be done in a Christian way without knowledge of the truth; refuting erroneous doctrines in health and welfare, in medicine and nursing, in law and politics, in art, music and literature, in sport and recreation, let alone in the home where we might still on occasion gather around the box if we are not at our lap-tops. It requires trustworthy office-bearers in these spheres of society to oversee the work of developing a Christian mind in which we all need to share. And it is not simply a matter of combating errors as if the “truth” will automatically “pop up” as soon as all the errors are unmasked. Often it is said that the most effective line of defence is through counter-attack and we need well elaborated scientific thinking in all these areas so that nurses, doctors, politicians, farmers,

lawyers, teachers can do their work as Christ's faithful soldiers and servants and present positive Christian perspectives. They too are the ones who in this society are also "in office" and they need the support of us all. But just as the people in the desert under Moses believed that they could counter-attack when God was actually forbidding it, so we should not think that we can "attack" these areas without adequate training in the knowledge of the every-day problems in these areas. If we go on the counter-attack without knowledge, as many as prone to do, we are in danger of being routed like the children of Israel were of old.

Paul's teaching to Titus refutes the notion that just because you are in a position of power does not mean that you are capable and competent. Just because you have the power does not mean that you know what you are doing. Paul puts paid to that idea. In fact if you assume that you are capable and competent when you do not have the right knowledge and understanding, you run the risk of developing myths as destructive as the ones described here. Paul calls upon us to beware! To be self-critical. After all, the circumcision party thought that they had a thing or two to teach others because of what had been done to them. Could we not say that they thought that because they were adhering to their ethnic interpretation of God's purposes then other people just had to listen? They assumed they had the inside running. In the same way many are the calls within the Church for us to pay heed to the latest theological re-interpretation of the Gospel. Whilst this might safeguard the privileged position of a theologian or two for another season - sales go up - it does not actually provide the understanding and insight which the many Christian professionals in our midst require as they seek to serve their LORD and Master. Whilst theology might have its own peculiar scientific task we must learn to resist all theologically-generated myths that turn our attention away from what God in Christ has done for us. We must also learn to discern who is trying to manipulate the pure teaching of Jesus Christ for their own personal advantage.

Today, in Australia, we do not tend to have to battle with the "Jewish myths" that Paul perceived to be white-anting the Christian church on Crete. But today we have many "myths", of ethnic, gender and religious colour, which try to get our attention. They have been specifically designed to wrest control - not by sound teaching - but

through pressure tactics and making people feel guilty so that adopt a subordinate posture, inducing them to see themselves as “outsiders” who need to do something special to get in on the inside. How are they to do that? Probably by going to some course, accepting the leadership of some teacher. Usually there is a cost involved in money terms. These tendencies can also be seen throughout public life; sadly, they are rife in the Church of Jesus Christ, when also self-interested parties seek their own selfish gain. Who will deny that they exist in the churches, in your church? We are all not immune to this.

We should not become complacent. Paul knew that Jesus Christ is the LORD of all Cretans, even of those who refuse to follow His Law and who instead try to live according to some or other pious stereotype. And He is certainly is the LORD, the LORD of Grace whose Kingly Rule is not diminished because we don't come from the “right” family, or a family without the right kind of blood, or were born overseas, or were born male or female, Jew or gentile, insider or outsider, bond or free, or were born an Evangelical, or a Roman Catholic, or do not have the right qualifications, have not gone to the right school etc. etc.

It is the Kingly Rule of Jesus Christ which makes Paul so concerned in v.11 where he sees the havoc which false teaching born of self-interest wrecks upon Christian and God-fearing households. It is wrecking havoc among believers; why? Because they are trapped into a scheme in which they supposedly can no longer boldly approach their Heavenly Father; they are being taught to hesitate; they can no longer boldly confess that God, the father of Jesus Christ is the Lord of their household, their study, their work. Why? Because presumably they didn't allow a knife to be wielded upon them in the right way! They are rendered not good enough! What a travesty! There are comparable schemes afoot in our midst today; for instance, those who do not study theology or business-management, for instance, are encouraged to feel that their studies are a second-rate contribution to the kingdom of God until they have enrolled in a course in theology. And Paul goes on the attack :

*15 To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted.*

He sums up their problem - guilt makes men go from bad to worse;

those who judge themselves too severely and conclude they are too unclean for Jesus' blood to restore them, will end up living by a spiritual dynamic they will foist upon others. But, Paul implies, that those who confess to have been cleansed by Divine operation, have a knowledge of truth and are led to godliness. They are sinful enough; the blood of Christ is more than enough. They do not have to become more sinful in order to become more sanctified; their own ethnicity is not rendered obnoxious; by subordinating themselves before an ideal they concoct goals in which they oppose the truth. Recall Paul's comments about the mythological picture of Cretan society fomented by a Cretan who had joined the circumcision party! The teaching of Titus is to refute such ungodly "repentance" by pointing the true way. Paul takes the circumcision party to task and says that it is precisely this teaching which is lying, evil brutality and deceitful in its quest for dishonest gain. The circumcision party is well and truly bucketed:

*16 They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.*

They have missed the boat completely. Try and join the Gospel with mythology - even piously framed stereotypes of what it means to be a pure breed either in ethnic terms or gender terms or ritual terms - and you end up headed down the path to destruction.

That is what Paul was writing about in the first chapter. In the second chapter we have an outline of what this redeemed (non-ethnically circumscribed) way of life means for people of all ages, for all the different kinds of office bearers in households, for husbands and wives, for fathers and mothers, for children. The entire company of God's people are on the march, so to speak. This is the social setting of sanctification. And the third chapter concerns knowing who we are and acting accordingly in this present age. Jesus Christ rules. He frees us from the slavery of sin and Paul is keen to remind Titus that even slaves become participants in the Grace of Jesus Christ and they too are part of the company whose reason for existence is to live lives of thankfulness.

## LET US PRAY

Almighty God and Loving Heavenly Father :

Out of your great love and mercy toward us, you sent Jesus Christ into this life of ours for our redemption. We thank-you that you have called us to order our lives with strengthened and encouraged daily service. We thank you that we can live happily before Your Throne of Mercy and that you have given us the great privilege of caring for our neighbour. Give us a special portion of your grace to help us when we have to face telling a neighbour, even a Christian friend, that they have taken the wrong path. We are aware that things continually need setting straight in our own lives; in our churches, in our households, in our marriages and families; in our schools; in our work; in all the things our hands find to do. So we have no grounds for pride. But we know that we so often fudge the issues and so like Titus we need the strengthening which your Word of Grace alone can give us for this task, and our knowledge needs renewing and our hope needs refreshing. Graciously lead us and enable us to take courage and stand for the truth. Lead us away from all error and unite us from our hearts in the communion of Your Son Jesus Christ, so that in all our words and works, formal and informal, we might deepen and extend the praise of Your Holy Name. AMEN

# Titus 2 The Social Setting of Sanctification.

*1. You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine. (2) teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. (3) Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. (4) Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, (5) to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God. (6) Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled. (7) In everything set an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness, (8) and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us. (9) Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, (10) and not to steal from them, but to show them that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive. (11) For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. (12) It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, (13) while we wait for the blessed hope - the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, (14) who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (15) These then are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you.*

## Titus 2 - Godliness for All.

### I. Introduction

Remember the purpose for the letter which is spelled out in 1:5

*The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.*

Previously, I explained that this letter was written in the face of the serious threats to the Christian community on Crete, and in the rest of the Mediterranean world, posed by the teachings of the *circumcision party*. This "Jewish supremacist" group were confusing the pure

confession of faith in the Risen Lord.

The book of Titus gives us good guidance for when we, like Titus, are faced with teaching and a way of life which was ripping the heart out of the Gospel.

As we might expect chapter 2 builds on what we read in chapter one. The circumcision party were wanting a Gospel which acknowledged that Old Testament traditions were the right way for everyone. Presumably this was their interpretation of the Scripture which Jesus quoted : *Salvation is of the Jews!* So, if Jesus was of Jewish descent then all of his followers had to adopt those Jewish customs which Jesus accepted and thereby order their lives according to such biblical patterns. This is what Paul was concerned about. So he was concerned that the elders of the Christian community knew what they believed and lived what they believed.

Due to the circumcision party the future of the Christian witness on Crete was under a cloud. But when believers are reminded that Jesus Christ has liberated men and women to follow Him, we are strengthened spiritually. Jesus said : Follow me! For us this does not mean : "First you must adopt the customs I adopted." When Jesus said his disciples must wash each others feet he did not mean that we have to wear sandals. But we do have to listen and work out what it does mean for us as His disciples.

Jesus had said that the law and the prophets bore witness to Him. Now there were those Jewish followers of Jesus who claimed that Jesus bore witness to the law and the prophets as the way to live. It sounds the same but it can actually turn the good news upside-down. In effect, such an interpretation of Jesus wants to use His person and His teaching to endorse a particular set of customs that His disciples have adopted, or have been born into or have developed. The circumcision party were wanting to change the Christian life so that ordering your life according to the teaching about circumcision gave overall direction to a cultural or ethnic pattern. If you followed the customs that Jesus adopted then you could legitimately claim to be a follower of Jesus!

When the doctrine of Godliness in Christ is undermined in this way, then the social life of the people of God is placed under enormous

strain. If the circumcision party succeeded in their aims in ensuring that the Christian church became and stayed a Jewish sect then the unity which believers shared *in Christ* would be replaced by a unity in the cultural traditions into which Christ was born. This is not on, says Paul.

Jesus Christ is indeed the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets - salvation is of the Jews. Yes! But salvation for all nations and all peoples and not just or primarily for the children of Israel or for those who adopt particular ethnic customs!! Christ shall have dominion over all tribes and families and nations and peoples. He is the King of Kings not only to judge them, but to bring Grace and Mercy for the humble and righteous who seek Him and live according to His commandments!

So what does chapter 2 of Paul's letter specifically say to the everyday life of Christian people on Crete. It is notable that there is just no mention of ethnic background here. This does not mean that Paul was unaware of people's culture. The Word of God is not silent about these things. But the Word of God simply has nothing in common with the view that a *cultural background with the appearance of Godliness* is the same thing as living a Godly life.

Now this applies to us. Coming from a Christian family is not the same as living a Christian life. Going to church as a weekly custom is not the same thing as repentance. Coming from a Christian school is not the same thing as submitting to Jesus Christ. We might hope that those who go to a Christian school will have living examples of what serving Christ means, but we are not of the view that you can't be a Christian unless you have gone to a Christian school. Those who do not have the benefit of a Christian education might well have special problems in their professional life. Having a Christian education is a good thing and we should be thankful for it. Coming from a Christian family is a good thing - be thankful for it. Going to church to worship the Lord God is a good custom - be thankful you can meet together. But as much as these things are *good* they are not *God*. Sounds simple doesn't it!

Now we can see why it was that the circumcision party was *ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to - and all for the sake of dishonest gain*. The dishonest gain was that they were

wanting those of Jewish background, those who favoured Jewish customs to have priority in the church. The elders had to be appointed to encourage all Christians to live Godly lives. The elders were no elite; they could not be in the forefront in all spheres of life. Nor are they are Christian Caesar's. Elders are appointed to serve the flock of Christ by encouraging those who are called to render service to Christ in the frontline of the battle, in everyday life.

## **2. The Pastoral Advice :**

Chapter Two is like many other passages in the New Testament letters of Paul, Peter and John. Chapter 2 is the social application of Chapter One's appeal. The more I read this book the more I am convinced that this advice is not just general; it is specific. Paul tells Titus that the "circumcision" ideology is turning Christians in upon themselves; the task instead is to form social life as a company of the People of God. It is the same today; the problems which face us as a company of Christian people, which threaten to make us turn in upon ourselves, can be met as we listen to God's word.

The key point of this letter is this : the divisive teaching could be resisted when Christians help each other to serve God in the social relationships in which they find themselves - we serve God by being thankful where we are, by being who we are. it is not a matter of trying to be something we are not; it is not a matter of trying to prevent others from living the Christian life because we do not share the same background.

We focus upon what we in Christ owe to each other and to our neighbours, because we know that what we owe to God we could never hope to pay and God Himself has taken care of all that!! Paul was concerned that the circumcision party was turning the followers of Jesus Christ in upon themselves.

## **3. Teaching to all : Male and female, Young and Old**

The letter aims to bind the Christians together.

*You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine, instructing the older men (in the meaning of) temperate behaviour, forming lives worthy of respect, which are themselves self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance.*

Paul's explicit instruction to Titus is to instruct the older men. They are singled out - if he had been writing on behalf of the circumcision party the letter would have assumed that what he had to say had to be conveyed to those with power and authority - the older men. He would not have singled out the older men for special treatment. Why? In the circumcision ideology the older men, the men of experience, would have the priority! It would be taken for granted. But Paul does single them out. What is the rule by which they have to live, as faithful followers of Jesus Christ? Giving those with a ritual cut the priority? Having a ritual cut (if you are male) to show your piety? Not at all. Rather the older men are to live by the rule of Godliness.

The relations between the generations needed to demonstrate godliness as well. This was an important dimension of the life of the Christian community on Crete, and it is very important for us today. How are the generations to respect each other? Is it a matter of men and boys having submitted themselves to the same surgical operation? No. The answer is Godliness. Paul had invoked this in the initial chapter.

Remember that the appointment of suitably qualified elders indicates that such elders (*presbuteroi*) had special tasks which other older men (*presbutas*) and women (*presbutidas*) do not have laid upon them. Thus the structure of respect begins with those who are older - binding them all to others; binding them together by the same teaching.

When a bishop (*episcopo*) is appointed the relationships between the Christian adults on Crete would be transformed in subtle ways. It reminds me of what happens in an op-shop staffed by volunteers when a paid manager is appointed. The entire operation undergoes a transformation and for this reason the volunteers, who made the enterprise into a going concern in the first place, need to be encouraged to fulfil their (new) responsibilities in a new situation. Sometimes singling out one person for office can be divisive. But what does Paul say : Teach in accord with sound doctrine. In this context that means; teach people that having a teaching office doesn't mean that you are more important in the Kingdom of God!

The relationships between males and females also needed encouragement and that is part of the reason why Paul reminds Titus

to encourage the older men - just because others have been appointed to special tasks doesn't let the other men and women off the hook. And just because some have been appointed to special tasks of over-sight certainly didn't let the women off either!

*Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.*

This is a remarkable passage. Paul knows that in the Gospel women are called to be wholly engaged in the work of teaching, but even more remarkable is the fact that their work - at this time it was with focused toward other women - was part of the fabric of the growth and development of the Kingdom of God. So much for the (male) circumcision party's view of how things should run.

It is not clear whether Paul is exempting women from the special oversight role of the Bishop [presbuteroi/episcopoi] spelled out in Chapter One. But what is clear is that Paul does not explicitly forbid for all times and in all places suitably qualified women from taking up their part in the historical task of education and refutation of erroneous teaching. The teaching responsibilities of the older women were crucial to the overall strategy. If Paul had meant to exclude women we can be sure he would have written so explicitly. But clearly he is "on the war path" here because the circumcision party were spreading division - division between the generations; division between men and women; division between boys and girls.

Rather than letting women off the hook, Paul tells them to get cracking, to get working to develop right and proper understanding among the people of God. Admittedly this society seems to have been organised in a traditional and tribal Greek manner.

But Paul challenges any attempt to segregate women off from the responsibility they have to develop right doctrine and right conduct.

Knowing the right doctrine they are not left to keep it to themselves. Besides, he implies, if they do not do it right then outsiders may speak badly of the Word of God. Paul certainly has a "high view" of the role or roles of women in the kingdom of God. This is not women

"off in a corner"; this is addressed to women as full players in God's Kingdom.

It reminds us of Israel in the wilderness on the brink of the promised land as described in our reading from Numbers 13 & 14. Just as Moses and Aaron with Joshua and Caleb were united as old and new guard in the forward march of the people of God on the brink of the promised land, in the face of serious rebellion, so Paul here reminds Titus that male and female, particularly the older adults, are called to serve God together and in this way unite the Christian witness, avoiding being distracted from their primary loyalty by the Jewish myths and traditions of the circumcision party.

Under Christ history never stands still. The idea that women have a positive role in the proclamation of the Gospel, let alone a positive teaching office, would have really gotten the circumcision party into a fury. We can imagine Paul's wry smile as he pens these words. Christ is Lord! Just because Jesus was unambiguously male does not limit Him in the gifts He gives to the sons and daughters who see visions and dream dreams!

The circumcision doctrine was a male-centred doctrine, a male-centred way of life and a male-centred understanding of the Gospel. "Church life" under this regime would mean that at best women were off to one side, learning their own place by listening to what God said to men, but probably it would degenerate into women listening to men!! If such a view of woman is right, Paul would never have written this letter! And he certainly would not have addressed women so directly as he does here.

God chose to send His Son to seek and to save the lost and that choice cannot mean the exclusion of women from salvation. Quite the opposite. Elsewhere, Paul poetically insists that (the office of) woman will be saved through child-birth, namely with the birth of a Saviour (1 Timothy 2:15). This way does not tie the Christian church to a male-centred idea of ministry, or exclude women from contributing fully and according to their God-given talents to the ongoing sanctification for the entire People of God. But it does mean that the followers of Christ, obedient to the Scriptures, are to respect the office of woman according and the vocation of motherhood, and the other competencies, talents and responsibilities which women legitimately

hold. The Bible says that God acted in the way He did through Christ to establish the right worship of God in our hearts - for old and young, for men and women. Paul wanted to prevent households descending into disarray. All those who named the name of Christ could have Christian households - households blessed by God's grace. Public office can be a distraction from the immediate task of setting one's house in order - and if men were brawlers and women were tipplers or wine addicts then they should not be elders, and can not set a good example. Women are to be taught to be reverent, rather than slanderers, so that they can teach what is good. This is an important part of Paul's emphasis. Women are to be taught so that they can teach. This is also what the famous passage in Ephesians 4:11 says:

*It was He who gave that some be apostles, some prophets, some pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for the work of ministry, so that the body of Christ may be built up ...*

Paul is concerned that the younger women also face their tasks in the Kingdom. They too have to "walk the talk". The example of the older women is covered by a spirit of reverence. It is not traditional - it is Godliness. The younger women had to become conversant with the faith, fully able to assume their own adult responsibilities when the time comes. Paul, the Jewish Christian, respects the traditions on Crete. He didn't tell Titus to teach the younger women. He was rather concerned that Titus would use his apostolic injunction to empower the older women in their tasks.

Women's place also had to be safeguarded against the threat of the circumcision party because make no mistake their contribution was under a cloud as long as the *circumcision party* had a foothold among Christian groups. Subjection to one's husband is enjoined. Note it is not a matter of subjection to the head of the household - it is a teaching that assures us that Christ has an absolute dominion over all of life. A pious, reverent way of life, a life of gentle grace, is what is called for. It is the older women who are to teach the younger women to be submissive to their husbands - it is not formulated to imply that a woman is less than a woman if she does not marry; it is a teaching that says that there is work to be done by women - married and unmarried - for the benefit of the entire body of Christ, which can not be done by anyone else. Paul is keen to safeguard that.

We hear a lot of talk about the inappropriateness of women "obeying"

their husbands, when men are only called to cherish their wives. Let us keep in mind that Paul's letter here is a forceful rejection of male supremacy, as well as concerned, as he is in all his letters, of preserving the God-given integrity of marriage. The wonder and mystery, as Paul points out, is that God allows us to view marriage as a picture of Jesus' bridegroom's love for the Bride-Church. And let the present-day secularists complain that Christianity is anti-human - let male supremacists whinge, let feminists whimper, let Gay activists cry "foul!" but the Word of God in Paul's letter to Titus simply reminds us that marriage between a man and a woman is God-ordained and a relationship which is meant to be one of mutual submission, for mutual benefit to the Glory of God! Marriage is no human invention - it is a gift of God and that means that not only men and women separately should honour it as an institution, but the man and the woman together must learn to submit to God as the Lord of marriage since it is in Christ's submission to His Father's will in laying down his life for the bride that our lives - including our own marriages - before God have been restored.

The circumcision teaching not only posed a threat to families; it posed a threat to marriages. The only way to overcome that threat is to develop Christian marriages and Christian families which flow out of such Christian mutual submissiveness. But read the letter carefully and note that the principles which are formulated here are also relevant to the lonely, unmarried, the lonely and the single. Paul is eager to have Titus free up the people of God on Crete to full and submissive service. The submissiveness which Christ Jesus demonstrated is a great and amazing good news for all people but I suspect particularly to the younger people who are on the verge of adulthood.

*(6-8) Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled. In everything set an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness, and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.*

Young people have to find their own place under God's Heaven. Very often they find themselves rebelling against the overly concerned control of parents. We do not hear pious advice to submit to your parents and do whatever you are told. Instead, we find that the weight of the teaching is upon the example of holy living set by the elders,

the older men and women. Without such example it IS very difficult to live a Christian life. It is almost as if Paul is saying that young people can be given good parental advice once the pious, reverent and holy life has been established among their parents and their generation. In this context it is "Do what your parents advise - it is for your own good!" Young people do not have to wait until their parents are perfect before they can participate fully in God's Kingdom.

Paul respects Titus's responsibility - he has a "direct line" here to the young men, but when it comes to the young women Paul advises him to proffer his advice through the older women. The social pattern as had then developed on Crete required such a specific differentiation. Paul enunciates a norm which places utmost emphasis upon all members of Christ's body hearing the word and doing it, according to the opportunities that present themselves.

Paul's method is to insist that each step along life's pathway involves submission to Christ's Lordship. Hence in Cretan society where the social fabric was segmented in a gendered way men and women were to operate in full submission and in "full service". Women's friendships are often the glue that keep the social fabric together; we should all rejoice in these kinds of relations within and between generations.

Let us keep in mind that if young people are to grow to maturity in Jesus Christ then they are to be encouraged in their own familial environments; it is from our families, our churches, our schools, our work that we learn the value of self-control. The picture is of a full-orbed service, full-orbed devotion by all - each doing their own task unto the Lord. Humble devotion to God on all fronts. In this way, and only in this way, will opponents be silenced.

It is not just across generations, within male-female relations within generations, support for younger people - Paul knows that the Gospel tends to bear fruit in the midst of an economic and political structure. The proclamation also bore fruit among the population of slaves.

*(9) Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in every respect, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, (10) and not to steal from them, but to show them that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive.*

The message of subjection to Jesus Christ - the dynamite of the Gospel - also goes out to slaves - Paul assumes that Jesus Christ has fitted slaves to sit under the teaching of the Gospel. Directly and immediately they too are part of the onward march of the Gospel. Can you imagine what would have happened to slaves under the circumcision teaching? Circumcision would have been a tool either to incorporate or exclude slaves from the company of the people of God. Paul advises Titus to deal directly with slaves. He is to address them as those with full membership rights. They are not included in God's Kingdom through their masters; Paul's rejection of circumcision prises open a social institution which needed reformation. Such positive development for slaves would be cut off if the circumcision teaching gained a firm hold. Instead of circumcision Paul announces good news for slaves - serving God and doing good where they are!

Clearly slaves are addressed in a political context. Paul does not call for insurrection or passive resistance. In all things lawful slaves are to do the bidding of their masters. They are to fulfil their work contract. The institution itself might be structurally wrong in our view, but slaves are called to live their lives serving God. Slaves are to be taught the word that comes to them, for them.

When we think about it that is what Paul has been writing about the entire community of the church on Crete - the older, the younger, and the men and the women, the slaves and the free. All are to be taught the word that comes to them, for them. How was it possible that the Gospel could be preached to all for all? It is this ...

*11 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all people.*

Here is the central doctrine. It hits the circumcision party for six. Jesus Christ has come. The entire emphasis of the law and the prophets finds its focus in Him.

And all people are now called to life in Him. In subjection to Jesus Christ slaves, women, children, like everyone else, have their own important tasks. They are members of society. They are subject to Him in all situations. And just in case his words are taken as an endorsement of possible sinfulness by slave-masters, or one or other group, Paul continues :

*12 This word teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age . . .*

This is the same word which has been addressed to elders in chapter one! Paul is writing to say "No!" to the circumcision party. A larger agenda is revealed. Patience and urgency are mixed together, giving an horizon within which to work. Paul when he speaks of slaves and masters has Joseph, in Egypt, in mind who had to suffer many privations. But what glory was his! He was able to participate in his generation by helping to build up the people of God who in God's time would move on and claim the promised land. Now there is something even greater than a promised land for those who are captured by this grace of God which has appeared for the great benefit of all types and kinds and conditions of people. All of us. Each of us motivated by godly self-discipline given in the Grace of God in Christ! But it is not just obedience now - it is right living in terms of a horizon filled with hope. We live like this because we are filled with hope. The circumcision party deflected away from godly living; not only from the right path, but from the gospel itself.

*13 while we wait for the blessed hope - the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, (14) who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.*

It is because of Jesus Christ, that all of God's people, wherever they are found, are eager to live their lives by doing good. It is a Gospel which tells us that we cannot bring it all to completion, but our work is intensely important nevertheless. The teaching and preaching of the Gospel was an appeal filled with mercy and grace. For those who are willing to take their sins upon their own heads, for those who will not renounce ungodliness, the preaching of the gospel of forgiveness passes them by, and they will concoct myths, make threats and try to engender a false sense of guilt in others - but Christians are eager to do good. As it sits in the letter verses 13 & 14 reassure us that we are covered as we are busy living our lives according to verses 1-12. Despite all the tensions between the various age-groups and older and younger, slave and free, and all the possible tensions that might emerge as people learn how to live with each other, Paul insists that Titus adopt an attitude of encouragement. mixed with courage and self-respect.

*15 These then are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you.*

Paul was content. This was the basis of his own life, teaching and conduct. This was to be the same for Titus. This was to be the same for the people of God on the island of Crete. Paul had been on the "other side" at one stage. But he had bowed the knee to Jesus Christ and knew that he no longer had anything to run away from. And that Titus too could face the challenges that lay ahead full on. It is by God's grace in Christ, and in Christ alone, that a life ruled by Godliness is possible for all despite the differences and difficulties and in the midst of the differences and difficulties. AMEN

#### LET US PRAY :

Lord God of Heaven and Earth, Father of Jesus Christ, Ruler of the Nations : Hear the prayers we offer. Accept our thanks for speaking to us in our hearts, directly and specifically about our life of service!

Give us grace as men and women, older and younger, boys and girls, to submit to each other out of love for You and in thankfulness for what you have done! Empower us by your Word and Spirit as we serve you, this night, this week, in this place. Teach us to live confidently knowing that the Gospel has come to us despite all the differences and difficulties and in the midst of differences and difficulties. Lord God may your kingdom come and your will to have your Son, Jesus Christ honoured, respected and cherished in our lives be done. For Jesus Christ's sake. AMEN

# Titus 3 Knowing Our Place in the Present Age.

*(1) Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for any honest work, (2) to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarrelling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all men. (3) For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another; (4) but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, (5) he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, (6) which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, (7) so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life. (8) The saying is sure. I desire you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to apply themselves to good deeds; these are excellent and profitable to men. (9) But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels over the law, for they are unprofitable and futile. (10) As for a man who is factious, after admonishing him once or twice, have nothing to do with him, (11) knowing that such a person is perverted and sinful; he is selfcondemned. (12) When I send Artemus or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there. (13) Do your best to speed Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way; see that they lack nothing. (14) And let our people learn to apply themselves to good deeds, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not to be unfruitful. (15) All who are with me send greetings to you. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all.*

## **Recapitulation : Chapters One & Two**

The principle purpose for the letter is in 1:5 -

*... I left you in Crete ... [to] ... straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.*

So, in the first Chapter, Paul has spelled out a strategy for dealing with the weaknesses in the life and thinking of the Cretan Christians.

The elders and leaders are to be Holy - it is neither their ethnicity nor their gender which is to be their primary characteristic, but their submission to God. This is the first step toward restored health of the

followers of Jesus Christ. Holy leaders of the flock - clear and unambiguous direction from elders who know what they are about.

But Chapter Two develops this theme in an important way. Elders have to live godly lives because of what Jesus Christ has achieved, but then so do *all* Christians old and young, male and female, adults and children, Jew and Gentile, slave and free.

All are to be treated as members of God's Kingdom, because in Christ all are included in service of the King. The grace of God extends to all. And Paul has been pretty ruthless in identifying the

*... many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group (1:10).*

The integrity and character of Christian witness on Crete was at stake here. And it was not only a problem on Crete; the entire Christian community was under threat from the "circumcision party" - we might say that this was a group who engineered control through manufacturing guilt trips. They insisted on making people live by a standard which they themselves couldn't keep (Galatians 2:11-21). Paul had known about this because he had been caught up in that in his former life when he was engaged in trying to ruthlessly exclude Jesus Christ from his life. The erroneous teaching applied not only to the four walls of a "church"; its invasive character challenged the entire fabric of the Christian life.

Sound doctrine had to refute this guilt tripping by the ethnic supremacists. The Gospel had to be taught so that insiders and fringe members, Jews and Gentiles, Cretans and foreigners, were left with no doubt. Jesus had warned his disciples that enemies of the flock would come from *within* their fellowship; here Paul stresses the extensiveness of the problem they faced then and which we, with different historical and cultural background, face now.

Chapter Two is not just some good advice tacked on the end of a letter. Chapter 2 is not just "application". It is the outline of a strategy, a social perspective, which is a part of the message itself. Paul knows that Elders, as leaders among Christian believers, are not, and cannot be, in the position of all supreme overlords in all spheres of life. Elders, have a calling to serve, to rightly use the power Christ has given them for, those who indeed are in the forefront of battle. And we

know who these are:

*11 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all people.*

In other words, Jesus Christ has come. The entire emphasis is changed. In subjection to Jesus Christ even slaves are catapulted into the front-line of the Christian battle. The year of Jubilee has been fulfilled in a totally unexpected way. God brings in His Kingdom not just by setting slaves free, as under the new dispensation. Under the new dispensation slaves are especially free to be the ones who announce the coming of the Kingdom! They too have a most important task. They are the means by which the Good News will infiltrate society. They are His followers, subject to Him in all situations. And just in case his words are taken as an endorsement of possible sinfulness by slave-masters Paul continues

*12 This word teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age*

In Chapter 2 this way of life is described for people of all ages, for all the different kinds of office bearers in households, for husbands and wives, for fathers and mothers, for children. The entire family of God's people are caught up in this, in their life together and in the several families. This is the social setting of sanctification.

But now in the third chapter, we read that we are all freed slaves. Paul says that this is our identity, freed to a life of obedience and thankfulness, not to our earthly masters, but to God who is ruler over all.

*1 Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for any honest work,*

Well who is "them"? Paul has just said "Do not let anyone despise you". So the them refers to all, and particularly to anyone whose opinions have power to shape the life of the Christian people. Conduct your lives in submission. Keep the law of God and (where lawful) submit to the law of the land. But though submissive, to the law, it is also active - Titus is to remind people to put their hands continually to good work.

*2 to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarrelling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all men.*

In words, deeds and manners our task is spelled out. In terms of our attitude to others there is to be no difference between "insiders" and "outsiders"; our life is directed to the perfect law - to live with perfect, whole and redeeming kindness in all things to all men. All the time. This is the ethic which is to characterise the Body of Christ. Live this way!

*3 For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another;*

We are to live openly with all mankind. There is no ground for discriminating between those to whom we live out the Christian life - you do not only live Christianly towards fellow believers - Jesus had already made this plain in his sermon on the mount where he speaks about the perfection which is to characterise his follower's way of life:

*For if you love only those who love you, what reward have you?*

Our life of thankfulness has no boundaries in that sense because God, out of His bound-less love, un-bounded love, love with no fetters. has turned us from slaves into freemen. So our response is to turn from such a former life of self-orienting self justification to ... what? The answer is plain as it is simple : kindness in all things, all the time, to all. Paul reiterates why:

*4 for when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but simply because of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, 6 which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, 7 so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.*

Paul expounds the Gospel - Jesus Christ once for sinners slain, and all barriers in our socialising are in principle broken down! He is referring to the way we are to live in this world with our fellows. Since the goodness of God in Jesus Christ has undermined our sinful propensity to turn our lives into ghettos of self-righteousness, what else is there but to live openly, open-heartedly and kindly with our neighbours? Our socialising with all is to be a celebration, the God-ordained fulfillment of the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-55).

Ponder the order of Paul's letter here: we have to resist the guilt-tripping circumcision party, who would turn back the Jubilee and insist

on a continual replay of the Day of Atonement, with ourselves playing the major role. We do not play the major role here.

Paul then asks : how then should we - brothers and sisters in Christ the Lord - live with those around us? His answer is to remind Titus of the gospel!

Note that what the copula "for" anticipates at the beginning of verse 3 only comes to fullest expression by verse 7. We are freed from every sin to a life of thanksgiving.

*8 The saying is sure. I desire you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to apply themselves to good deeds; these are excellent and profitable to men.*

We can depend upon this! The saying is sure! The Christian community, the Body of Christ, families, schools, organisations, clubs and so on and so forth need to be constantly reminded of this : God has been busy so that we become the fulfillment of His Grace to all people in Jesus Christ. It is our works, our excellent and profitable deeds, which have a God-ordained power to commend the coming of Christ Jesus to others. In Jesus Christ God our Father has poured out upon us all manner of good gifts and opportunities; our life in its entirety is restored! It is good, very good, that we be constantly and repeatedly reminded of these things.

*9 But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels over the law, for they are unprofitable and futile.*

And just as we need to be told of the grace of God we also still need admonition, to hear the law, the word which reveals the stupidity and hardness of heart which still would try to dominate our lives.

There is something important and timely here : get rid of the tendency to delve into stupid controversies that simply cause unprofitable and futile results among Christian brothers and sisters.

Stop getting bogged down in genealogies and trying to prove who you are by reference to who your parents were; remember that you, just like your parents, have one heavenly Father to whom we must all bow down.

And as for disagreements and struggles over how we truly keep the law remember that there was One who truly, fully and completely

fulfilled the law even Jesus Christ. Cause enough to be rid of stupid disputation.

*10 As for a man who is factious, after admonishing him once or twice, have nothing to do with him, 11 knowing that such a person is perverted and sinful; he is selfcondemned.*

We do have to take action; it is not just a matter of living and letting live within the Body of Christ. It is not unloving to take a stand against deviousness or perversions.

Paul writes to Titus in the midst of an historical situation which requires remedies. If there are some who do not accept the rule set forth above, says Paul, then you do have my permission to exercise judicious censure and shunning.

Don't get embroiled in the messiness of those who are trying to prove themselves; those whose existence is one continual effort at trying to justify themselves. Those who go on and on about their lack of guilt, or purity have forgotten their own sin and their saviour who arranged their salvation through his willingness to go to the limit to set us free.

*12 When I send Artemus or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there. 13 Do your best to speed Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way; see that they lack nothing. 14 And let our people learn to apply themselves to good deeds, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not to be unfruitful. 15 All who are with me send greetings to you. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all.*

The final greeting reiterates the message.

You as a Christian must do good deeds and we as your servants are also in need of your good deeds toward us.

Be fruitful. Let the whole world see your fruit so that they may praise your God and Father in heaven who rules over all according to His own purposes.

Paul here is making decisive plans about how he is to best use his time. "Titus come and see me at Nicopolis, that is where I will be." Here are my plans, fit in with them if you can. But in the meantime, remember these other people who are coming through - help them on their way - and another reiteration that "our people" might get known

for the good deeds they do.

Paul seems to be saying the same as formerly, but it has a particular twist here, namely, that Paul is aware that those for whom he and Titus are responsible will be "letters" of commendation (2 Corinthians 2:14-3:6 see also 2 Cor 8: 1-15) for their joint work on behalf of Christ.

The emphasis here goes something like this : since our reputation is on the line here what is our strategic plan? Let us encourage our people to be generous. Let us become known for our generous open-heartedness. Let us go on our way commending Jesus Christ's life by holy and good lives. God has been generous to us. Let us spread the word.

Let us now bow as we pray before the throne of our merciful  
heavenly father

# GENESIS : TURNING FROM IDOLS AND LEARNING TO RESPECT WOMB, SEED AND TRIBE

Some Reflections on Genesis 28:1-10, 31:34, 32:21-32

*Reformed University Student's Conference*

*Hobart, Tasmania*

*Saturday, 16th July 1994*

*at*

*Reformed Church, Kingston*

## Genesis 28:1-10 NIV

*So Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him and commanded him: "Do not marry a Canaanite woman. Go at once to Paddan Aram, to the house of your mother's father Bethuel. Take a wife for yourself there, from among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother. May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May he give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, the land God gave to Abraham." Then Isaac sent Jacob on his way, and he went to Paddan Aram, to Laban son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, who was the mother of Jacob and Esau. Now Esau learned that Isaac had blessed Jacob and had sent him to Paddan Aram to take a wife from there, and that when he blessed him he commanded him, "Do not marry a Canaanite woman," and that Jacob had obeyed his father and mother and had gone to Paddan Aram. Esau then*

*realized how displeasing the Canaanite women were to his father Isaac; so he went to Ishmael and married Mahalath, the sister of Nebaioth and daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, in addition to the wives he already had. Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran.*

### **Genesis 31:34**

*Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them inside her camel's saddle and was sitting on them. Laban searched through everything in the tent but found nothing.*

### **Genesis 32:21-32**

*So Jacob's gifts went on ahead of him, but he himself spent the night in the camp. That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon.*

## **Christian Students and the Critique of Idolatry**

I am going to try and interpret what is going on in these passages from Genesis. If my reading is right then we will have a bit of re-reading of the Bible to do. Not only that. We have a task to re-form our social relations. The book of Genesis is a book whose purpose is to show us the Grace of God. The Worship of YHWH has nothing to do with the idolatries which human rebels against the Lord God make for themselves. Think about it. Where does life come from if this life is all there is? If we say that this life is all there is then fertility cults will be one result. Fertility cults assume that all of life depends upon our sexuality and our gender. Who would deny that we live in the midst of

subtle and not-so-subtle fertility cults? Students at university are often confronted by the accusation, implicit if not explicit, that profession of christian faith is due to a psychological weakness; a basic character flaw. Often, it is implied, that Christians follow Christ because they cannot face up to their own sexuality.

Young men, it is presumed, profess faith in Jesus Christ because of an unwillingness to take on the maturity expected of a post-modern male. In short they need a role model. Part of this involves adopting the "cool" sexual permissiveness that is exploited in, and by, the media. Faith in Christ is viewed as an outlet, sometimes harmless, but potentially over-bearing, a covert urge to control women ... in other words Christianity appeals to the patriarchal pretensions of young males "on the make".

For young women the situation is no less problematic - Christian profession by women in the university is viewed as a capitulation to patriarchy - that is, the domination of males in society, church, consciousness, and so on ... secular-feminists may view Jesus as anything from a s.n.a.g to an introjected charismatic leader with androgynous potential. But the accusation is clear : if women profess faith in Christ they take the first step toward a compromise with patriarchy.

What I wish to argue is that God's written Word is a sure guide to us as we seek to live in this society and flee from the idolatries that dominate us ... whether those idolatries are expressed in patriarchal social organisation, or matriarchal counter-organisation, the worship of the seed or the worship of the womb ... or whether the idolatries are expressed in some kind of ethnic-rivalry, where tribe and nation are given a pseudo-divine status. We also have to reject ethnic idolatry if our discipleship is to remain faithful.

Christian students, belonging to the Body of Christ, must avoid the idolatries of womb and seed. Our religious search to "belong", to find meaning and purpose, cannot be fulfilled by the social works of our hands ... no matter how "christian" our works and how pure our hands. Any task we undertake as Christian students will be derailed before we start if we compromise our discipleship by turning to idols. We have to learn anew to read God's Word for our salvation. We have to turn away from idols.

But how can we do this? Perhaps we have to look at people of faith who wrestled with the problems of idolatry in their own lives. That is where the Bible comes in and in particular the book of Genesis. Clearly, this book was written to show how God's people were historically freed from fertility cults.

Fertility cults are frequently viewed as womb-worship. When the womb is considered the central point of all our life then it becomes an idol. But this is only one side of the story; it is just as idolatrous to make the fertilising seed central. It is this sense that Genesis is opposed to all forms of idolatry - scripture opposes the idolising of femininity and the idolising of masculinity. It opposes all forms of gender dominance.

The book of Genesis reveals that "God's ways are not our ways ... ". It is the contra-idolatrous record of the way in which God's Covenant has progressively been disclosed to us in our fallen humanity. Genesis aims to turn our attention to the God who rules all creation; it shows us that God is the Lord of all of creation, and this includes His rule over all rebellion and all idolatry (Genesis 1). It reveals to us that all have sinned. All have joined in this revolt. Generations are in a state of war against God (Genesis 2-3). All are immersed in the family brawl of the first parents. All are desperados seeking their own pre-eminence and domination. All of us are spoilt brats seeking to massage our egos at others expense. All try to cover over the tracks, and avoid God's judgement. All, by default, participate in great re-unification schemes which aim to protect and insulate against the judgement (and mercy) of the Sovereign Lord. It was from out of the mess of mankind that God proclaimed his tender love and mercy once again. It was from out of this mess that Noah heard God's call. It was in this spiritual crisis that father Abram was called when he was involved in the great migration which his father had begun from Ur. God covenanted to make a great nation through Abram, but the story does not make Hebrew or Jewish ethnicity the central focus. Recall that Abram, the father of faith, was circumcised before he became Abraham, and he gave honour to Melchizedek (Genesis 14). Moses gave honour to Jethro (Exodus 18:14); Melchizedek and Jethro had important parts in the story, but they were not Jews. Isaac was given pre-eminence as a first-born over the adopted Eliezer and Lot the nephew, even though their stories are also part of the tale of how God

took care of them. And then there is Jacob and Esau.

This book of the Bible is a religious critique of idolatry; it shows us how God helped people to resist the idolatry dominant in those days. These three readings record events which tell how God's Grace became known in the lives of these Old Testament people of faith. This is part of the story of how God made his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; how God weaned these people off idolatry, off fertility religion. This is also God's Word about the background and foundation of Israel as a distinct people, known throughout the nations. This is God's ancient Word about the preparation for the One who would come to save His people. But it is also an account which now calls us, members of the long family line of faith, to get rid of idols and prepare for the second coming of the Messiah. It's first "edition" was published with the aim of preparing God's ancient people being prepared for the Christ's first coming. Now it helps us get of the fertility religion in our own day whatever its form.

In the Bible, the covenant of God's Grace is according to His Promise; it is not something a group of people invent for themselves. It is something God does for them despite themselves. God is busy helping His people overcome the tendency they have to "baptize" their primitive ancestor worship and thus exalt their own ethnic inheritance. [Such a reading is what is often implied in the sociology of religion - strangely, it is promoted most strongly in the tradition of a secularised Jew, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). You will find that the idea is a common-place in everyday life, too. Faith in God, it is assumed, is a psycho-social tendency, which a person enacts for the purpose of making sense of, creating meaning in, an otherwise senseless existence].

The Torah reveals God's love and mercy, to a people who, like us, were prone to worship their traditions. The scriptures teach us how God intervened in their lives, showing men and women that He is Sovereign in every sphere, and that He has power to smash all idols. How could this sovereignty which saves us be known if God had not revealed it? How would we have ever known if God had not freed us from our patriarchal, matriarchal and tribal gods?

Genesis tells us that "great saints" were men and women like us who did not give up idolatry without an immense struggle. It tells us that

they were dragged kicking and screaming into the sheep-fold of faith. With Jacob this can be seen most clearly in his wrestling with the angel and his subsequent limp. The entire Old Testament tells us that the descendents of Jacob, the children of Israel, didn't give up their idolatry without a struggle. Idolatry is not just a marginal possibility; it is a constant threat because human hearts incline to all kinds of compromise with evil. We prefer accommodation to ways which are in rebellion against God; their life, like our own, was an ongoing struggle to define and interpret human responsibility according to the revealed will of God. Genesis, the saga of the so-called Patriarchs, shows that there was an ongoing struggle to define and interpret human responsibility according to the will of God. And it was also a saga for the female contingent among the people of God as well. Let us look briefly at three examples :

*Go and marry a girl from Paddan-Aram*

Isaac sends Jacob away to Paddan-Aram. Esau was furious with Jacob. Recall that Isaac is now aware of what had happened over the venison-soup affair; he suggests that Jacob goes away for a bit - "Let your brother's fury die down." But Jacob went, we are told, in accordance with the wishes of both his parents - note he obeyed his father and mother (Gen 28:27) - and it was not just a matter of staying out of harm's way. Perhaps this helps us understand why later on the fifth commandment was written in the form that it was. In honouring both parents Jacob was respecting what God had instituted - the marriage of his parents.

More, he was warned not to marry a Hittite; instead he was to do what his father had done before him. This seems to have provoked Esau to get a "bit of the action" too; no doubt he wanted to win back some of the favour he had lost. Esau treated his own birth-right with contempt; he married Hittite women. The Hittites lived in the land of Canaan and Abraham had expressly told Isaac not to take a wife from amongst them. Clearly the Hittites referred to here worshipped idols, probably in some kind of fertility mother-earth cult.

Note what is recounted here. Jacob may not be an idolater, but neither is he "squeaky clean". Idolatry transforms a good thing into something which turns life around the wrong way. All of life is still there, but it is going in the wrong direction.

How did Jacob fare? He was not preserved from spiritual trouble by obeying his father and mother; look at the deep family turmoil of his own into which he was thrown! Part of it, no doubt, was his own fault. Why did he take Leah for his wife, and accept that he had to do another seven year stint for his beloved Rachel? Had he drunk too much at his own wedding? Was he too much under the thumb of his father-in-law? Think again about Genesis 2:24. Jacob had left his father and mother to be united with his wife; but did he give any thought to whether his wife should leave her father and mother and cleave to him? No doubt in time he wondered whether his own family could ever get out of what seemed to be an inherited tendency to make family messes. Jacob was tricky in his own right, yet even his devious tendencies seem like a storm in a soup-bowl compared to the wily calculations of his father-in-law, Laban. Jacob, with all his cunning, did not have the power to withstand Laban on his own.

Seven years later, Jacob is at the point of getting out from under Laban's dominance. He wants to get away to his own country and form his own family life according to the will of the God of His Fathers. But what happens? To answer this question we have to look at the various sophisticated forms of idolatry which were at work in Laban's household.

Laban's house was run with a patriarchal pretension which assumed total control of persons and things. Laban would make a slave out of his son-in-law, and then when the rights of inheritance were to be decided he sought ways of revoking the contract he had worked out with Jacob and his daughters and their servants and their children. In this household the family title deeds are referred to as "gods". Laban was a man who knew of the Lord God, but he had not dispensed with that way of life which gives the family a semi-divine status. The tendency to rule by Mafia, Broederbond or Cosa Nostra has a long pedigree.

Jacob and Laban had developed differing views of the contract worked out between them. Laban adopted Jacob, contracting to give him his daughters in exchange for his filial piety. But Laban still saw himself as lawful patriarch and would not accept that Jacob and Jacob's wives, his daughters, could leave the realm where he ruled the roost. Jacob intended to leave Laban; not only geographically, but also spiritually. This was a strict system of patriarchal inheritance,

complete with family gods / teraphim, which in time strangle God's will for marriage (Genesis 2:24). But it had lost its hold upon Jacob even if he found it difficult to get out from under Laban's patriarchal domination. How could he leave without asserting a domineering paternal power over his wives?

Recall that rather than hold out solely for his "one and only love" he had been tricked into marriage with Leah. He now had to deal with the fact that he had bound himself in a polygamous way. Jacob's married life diverged from the monogamous norm which Abraham and Isaac had struggled with.

The Ways of the Lord did not come to Jacob, or his family, naturally. This other way, God's way, came into view in the midst of his own mess. In Jacob's family the women were locked in bitter rivalry. They too had to learn about God's ways of doing things and setting things right. They might assert their female primacy but it is a confused situation in which a return to an alternative idolatry of the womb is a real spiritual possibility. If the competition between Rachel and Leah and their servant girls was not so serious it would be funny.

Jacob acts to re-assert his male-patriarchal primacy - and moves close to fashioning a new form of idolatry - if not that of the seed then an idolatry that accommodates seed-worship (patriarchy) and womb-worship (matriarchy). A tradition of tribe-worship - the idolatry of the family of Jacob - is anticipated by the text.

Don't be angry, my lord ...

I'm having my period.

Jacob decides to leave, to return to the land of his father. But Rachel had stolen the teraphim - the family "gods" of Laban. We are not totally sure what these were, and we are not so sure why she did it. Maybe it had something to do with Isaac's legal right to the promise of the inheritance which came through Abraham.

Some scholars imply that Rachel sought to establish Jacob as the family leader (Gordon and Greenberg) - an attempt to win her own favour at the expense of her more productive sister. Clearly she didn't

have to do this for herself because she was "beloved" already - but yet she was ambitious for her own son Joseph and sought to get him into pole position in the inheritance race. But note how, in Deuteronomy 21:15-17, the Law of Israel is critical of any Rachel-Jacob pact at this point.

If a man has two wives, and he loves one but not the other, and both bear him sons but the firstborn is the son of the wife he does not love, when he wills his property to his sons, he must not give the rights of the firstborn to the son of the wife he loves in preference to his actual firstborn, the son of the wife he does not love. He must acknowledge the son of his unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double share of all he has. That son is the first sign of his father's strength. The right of the firstborn belongs to him.

On the other hand, another scholar (Spanier) draws the action as part of Rachel's attempt to establish *her own place* within Jacob's household. "Theft," he says, "is the Leitmotif (leading idea)" of scripture at this point. She was the most beloved, so why should not she have the priority over Leah. Just because she didn't produce as many babies shouldn't mean that their love wasn't to have top billing in Jacob's tent!

Ancient Jewish interpretations say that the "theft" was Rachel's calculated attempt to prevent her father from idolatry. But if such is the case then it is very hard to discern what the scriptures are saying at this point. After all the teraphim become part of Israel's inheritance. Does it perhaps mean that she stole them because Laban worshipped them and she didn't?

Theft, or usurping, is in contrast with God's grace and we are reminded of Jacob's mess of pottage and Rebekkah's tricking her old and frail husband Isaac. In either case Genesis shows us that men and women fall into these kind of devious acts not so much because they rebel against the Law - the Law hadn't yet been given - but because of their inherent tendency to worship idols. Even if Rachel stole the teraphim for "pastoral" reasons, she still would have become susceptible to the other implications of her deed. Humankind does not wait on the Lord for His Gift; we prefer to take, to grab impulsively. Only the Law of God effectively unravels our actions and reveals our hearts and leads us to plead for Mercy for our lack of gratitude from

the Saviour.

We can only wonder what Laban would have done had he recovered the "gods" from their hiding place. Maybe Rachel was also lying about her period - in which case the Torah is broken on another point. But if she was at her time of month it is almost as if Genesis here warns of the great impurity that would occur if Israel, God's chosen people, would turn from their own identity to the worship of an idol ... even an idol which claims to remind them of their specially favoured status in God's eyes. Note that these title deeds were an historical building block for the nation of Israel. They have been sat upon by a woman during her period! If these family gods are to be Israel's idol then Rachel has rendered them unclean! If Rachel's fertility is to become Israel's idol then it would do so by protecting Jacob's ownership of the teraphim. The family cult is thus separated from the female fertility cult and Israel is established with a respect for *family* and *fertility* as part of God's plan for our lives. Cleansing is by grace, not by works which conform to the Law.

The laws about female uncleanness have to be seen in the context of the idolatrous fertility religions in the nations round about. God's people are not to relate to others as sex objects, or as mere servants of male pleasure. The laws indicate a social and public way in which women can live as God has created them to.

*.. he was limping because of his hip.*

When we read the bible in this way and apply what we read to our situation (eg with respect to IVF, experimentation on human embryos, gender equalisation etc) we realise that the real idolatry often lies with us, as it did for Jacob's day, in a misplaced trust in social institutions - for us we are often caught out placing our trust in the community of scientists and professionals.

Jacob's all-night wrestling match with God involved his struggle with his own self-image. His struggle became a matter of whether God would establish His Rule of Grace over his life. But it was not until the angel wrestled him into submission - are we justified in reading this as a knee in the groin as some scholars say? - that he came to see

his own children as the gift of God. They came "not by might, nor by power", not firstly from his loins, nor by co-operative ventures between the idolatry of seed and womb, but by God's grace and generosity. Nor were they to be viewed ungratefully as the evidence of a big family mess! Jacob wrestled with the Angel of God, he wrestled with God "face to face", and received a new name. God does not let go of Jacob who is now in no position to "take" anything; Jacob realised that his large family was not his own creation. On that night he was spiritually weaned off patriarchy - the idolatry of his own seed-bearing potency; and he was freed from the debilitating of matriarchy - in which female fertility is *modus operandi* for life. When he limped away he was breathless because God's message had got through to him. His children were plain and simple a gift from the Lord. He was blessed because God had granted him a quiverful of sons! It was neither womb (Canaanite female fertility religion), nor an Israelite version through Leah and Rachel, nor was it seed (Laban's appropriation of the Abrahamic heritage for his own patriarchal power-games), but the purposes of God which were Supreme in his life. Genesis tells us that attempts to preserve God's promises with a patriarchal line of inheritance, even if done by men and women of faith, are tragically flawed. Genesis tells us that outside God's grace their is anarchy.

In our context this means that we accept the Gospel as the true basis for our sexual/gender differences and as the only sure basis upon which we can grow in respect for gender difference. Those who advocate that some jobs should be male-only have to show - to fellow males and the qualified women in our midst - that the exclusion of women from some public offices does not encourage a patriarchal or fraternalist idolatrous attitude. For the record, I think that this will be a very difficult task; exclusion of females from full participation in public life on the basis of their (God-given) gender must logically imply the inclusion of males on the basis of theirs. Males are excluded from the role of mother on the basis of their sex and gender. In my view this exclusion is quite consistent with the teaching of Scripture fulfilled in Jesus Christ. But when it comes to women participating fully in public life, and giving new expressions to the role of co-worker, which God made her to be in the beginning, I think the Bible is exclusive. "For it is not the one who commends himself ..." by reference to his gender or anything else "who is approved, but the one whom the Lord

commends."

And when we start to read the Bible in this way we see that God's Word has an immediate and direct application to the vexing social, ethical, political and economic problems which face us. This is because God's Word Written is given to us so that we can see the underlying religious tendencies of our life and the society around us is brought into the light of God's Grace.

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# SACRIFICE AND SPIRITUALITY :

JESUS' TEACHING ABOUT SALT : Matthew 5:13

*Given during the*

*Inaugural Reformed University Students' Conference*

*Held at the Reformed Church of Box Hill*

*Box Hill, Victoria, Australia*

*on 17/18 July 1992*

*You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. [Matthew 5 : 13-16].*

What is Jesus talking about when he refers to salt? The answer seems rather obvious; he is referring to his view of his disciples. But can we leave it at that and then simply hope that we can "live salty lives"?

I suggest that there is somewhat more to it than that. The passage from Matthew 5:11-16 holds together thematically. It is especially so when we seek to read the sermon as the collected formulations of a Teacher who developed His teaching in the knowledge that the entire Old Testament referred to Himself. When we read what He has to say in this His most famous sermon we should not under-estimate the extent to which He is developing themes found in the ancient canon. Our picture of discipleship can only be deepened when we read the Sermon on the Mount like this - as Jesus' well-crafted formulation to bring the teachings of the Law and the prophets to their true fulfillment.

Very often sermons use this term salt in a metaphoric and analogical way; I have heard very powerful sermons over the years which have focused upon :

i. salt as preservative - Jesus contra Marx! and the drug culture. Christians are not to seek their own preservation because they are salt! they are preservative. The salt of the earth is not the opiate of the masses. In such a sermon the preacher develops the sermon from the fact that in the New Testament times salt was used as a preservative for meat.

ii. salt as spice - Jesus contra bland life-style, giving life a bit of bite, but not sugar. Why did not Jesus say : "You are the sugar of the earth!"? Following Jesus is not a matter of applying the icing to the cake! This would include the challenges of so-called "muscular Christianity".

iii. in India, after Gandhi this teaching could take on a very pertinent political ring; you are the salt of the earth - you may know how the strike on salt in India brought the British Raj to its knees.

And no doubt there are others but despite the powerful nature of such Christian appeals to live our life in the world, I am not exactly sure that they adequately express what Jesus was talking about in this passage when he refers to His disciples as "the salt of the earth".

The New Testament is not only about Jesus - the Gospels are not novels as if they are to be read with the life and exploits of the hero uppermost in your thoughts as you read. In a novel the reader will emotionally and chronologically follow the hero's exploits through all the ups and downs of life. But the Gospels of the New Testament are not novels. They are the definitive and reliable revelation concerning how Jesus lived and what He taught. As such they tell us how He read, and responded to, the Old Testament scriptures. He went about fulfilling His servant task according to the scriptures. This I take it also involves His serving His followers, and us, as Teacher, a Rabbi.

Now the Old Testament was not composed of hidden and obscure documents; they were well-known. The scribes and the pharisees may have been strongly criticised by Jesus for taking away the key to knowledge, but the religion of the Bible has never been a secretive

and gnostic affair.

The Sermon on the Mount is, as I have emphasised, the formal articulation of Jesus' way of reading the Old Testament. Consider His teaching in Matthew 5:17-20 :

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them....For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

On another occasion we might spend some time discussing the significance of this most important passage. Here our task is to focus upon Jesus teaching about salt. But let us keep in mind that His teaching on salt is not unrelated to His view of the Law and the Prophets. What did Jesus mean when He called his disciples salt?

Seen in its context in the Sermon on the Mount and noting that He was addressing a crowd of Jewish disciples, the intent of what He is saying is something like this :

*So, you Jews (who have come to listen to me and follow the way I indicate) might well conceive of yourselves as being the salt of the earth! Well and good! But remember, that salt has to be in something! Just as a light lights up the house and is not simply something for measuring how much wheat is in the wheat container, so salt is in the world. Salt can lose its saltiness! Even so, the Jewish people, the ethnic inheritors of God's grace, could be cast out and trampled underfoot. Just because you can call yourselves the people of God doesn't mean that you or your society will escape from God's judgement.*

Ethnic background doesn't save you. God may have called His Old Testamental people to prove the reliability of His covenant promises by building a nation based exclusively on His Word and in so doing to carry His Covenant for themselves and for all humankind in their ethnic traditions and practices. But such activity also comes under the purview of God's judgement and in His time that was to change, as He had promised.

There are, I believe, at least four aspects to this : in the Old Testament we find that salt has to do with i. judgement; ii. sacrifice; iii. the covenant. There is a fourth aspect and it becomes clear in the New Testament. Iv. What is taken up and expanded and in

Colossians 4:6. There, Paul assumes the enhancing and preservative aspect of our discipleship and develops it further.

*Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer every one.*

This helps us understand something about the Christian's involvement everywhere with everyone under heaven.

Apart from Matt 5:13, Mark 9:49-50 gives us the other instance of Jesus' use of the word "salt" :

*Everyone will be salted with fire. Verse 50 reads : Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other.*

Now this comes in a passage where Jesus is talking about judgement. And in the Old Testament "salt" is used as a euphemism - when judgement is delivered and a city burned down it is referred to as having been "salted". It seems possible that in Matt 5 : 11, when Jesus refers to persecutions, which His disciples will inevitably face, He is implying that they will also be "salted" in this sense.

When the term salt is used, as we see from the various bible passages, it refers not only to preservative and seasoning and as a euphemism for a military-type judgement, it also refers to aspects of God's covenant with His specially-hand-picked people.

But what is the saying telling us that Jesus expects his disciples to be the salt for? The salt of the earth? For what? Salt is seen these days on dry lakes in the centre of Australia - this might be great for the development of imaginative and mythic folk-tales. It is also found in the ground in Siberia to be dug out by political prisoners. But these associations do not get us all that far when we try to appreciate Jesus' usage.

The salt of Leviticus 2 was the salt that was to accompany the sacrifice - this gives Mark 9:49 somewhat more sense. The fire will consume in judgement or sacrifice. This has to be a sobering moment for us in our consideration. Paul puts the same idea when he writes :

*2COR 2:14-17 But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those*

*who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word; but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ. (RSV)*

So it seems that in the biblical picture the three aspects of sacrifice, fire and judgment should be kept in view. For Jesus' teaching implies that the time is near when the earth would no longer be totally subject to judgment - the fulfillment of the Kingdom of heaven is at hand. Jesus had come and begun the great work of the reconciliation of all things in heaven and on earth - and in Jesus' picture the earth is now to be consumed as part of .... what? The answer is sacrifice. The disciples are to salt the earth - that means that the whole earth is to sing the praises of the living God in a perpetual act of sacrificial praise.

*Psalm 51:17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

The sacrifice now is the entire earth and Jesus' disciples are to fill the earth. Why? Because just as salt was to be thoroughly a part of the Levitical sacrifice, so now the People of God are to be a thorough part of the creation, as the whole earth now replaces the sacrificial offerings which the Levitical Priesthood had once been commanded to perform. Now that the Messiah has come, His People are to be the salt of the earth!

When Jesus was baptized by John for the washing away of sins we are told that the heavens opened. It seems from the various accounts that both He and John saw the Holy Spirit descend upon Him as a Dove. Now I cannot be absolutely sure of this but I suspect that this is richer, literarily, than merely a bird fluttering down and perching on wet just-baptized shoulders. Is this not an indication of His poverty? The turtledove was the substitute offering which those who were too poor offered for their sin offering! Now remember John's words : He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matthew 4:11). The sense may well be that Jesus saw Himself as the dove when the Holy Spirit came upon Him, the offering to be holocausted for the poor who could not afford the (price of the) sacrificial lamb without blemish...it is the Holy Spirit's coming which now holocausts whatever it is to be sacrificed... our lives are to be burned up in service to God; the

holocaust is not for the purpose of suffering "burn out" so much as it is via this means that we will be purified and made more holy. "You are the salt of the earth!" Here then is the biblical teaching which shows that salvation and sanctification cannot be separated. They are two sides of the one coin.

The point is that the baptism is the salting of fire, and Jesus' disciples - the salt of the earth - are caught up in that fire-baptism when from Pentecost the humble service of faith working its salvation out in the world, replaces the Levitical priesthood, and the good works which God has prepared for us to walk in now can come into their own. This then is the Good News also for University students in Australia 1992.

This is all well and good, you say. But what about the actual (class-room) situation which confronts the serious student? Questions naturally arise : How do we develop a better idea of our public responsibilities? If we are to be salt for all the earth just have a look at the sense of meaninglessness, emptiness and desperate materialism which grips our peers world-wide. How is that to be challenged? How are the injustices of the self-oriented powerful to be effectively resisted? How can government and nation, economy and society, be reformed so as to encourage, rather than to discourage and deform, the cultivation of human talent? Are we able to study these things with integrity? Can we study them without being swamped by the despair that they seem to engender? Can we give over many years of our lives to the study of these things? Can we help in the development of a Christian perspective that points the way to some genuine solutions. Consider the breakdown of the ozone layer; the destruction of the earth's vegetation; the smog and pollution in our air, water and food; the melting of the ice-caps; the erosion of the coasts and arable land; the extinction of rare species of animal life; the rising of salt; the problems of big cities; the ongoing population explosion; droughts and famines that continue to afflict African and Asian peoples ... and so on. This list alone, even without questions of morality, bio-ethics and public justice would be enough to keep us occupied for a lifetime. Is it any wonder that students are often accused of being negative! It seems as if serious study is a doorway to despair and confrontation with a pile of negatives, piled on negatives. This is a world cursed with problems that are just too big for us. But let us recall that the curse has been lifted.

Until we - His Image bearers, women and men - are restored, it is clear that God remains profoundly dissatisfied with His creation. Why? Because of the central place in which He has given to humankind in His plan. He cursed the earth, for us. He lifted the curse, for us. This is the reason that Jesus could say :

*JOH 14:12 I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. (NIV)*

The curse upon the whole earth (Genesis 3) is now overcome such that the earth is to be salted by the people of God - and the sacrificial offering now having been offered we now live *AD anno domini* in the years of our Lord's favour. An intermediary priesthood is no longer required. But the people who find that their sins have been forgiven in Christ are the royal priesthood in the family of God.

When, having heard at the depths of our sinful hearts, that our righteousness is but as filthy rags, we turn to Christ and such is the residue of our sinfulness we often live in fear that our prayers might be mere works-righteousness ritual of some self-hypnotic quest; our residual guilt is often so twisted that we think we can fool ourselves all of the time. But the gospel is that we cannot and it is at times like these that we hear the Doctrine of God's Predestination - you are the salt of the earth - to our very great profit. We may address God as Our Father. No longer the fruit of the fields or the blood of bulls and rams, it is now the whole earth - God's entire creation - which is to be restored to its rightful place as pleasing to God. And consider the wonder of wonders; our place in this as salt.

Again the Great Commission delivered by Jesus, the Great and Sufficient Servant of God, revealed the end of an era for the ethnic people of the law, and anticipates their dispersion - "...in your going into all the world...preach the gospel to every creature..." The judgement was that Israel's task as servant to the nations had been fulfilled; a life which was organised to hold onto inherited ethnic loyalties at all costs did so at its peril. The peril was this : inherited ethnicity could be closed off to the liberating power of the Gospel. This is the tragic matter which Paul, unwilling to consign the Jewish people to such a fate, wrestles with in his letter to the Roman church. It is not that ethnicity no longer had any meaning. It is that ethnicities meaning is re-vamped when the messiah of the Jews comes;

traditions are broken asunder and broken open.

But just as God had raised Jesus Christ from the dead so He could bring new life to all (inc the sons and daughters of Abraham, Jacob and Esau) who believed this gospel concerning the forgiveness of sins.

You might like to give some thought to how this relates to the written record of cloven tongues of fire at Pentecost.

So what are the applications here? Is it a matter of : i. Be in relation! or ii. Be down-to-earth! or iii. watch you keep salty - Be salty! or iv. some other....

I don't think it is a matter of doing anything here. It seems to be much more a matter of listening! Where you hear this there you are called! It is a teaching of great personal assurance! It is an indication of the communal and priestly solidarity we all share as God's people, for each other and for the neighbour we are called to love as ourselves.

Maybe you are like I was when I entered university - prone to think that my christian task was to evangelize everyone everywhere I went. Until I started to hear Jesus' call : You are the salt of the earth. It comes in the chemistry laboratory, during your podiatry class, critically reading the latest reviews of novel or film, in the politics tutorial, and as you stand up to take the class of 7 year olds in your teaching rounds. You are the salt of the earth! What a great assurance!

The chemistry laboratory, the podiatry course, poetry and novels, political debate and primary school lessons on the life of the pond all belong to the Lord of Heaven and Earth. And now, we are told they are to be consumed as the well-pleasing sacrifice of thanks-giving to give an odor through which the Lord God Himself will lick His lips. When His voice affirmed : "This is my one and only Son my beloved" and when He raised Him from the grave He did it so that we - salt - could be mixed in as flavoring, as an indication of His covenantal promise-keeping, thoroughly a part of the life of the whole earth! The whole earth will tell of His glory, but it will not do so without us as salt adding to the aroma!

We Christians don't wait in the expectation that these things will be

burnt up and destroyed at the end of the age. God the Lord delights in pond studies; dig your toes into the mud and feel it and look at the creepy-crawling things that live there! God the Father of Jesus the bringer of life and health smiles as a proud Parent when you straighten out those smelly toes and make shoes that allow the club-footed to walk upright! God's purpose is that He also delight in these things here and now before Jesus comes back so that when He does He might also delight in that graduation ceremony when King Jesus shakes us by the hand and says "Well done!"

TEAR, as we heard last night, is a christian attempt to shape overseas aid - Steve Bradbury is chairman of the Australian Council for Overseas Aid council. But also Australian Volunteers Abroad will be subject to God's Sovereign Sway. Maybe we see something of that as we wish John and Elizabeth Blik God's blessings on their way to Botswana to find themselves thoroughly mixed in with the sacrifice of thanksgiving throughout the whole earth, whether the earth understands it or not!

*Jer 22:29 O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord. (KJV)*

I dare to say that in the current climate in the university one of the hardest things to do is to be a student! It is very difficult to avoid the distractions thrown up by Government, university administrators and indeed by those who have shaped the course you are doing. There is a concerted attack on the value and meaning of your studies by well-meaning friends, family, spouses, church members which really are an invitation to interpret your whole life - and particularly your studies - in terms of money values and financial reward.

Some students can only stop those distracting and depressing sounds by finding a night-time and week-end job - indeed they have to because they are so poor and that is the only way that they can ensure that when they attend to their studies they can give it the attention it requires. We are not those who say that the student vocation is for the rich only. But Matt. 5:13 does imply that you are Jesus' servant in your social situation and for the engineering student who has to sit for long night-time hours in a drive-in petrol station she too will need the assurance that, as a short-term part-time Mobil-employee, Jesus cares for her not only in the laboratory but also at the gas station counter. Jesus' words - have salt in yourselves - come

as a great encouragement, as we learn to see God's guidance in the bundle of roles we are called to fulfil.

And to just this kind of situation - student and Mobil-employee, student and spouse-taxi-driver - Jesus' teaching on salt comes as an amazing sprinkling of encouragement on our lives which are to be lived as full-bodied sacrifices. As salt we learn what is the good and perfect and acceptable will of God for His Creation.

# JOB'S REPENTANCE AND GOD'S TRANSCENDENCE

*Biblical Studies Paper*

*for the*

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*Reformed University Post-Graduate Students'*

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*Held at St Stephen's Presbyterian Church*

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## **Introduction :**

The Wisdom literature - Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs - have their own special place in Holy Scripture. But how do we read these books?

Job indeed has many themes which are reminiscent of other books of the Old Testament. The initial three chapters have some consonance with the book of Genesis. It is not a book which "taps into" the cumulative historical tradition after Abraham and Moses. And it is for reasons such as these that I would particularly like to focus our attention on the Book of Job. It is said to be of very ancient provenance, possibly achieving its present form before the Pentateuch as collated and edited in the form we today receive it.

## **The Transcendence of God :**

The clue to these books, as to much else in Scripture, comes from the specific Biblical teaching of the transcendence of God. God is the Creator of Heaven and Earth, in whom our hope in life and death resides. he has not only created us, He has creation His own

relationship to us, His way of relating to us, His creatures. And we know that He relates Himself to us by the Word He has spoken (John 1). This too functions as an important theme by which this book reaches its climax and resolution.

The Biblical God is no created entity. Creaturely existence has to conform to, or negotiate with, a creation order, a set of predicated-relations which are a given, non-negotiable and structural part of our creatureliness. But God is not His creation. All relations which the Biblical God has with His creation are created by, and maintained by, His Sovereign Power. He reveals Himself to us in ways that are createdly appropriate to our creaturely station in life; that is, God speaks to us.

And if the Psalms reveal the Faithful God of Israel and David to Whom we sing, and the Proverbs reveal God the Lord as the basis of our Wisdom, how do we understand Qohelet, Job and the sensuous love which only the Song of Songs can reveal? We will limit ourselves here to Job; suffice to say Qohelet proclaims a God who is not subject to our humanly futile search for the meaning of things; the Song of Songs celebrates the God who has called faithful, marital sexual fidelity into being as the context of a created order of social co-responsibility. This, as Paul says, is a great and deep mystery.

Job reveals God as good; the One who is "totally other" who cannot be defined by, or constrained through, our creaturely efforts, no matter how extreme the disasters which befall us. It is God the Lord who is superintendent of our creatureliness and who even creates the structure of His own hiddenness from us.

## **The Structure of the Book :**

The major part of the book - Chapters 3 to 31 - consist of Job's discourse with Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. The wisdom of the elders having run its course, Job and his three comforters having said their bit, a youthful Elihu makes his contribution - 32 to 37 - until the Lord God replies - 38 to 41. 42 is Job's reply, almost an admission that he has been reduced to silence. His reply is his confession of guilt and repentance, and the book concludes in the style with which it began. Job is blessed by God.

It is hard to work out what is meant by the structure of the book. Maybe that is partly due to our own unbiblical perspective. We are not disposed to see the Word of God conveyed to us in such a form. The Satan (prosecuting counsel), Job's wife and Elihu all seem to have been included in the narrative in an *ad hoc* manner but they make their contributions and we are left with the distinct impression that our attention should not be too heavily fixated upon them.

Two-thirds of the book is the exchange between Job and his three friends. It is hard to work out just what this "quodlibet" is meant to be (quod - something; libet - discussion, hence a discussion about something). What is it about? At first they are Job's friends, sitting quietly with him while he is appalled by the tragedies that have befallen him. Then when Job raises his voice and begins his lament, they join and add their bit in adversarial fashion. They try to construct some rhyme and reason for Job's condition, the deep dilemmas of his heart and mind, and in so doing push their friendship very close to the edge of disaster. If only he would acknowledge the hidden rule that he has violated. If only he would face up to the rhyme or reason they have divined, then Job presumably would be able to face his situation. They claim to have a handle on Job's suffering. Job's complaint is that God seems to have lost His grip on Job's life; at least the grip on his life which led to blessing.

The exchange seems to have been the published *Proceedings of a Problem of Pain Summit* in which Job, his friends and Elihu come together to "thrash out the issues" of Job's disasters once and for all. But the summing up of the Lord

God seems to throw the value of the entire lengthy proceedings into doubt. Are we to conclude "Vanity of Vanities all is Vanity" as is the recorded wisdom elsewhere? I do not think so.

The "quodlibet", along with Elihu's outsider's perspective, can all be read with great profit. There is much of value in what is said, but also much that is misconstrual, re-construal and deceptive counter-argument.

On one level the message of Job seems to be that we need help in painstakingly sorting out the wheat from the chaff. And to gain such help we better get some practise; so we start reading; so we re-read

the exchanges and notes their deep subtleties.

### **Important Biblical Themes :**

As stated above, there are various themes which remind us of the first chapters of Genesis. There is the part played by the adversary, there is the reference to skin, there is disaster which falls upon a scene characterised by peace and happiness.

Throughout there are references to the breadth and depth of Creation. God is referred to as the ruler of all that He has made. It is as if Job and his friends are somehow prevented from singing the equivalent of Psalm 8 until the dilemmas of Job's sufferings are resolved by God's revelatory intervention in their discourse.

Sin and evil as two sides of a perpetual, if not eternal, struggle are repeatedly depicted. But the discourse between Job and his friends has an important "reflexive" aspect; that is, the understanding of the struggle between good and evil, sin and righteousness, also participates in this struggle.

The sin of imputing God with evil is very closely linked to struggle Job has to maintain his own integrity. Job's continual refrain seems to be that one can in fact lose one's own integrity if one does not truly face up to the situation God has presented him with. He can join in the refrain of his comforters, and accept that he repents of sins he has not committed, but that does not make him anymore righteous; nor does it alleviate his sufferings. It is only finally when God speaks that Job has a frame-of-reference in which to rightly ascribe righteousness to God.

### **Discourse :**

The greater part of the book is discourse to be sure; but is it philosophical discourse? It is discussion about the limits, the horizon of human experience and understanding. But it is a discussion about God's involvement, or at least His perceived lack of involvement, in the day-to-day pain, trouble and agony of human life as he gives it and as we experience it.

*Front-stage - back-stage :*

Chapter 1 verses 1 to 5 sets the scene; but then having been introduced to Job we get a partial glimpse "behind the scenes". God, who has obviously been delighted by the good reports that come to Him about His servant Job, is confronted by an accusative counsellor - the Satan. The Satan, not only maligns Job, but *prima facie* slanders God for His confidence in His righteous servant.

Then we have the record of events, the almost comic account of one servant after another - "and I alone am left to report to you" - who tell Job of the disasters that have befallen his enterprise.

The oxen and donkeys have been carried off by the Sabeans; the servants and sheep have been devoured by fire; his servants and camels have been plundered by the Chaldeans and the lives of his sons and daughters have been blown away by a fierce desert wind.

Job's regular custom of rising early and interceding for his sons and daughters in interrupted (ref 1:4-5); but his worship remains. Finally, it is renewed again at the close of the book.

Chapter 2:1-7a takes us "behind the scenes" again into the chambers of God's judgement for the sequel. God has heard again of Job's loyalty and faithfulness to Him. Again the Satan makes awful accusation; and the Lord is permissive again. Job is afflicted bodily this time.

Previously we learnt of Job's afflictions via a messenger - they were "at a distance", his flocks, his herds, his servants and his children had been wiped out. He had to suffer in this way. Now he suffers in a different way. His body is attacked. His response is to sit in the dung-heap and lament his situation. His wife turns on him; Job rebukes her for her faithlessness. But as with the initial trial Job held his counsel and did not allow his trial to drive him to sin. At least, that is what it says.

The record of Job's response to the two phases of his trial is important; is there some kind of development between 1:20-22 and 2:8-10? There is, I believe, and it is this : Job's response to his wife represents an intensification of his trial. She has constructed his response - "Are you still holding onto your integrity?" and Job tries to forestall any further blundering on her part. But the trial of Job now

moves decisively into a new stage.

Job sits with his friends as they try to gauge the depth of his anxiety. All is quiet until Job speaks. And thus the discourse continues in 2 and 2/3rd cycles. A close reading of the interchange leads us to conclude that Job considers his "friends' advice" to have become as much a part of his trial of patience (James 5:11) as the disasters on his enterprise, his family and his body.

*Silence :*

Suffering might reduce us to silence (2:11-13) "but who can keep from speaking ..." (4:2b) in such circumstances as these? The three friends, and later Elihu, and later the Lord God Himself, do not speak directly of the events; nor does Job. They are given. They seem to have spoken for themselves. But what they say, of themselves, is not decisive, until God the Lord speaks and makes Himself heard by the suffering one.

The question seems to resolve itself : Who will speak for the suffering one? Who will dare to take sides either with God or against God (and side with the Satan) in this case?

Perhaps Elihu is not just a peripheral player here. Maybe he should not be read as simply a "passer-by" who just happens to hear this exchange and offers his "two bob's worth". 32:2-3 has Elihu becoming very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God and the three friends failure to refute Job whilst condemning him. It seems that Job's comforters have become his detractors, they have deepened his misery and their silence ends their activity on his behalf. They, and also Elihu, seem to put words into Job's mouth that he has not said directly. The friends derive the words from Job's condition; Elihu claims to be quoting him (33:8-11).

Job had finished his complaint. The three friends had finished their attempts to rebut him, but had left him in his misery. Elihu knows that this is not a good place to leave it. Now what they each say is not without merit. But Elihu, even with us, as sympathetic "outsiders" or "audience", doesn't set things to rights either.

*The Lord's Response :*

What we have from the Lord's mouth, when He speaks, is not only what He says but that He speaks. He is somewhat introduced by the

monologue of Elihu, but the Lord does not speak to address each of their arguments, or poetic exhortations. What then is it that He says?

First, let us look at what Job says in reply? The crucial verse is 42:5. It is a difficult verse, not only doctrinally for its implications for the entirety of our understanding of Biblical doctrine, but also for how it is to be understood in this instance. If the interpolated "You said" stands for verses 3 and 4 is it possible that Job could be also implying that God the Lord has said to Him that "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you." Could it not be that having heard this Job therefore coram Deo declares "Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." And I suspect that such a rendering actually helps us to better understand God.

Secondly, and following from the first, the Lord in his address to Job "out of the storm" (is it the storm Elihu is referring to? is it the storm which killed his children? or is it just the created torment of the natural elements?) implies that God sees and superintends not only the disasters which men see but more besides. There is more to God's creation than humankind has been able to comprehend, let alone cultivate and nurture.

God the Lord is not a part of creation. The creation is not a part of God. He will speak from out of what He will. He speaks "out of the storm". He does not speak out of the residual wisdom of a "quodlibet" among Job and his friends, nor of Job, his friends and an outsider who comes to judge the action. God is not our debating partner. God creates the very possibility that we can have a debate. And in this Job was patient, and was not patient. It was only when God would see Him "face-to-face" ie when Job is brought into the secret counsel of the Most High, when God makes Himself centre stage in the midst of his sufferings, that matters are set to rights. We might want to "help God along" and confess "He is at centre stage; believe it" like Job's friends but our confessing it doesn't make it so. As Job's friends found out when their arguments were inconclusively exhausted. And Elihu comes to sum up and also tries to be a pious spokesman for God.

But God doesn't have spokesman in that kind of way. In fact contrary to Eliphaz, Zophar and Bildad, God the Lord declares that Job's arguments from the depths are more pleasing to Him than theirs. And the Lord God calls upon Job to act in a priestly capacity for his three

friends.

## **Conclusion :**

I think this is a book that teaches us about the transcendence of God, but it also needs saying that this book is as Whitehead observed "good Hebrew but bad Greek". Whitehead may have thrown in his lot with the Greek view over against the Hebrew "thicker intellects [which] gloried in the notion that the foundations of the world were laid amid impenetrable fog." So, in a sense, Job represents the view of a "thicker intellect", which assumes that unless God reveals Himself, man cannot know.

The point of this book of the *Proceedings of Job's Repentant Perseverance* is that God is not subject to a person's inferential logic, rhetorical explanation, or dialectical brilliance. God's relations to us are temporal, limited and changing, but they are maintained on His terms. They are creaturely. God, as He is in Himself, is beyond being either changing or static, limited or unlimited. He reveals Himself as someone who sometimes hides Himself and His purposes from us. He reveals Himself as the One who will bring humankind into His presence, to have an audience with Him, at His own time, at His own pleasure. But in that we, like Job, are called to patiently trust Him to call us into His presence when He is ready.

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# Love is not spooky!

## An anniversary discussion and appreciation for a friend

Friday 10<sup>th</sup> March 2000

### **John 13:35**

*If you love one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples.*

The 12 disciples of Jesus were all men, young men, blokes who had a special task to do. They were not the kind to just sit around all day reading the newspaper, sipping café latté, or sit on their thumbs waiting for something to happen. They had work to do.

Jesus needed help in a special task, which was to help people understand and remember that God's Kingdom was the most important part of their lives. The synagogues in the region of Galilee were where he started. That's where he began teaching. They were now filled with people who had heard John the Baptist and, I guess, Jesus worried about these people. They had gone to hear John down on the Jordan but now back home they would hear God's word read and explained every Shabbat in the synagogue and would they slip back into their old ways and forget John's teaching? John had had the whole region stirred up for a while. And that was the flame that Jesus wanted to fan. The problem was how to do it.

Now there were a few reasons why fanning this flame was difficult. There was the Roman army of occupation. It's hard to be yourself and live life as you have been taught to do from God's word if there are soldiers ruling you from another country. And even in the

synagogue, where you listen to the Word of the Holy One of Israel, the Roman influence could be felt. Yes, even there in the synagogue where the local priests rule the roost. They would call in their friends, the scribes, from down in old Jerusalem town whenever problems get out of hand and the people became too unruly.

Reading the gospels you'd think the task of these religious authorities was to make people more miserable. If people weren't miserable already, it seems as if they were committed to making them so. The writers about Jesus describe them as a pack of spoilers.

They wanted nothing more than keeping control over the people who possessed the common and ordinary gifts of God's grace. They saw their task as keeping them in their place. They would decide what was best for them. They went around on their power trips making sure that the people remembered just who were most important in God's Kingdom. If necessary they would make sure, in a pious snake-like way, that everyone respected their extra-special dose of "least important humility" that they had by virtue of their position. In such a way God's kingdom was being denied. It was the spin which mattered. The important thing was the spin and the people needed to be controlled by carefully composed spin.

Well, that wasn't what John had intended! He had called for repentance not for some pre-packaged guilt trip for dissidents, the kind which were specially prepared by these spiritual wise guys. Those who, before God (Coram Deo), doubted the wisdom of these self-proclaiming religious leaders and shepherds, were a special problem to this religious elite. Their self-definition was thrown into doubt. John had called a snake a snake. And Jesus anticipated the really tough time he would receive at their hands.

Maybe John went out into the wilderness to keep away from this pious crowd. Maybe that is also why he chose to preach out in the Jordan desert. This way he could get the word of God's Coming Kingdom out without forever being jotted and tiddled by these quibblers. But then, when it became Jesus' turn to develop his ministry, Jesus went for the jugular. He aimed for the synagogues where he would begin his work, calling for repentance for the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand and we are told he had the custom of going to the synagogue every Sabbath!

The Scribes and Pharisees spent much of their time devising ways to represent Jesus' views, and trying to trick him into difficult corners by asking crafty questions. But Jesus was up to it. He gave it back to them right between the eyes! Not that they understood that the Kingdom of God had upstaged them!

Well Israel was a nation that did all the things a nation does and the people did things like any people have done, and they were aware from their history that God had called them to specially serve Him and to make sure that life was worth living under heaven. They were to listen to His word and enjoy the life He was giving them. They were not to exploit each other, they were to care for and love each other, and build a society where you respected God and neighbour and especially the outsider because God had said "You were once outsiders in Egypt when I rescued you from Pharaoh and for this reason you are to be especially kind to outsiders." This was to be the special nation for those who didn't fit in. For the historical misfits, the strange people and the people who were looked down upon.

Women also had a hard time of it under the religious/Roman rule in Israel. And that is why many flocked to Jesus because they sensed he could rescue them from the paternalistic grasp of such worldly wise men.

But Israel was also losing the secret and was living not only pretty ordinary and boring lives, it was in mortal danger of losing its reason for existence. If they now slipped back to their old ways it would have been better had John never come. If John's promise about the One didn't come through, or if it was slow in coming, well, when push came to shove, the special person from God for whom John had tried to prepare them, would be exposed as just a trick - a good trick, perhaps, but just another con job. Just another pious manipulator of the people. It might get the nation thinking deeply for a while and attention might have been given to the nation's core values, or its moral fibre. And there would be those religious leaders who would say "Well, yes, it was really good for us to have been stirred up from time to time! John was one of us. That's the kind of things we Jews do! That's why God thinks we are so special! Praise Him for that! Hallelujah!"

But then they would continue to live their lives - proud of their

designer label "God's Chosen" - and blithely ignore outsiders and keep on worrying about being on the good side of the Romans. Isn't that what God wants of us? Doesn't he want to keep us as his special people who bear witness to his grace and mercy, after all? In this way the religious authorities thought they had it all sown up. Or so they fooled themselves into believing.

But in fact, this spin showed that they had lost it well and truly. They had not only lost the plot. They were now plotting against the reason for their existence. They were no longer capable of discerning the kind of people they were becoming in God's eyes.

So that is how John had come on the scene as a breath of fresh air for many faithful God-fearing Galileans. Get ready for the special Visitor from God. Oh boy just you wait! Are things going to change when the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world turns up. So get ready! Do you hear? Get ready. God's Kingdom is coming down the road and it's big, very big. And that was what John had said about his second cousin - Jesus. That's how Jesus' ministry started.

When to his horror he was told that the Romans had finally decided to put John away, Jesus knew it was his time to move. He had to get his own disciples moving out to all the synagogues and then get the synagogues patiently praying and seeing themselves and the Law's Word as a preparation for something really important. Living in the Kingdom was to take on a new meaning. The One to whom John had pointed had come. This was not just the constitution of David's Israel. But this was the time when David's Israel would witness the reconstitution of fallen humanity in the redeeming work of the Messiah of All Nations!

The people listened to John. They decided they really wanted to serve God. So Jesus decided that the synagogues would be the places from where he would help people grow and understand what a wonderful country theirs would be when God's Kingdom was welcomed in their midst. If they were to understand what his ministry meant then they would have to get a fresh sense of God's word, God's law for daily life. Jesus would follow John's teaching and those who had come to Jesus because John had told them to follow him from then on were among those he began to teach so that they would understand.

Jesus' ministry was to come to an almighty climax. God's kingdom would be unfolded in a way that would make the angels gasp and if his followers were not taught to understand God's word aright they might miss it.

So that is why Jesus went from synagogue to synagogue, from town to town, staying at people's houses as he went around helping them to get their country working for God's Kingdom again. It wasn't easy! It would be hard work. But it was only as they put their hand to this plough, Jesus knew, that they would be able to bear witness to what God was about to achieve in his life. That's where the 12 male companions came in.

In synagogue and school and healing work in those times it was very often the men, the older boys and blokes, who usually did this kind of work, or at least set up the organisation. No doubt there were special tasks that only women did or could do. You could have a synagogue even if you had a little village but still only had 10 or 12 men. That was the rule. That's the rule Jesus grew up with. Later when his own mission started and they had to start new synagogues to teach people about him, after he had left, that all changed. "As for me," he had said, "I am going to be with you even when there are 2 or 3 gathered in my name." He didn't say that men had to start the church. He knew that sometimes it was the women who really understood what God's kingdom was all about. It seems that some men took it upon themselves much later to countermand Jesus' word here, when they said that the rule that only men could start and run Jesus' synagogue was an unchangeable rule. But Jesus said if you had two or three in any one place, men or women, who could start doing the work of helping people see themselves as rescued servants of God's Kingdom in that place, then such a small synagogue was all you needed to begin to learn to develop a caring and just society. That was what Jesus had in mind. His Word and Spirit were such as to transform the older rules that would only have served to suppress the Spirit in the new situation. Jesus' word was sufficient when new situations called for new structures.

But anyway, he was still willing to go by the rules of his time and leave some of the harder work for his followers to do after he left. So he chose 12 male followers. They were his "disciples"; that meant he was their teacher, so it was like a school. The teacher's students are

the teacher's disciples. Anyone else in that school teaches with the teacher's authority.

But notice carefully the way Mark sets things up in the first chapters. The members of the synagogues are repeatedly amazed following the healings that take place, the demons that are cast out, and they say "What new teaching is this?" Not "What new healing!" or "What new synagogue liturgical technique?" Nor even "What new prayer!" or "What new medicine!" When Jesus casts out demons we confront something strange, not only in Jesus' confrontation with the demon, but with the people's confrontation with the sign of renewal that has appeared because the evil has been countered.

The Old Testament had given priests charge of health matters. The leper having been healed was told to go to the priest to offer such sacrifices as required so that the priest could be mediator between the outcaste and his or her former community. It would have simply been too dangerous for the leper to go back home pronouncing his "healing" by himself. He might have avoided dying of leprosy but would he not have died from brain damage caused by a smashed skull?

And what about these "demons"? Can not a case be made for saying that in the instances where healing by casting out demons is referred to, particularly in the early passages of Mark, they relate to the fact that Jesus also healed those who could not be healed by the priests and through regular remedies. The cast-out demons were those agents which had prevented healing coming to the people. Whatever they were, Jesus could deal with them.

When Mark records that Jesus cast out the demons he is actually telling us that this man went about showing himself to be a Healer with greater facility in medical matters than all the priests. So this process of demonisation had the unfortunate consequence of making people less than full participants in the life of their community. They were already suffering from some or other ailment which the priests could not deal with. And so they were said to have a demon. But then the process goes even further. Those who rub the priests and scribes up the wrong way are on the way to being marginalised, too. Their full membership is under a cloud. They have transgressed the lines of "holy" power and privilege. In this way they become the objects of

scribal or priestly "concern".

What a comfort there is in the process described for us in the first three chapters of Mark. Jesus is a trouble-maker. Jesus cannot be explained. Jesus is beyond the manipulation and control of spiritual wise-guys and pious frauds. Bring in the experts from down in Jerusalem and get them to have a good look at this guy, and put in a report of their official findings. And what do they report? What does it say? This entire process then becomes a none-too-subtle attempt to make Jesus into an outcaste. The "Executive Summary" is the guts of the matter : "He casts our demons by Beelzebub!" Jesus takes the side of the demon-possessed. They didn't realise that this was the Son of God dwelling in their midst.

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus was immediately put on the spot by the spot putters. Even Jesus' family were sucked into this. It all became part of a massive campaign of psychological warfare. And Jesus defused the situation by replying in a way that ennobled everyone and made his own family proud of him. But there would be other occasions when the heat would be turned up.

Note, for instance, how Mark says that when the sign of God's Kingdom through Jesus' "new teaching" showed itself in healing, the people were amazed. The people's amazement at Jesus' work is contrasted later when Jesus is in his own town. Because of their unbelief, their hardness of heart, he could not do any such work there. Jesus marveled. Maybe we should read this as Jesus' learning curve, discovering again just how deceitful human pride and arrogance can be. There is something awesome here.

As Christians we say we are disciples of Jesus. We claim to be members of his school. Some of us are teachers - tutors as it were of their Senior Lecturer Jesus. He is in charge of the course, our life. And Jesus said that there was a special "thing" in his course, the "diploma" he taught which, in his view, would show everyone else that they were his disciples. This was his special seal on the testamur. Do you know what that was? It was that they loved each other as he had loved them. They loved and enjoyed what they were doing, they loved God's world and they loved insiders, outsiders and everyone. They cared for and they encouraged each other.

At first Jesus sent them ahead to get things ready in the next town they were to visit. As Jesus' disciples, his friends, they were also "apostles" - sent specially by Jesus to do a particular task. He was teaching them to see themselves as those sent on a journey, sent to walk a path, to do whatever God had called them to do and serve Him, to be themselves, to use whatever gifts they had to love each other and build societies which nurtured a love for God and care for everyone. But when we think about it, it is what we have been born to do - to care for each other, to love one another and love God and follow his rule for how we care for others and the planet.

Many people think that being a Christian means doing something really different and extra special so God will be pleased with us and we can wear a special Christian smile on our face or something like that.

But Jesus seems to have wanted his friends to be ordinary friends; to learn how to enjoy each other's company, to even learn how to enjoy our daily work as well as our daily bread, and even the school work we do (that may be a miracle for some people!) and to care for each other and to help make our lives an enjoyable time from when we are born until when we die.

So what he wanted was not something out of the ordinary. It was not spooky or anything like that. It was simply living our lives by being grateful for being here, thanking the One who got us here in the first place and has taken responsibility for it all. Getting help from God's Son means we are openly making our friendships wider and more loving and still more kind.

# Let's Party

## Mark 2:18-22

*18 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" 19 Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. 20 But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast. 21 "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. 22 And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins."*

Jesus has a pretty good answer for every situation, doesn't he? What do you think he was meaning here? Let's look at 18, 19 and 20. What's this about the bridegroom and the guests? What's all that about? Who's the groom? What's the celebration?

Remember, back at the beginning of Mark in Chapter 1 verse 15. The words are:

*1:15 "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"*

Once you have repented and believed the Good News there is every reason to celebrate and every reason to keep on celebrating the goodness of God every morning again. Fasting might be needed from time to time. But, now that the Kingdom of God has been announced, God's party of enjoying life as he intended it in His Kingdom, is now going to be possible again. The good news is that we can party! The sad news is that there will come a time in this life when things get hard because you are seeking to live as servants of the One True King. But since the ground-rules have been changed we can always eat and drink in hope. God's covenant is going to be fulfilled. God's banquet is being laid out ready for all who respond to the invitation. Come and see the groom! Come and celebrate the announcement of the engagement!

Jesus makes it possible for us to sit down and enjoy a good party, a big cake, lots of candles, just like you had the other day when your friends came over for your 9th birthday sleep over.

But who is Jesus referring to here? Can you guess? I suppose you will say that the groom is Jesus himself. Yes you are right. Well then who is the bride? And why will the groom be taken away? What is going on here? What does Mark mean?

Jesus is saying that his life of teaching is like an “engagement party”. He is happily inviting all his friends to the announcement. It seems that the Kingdom of God is like the marriage. The “engagement party” is being held, and the promises have been made. And while we are waiting for the marriage we party. Who is getting married? Was Jesus getting married, perhaps to one of his women disciples? No. It doesn't mean that. Jesus is saying that those friends then were having something like an engagement party for him. It was Jesus' teaching ministry which was his “engagement party”. When God's voice came from Heaven and said “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased” (1:11) God was blessing the “engagement”. God the Father was giving the blessing to the Son for his marriage. But can you guess who Jesus' bride is?

Jesus says that he is going to have to go away. Before the “marriage” can take place the groom in this story is going to leave the guests. The time for celebrating the “engagement” was then in Capernaum but there will also be a time of waiting, of praying and fasting. The groom will be taken away and then the “bride” will be prepared and the guests will continue to wait for the groom's return. Then they will fast. But that time was not then, not when Jesus was with his disciples.

Maybe the disciples did not understand all of this at the time it was said. But it seems like Jesus knew he was going to die and going to have to wait with His father until it was decided that the “bride” was ready. We also know that God raised Jesus from the dead. So the “bride” is now waiting for her “groom” to return and then there will not be an engagement party, it will be the full marriage supper. So who on earth is the bride?

There are parts of the bible which are confusing like this. Jesus' bride

is us. We are the people who are members of God's Kingdom, the people who are waiting for Jesus to return. Jesus' "engagement party" was his ministry, which started with the miracle at **a marriage** in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11).

This must have been a special moment and the bible says it was really important for Mary, Jesus' mother. My hunch is that Mary was so excited at Cana because when she was engaged she was having Jesus and so she couldn't have an engagement party. Remember how that happened? But Jesus' "engagement party" finally came to a close with the bread and wine, shared with his friends, at the last supper, the day before he was tried and crucified.

But when he rose from dead this was a sign for his friends and family and the church ever since, to celebrate, to fast and to wait, as we look forward to the coming again of the Groom. In the meantime, it is we who are the bride, and we make ourselves beautiful for the coming Groom. If we get this clear in our minds, Jesus' words help us understand the entire bible message. It also helps us see our own place in its all. It is really very exciting. Nothing can beat this!

We are invited to the great marriage Supper of the Lamb of God because "Surprise, surprise!" we are to be the bride! Men and women, boys and girls, all those who follow Jesus – to be the bride of Jesus – that is the true purpose for our lives. That is why we still have marriages, and families and parties and Bed and Breakfast places, and work on rubbish trucks and go to school, and look after rabbits and ducks.

We do all these things to tell ourselves, and everyone else, that everything makes sense because God wants us to enjoy the Banquet of the marriage feast of His Son, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

In the Older Testament there is a poem that was to be read a marriage banquets. It was all about a "good woman" – what a woman of wisdom is like in the life of the household. Well I think while we wait for Jesus our task is to prepare ourselves and all the other followers of Jesus to be His Bride just like that.

This is what the poem says:

*Who can find a wife of value  
Valued more than rarest stone?  
That is how her husband trusts her  
Brimful trust for her alone.*

*Many good things does she well,  
Long-term impact on her place.  
Knows the wool for woolly jerseys  
Flax for mats and border's lace.*

*Like a merchant shipping produce  
When they market far off goods  
She works early in the darkness  
For her household's cooking foods.*

*Not just those beneath her ceiling  
Find their needs with plenty met  
All her servant-girls provided  
Ample portions they all get.*

*She knows how to rate the market  
Wisely buys another plot;  
From her earnings plants a vineyard  
Her strong arms will work a lot.*

*Trading wisely, gaining profit,  
Lamp's wick trimmed into the night  
Holds the yarn and wheels the spindle  
Her firm grip makes cloth come right.*

*Generously she serves the needy  
Welcomes beggars when they come  
Keeps her stock of scarlet ready  
When it snows her household's warm.*

*Purple linen is her forté  
Clothed so well her household found  
Meet the cold with snug warm covers,  
Health maintained all seasons round.*

*Husband honoured in the city,  
As elder takes respected place  
Hers the garments in the market,  
Merchants prize her sashes' lace.*

*Clothed is she so strong and noble;*

*Laughing happily day by day.  
Speaking kindly, wisely guiding  
That is what her tongue will say.*

*That's because her household style  
Never lives on idle bread.  
All her children know they're lucky;  
Praise like this her husband said,*

*"Many women are most noble  
You of them surpass the lot.  
Charm deceptive, beauty fleeting;  
Look at what a wife I've got!"*

*Praise, the worth of such a woman!  
Hers a work which fears the LORD  
God's reward how she's respected,  
Praised by all in thought and word.*

Our task is not to be charming or even beautiful. Our task is to be wise by serving God and keeping to his ways. That's the only reputation we need. That's the only reputation that lasts or will count at the Marriage party.

# A Blind Man Hails the Son of David and Sees

## Mark 10:46-52

*46 Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging.*

*47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"*

*48 Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"*

*49 Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you."*

*50 Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.*

*51 "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see."*

*52 "Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.*

Have you read that bible society book .... An interesting story about another one of Jesus' disciples.

Why do you think Bartimaeus is in the story? ....

Many rebuked him ... so it wasn't just his disciples who had got it wrong. In that other story it was the disciples who tried to stop mothers bringing kids to Jesus or who wanting to call down fire on those who didn't follow them ... but Mark seems to be saying that the crowd was big and that some started to worry about what it looked like ... "Hey Jesus! Jeeee ..... sus. Jeeee .... sus" calls out this strange old man. People may have been frightened of him actually. "Hey. Look at me will you. Son of david on your way to the big city have mercy on me ... "

We don't know how he got blind. Jesus doesn't seem to care about

that ... in another place a blind man is there and the disciples ask Jesus whether he was blind because of sin ... well it sometimes happens that diseases are passed on ... and the people who get the diseases are viewed as specially guilty ... or at least God's judgment is on them ... God is picking on them .... but that wasn't what happened here ... the people just said

"Shoo-ooosh." I suppose it could have been "Listen buster we've come on a long journey to hear Jesus telling us one of his stories. So cool it. You're interrupting. Shoo-oosh." But it didn't do any good. Bart just kept on shouting all the more .... He actually knew who Jesus was ... he couldn't read the bible any more but sure enough somehow he knew that the Son of David had come and had come to give mercy ... in fact it seems this old blind geezer knew that Jesus had come to have mercy on him AS MUCH AS ANYONE ELSE. He might have been saying: "Hey Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Oi! Oi! Oi! Over hear. Here I am. It's me. I'm here!"

Imagine a couple of blind tennis supporters at your church when Jesus comes to lead the service one Sunday.

David's boy! David's boy! David's boy! Oi! Oi! Oi!

[Ozzie! Ozzie! Ozzie! Oi! Oi! Oi!]

David's boy Oi! David's boy Oi! David's boy Oi! Oi! Oi! Oi!

[Ozzie! Ozzie! Ozzie! Oi! Oi! Oi!]

Really in a flap. Jumping up and down. Well when you are in a flap and jumping up and down because something needs fixing or something's really in need of God's help and you call out then you are really desperate. You are willing to cop the embarrassment. Bart was not just wanting everyone to look at him. He was really wanting God to help him and yes wanted to be able to look at everyone else. So he was ready to ask Jesus for what he really needed.

Jesus stopped. The eyes in the heads of the shooshers might have popped right out at this. "Call him." And Jesus said to the blind man: "What do you want me to do for you?"

How about that. Even before finding out his name. Well Jesus knew

his Father knew who this fellow was. "Anyone who comes to me comes because it was my father's will to draw him ... " That's how Jesus approached the people who came to him in need. So should we ... and we should listen. Jesus wanted to hear what the problem was.

"I want to see again!"

This man was ready for healing. He knew his problem. He wasn't distracted by his own shouting. He could have said "You heard me eh? Well now that's good. How about one of your miracles. Eh? No more down-trodden Bartimeaus for me if you do it." That wasn't the exchange according to Mark. It was simply.

Bart: I know who you are. You're the Messiah.

Jesus: What do you want?

Bart: I want to see.

Jesus: Alright. Go on your way. Your faith has already healed you.

Wow. And did he go on his way? Yes. He went on his way *following Jesus*. That's the real point here. Just like the seed sown in the good ground this was a harvest; but it was harvest in which Jesus had commended the work of the Kingdom of God to this blind man and in response to receiving his sight he followed Jesus.

That's how it happened. That's how Bart became a follower of Jesus.

Did he go back and pick up his cloak and walking stick? We don't know. But I have a hunch that the people of that town picked them up and kept them as reminders of what Jesus had done for him. That's just my hunch; Mark tells about him leaving the cloak on the ground because maybe someone did pick it up and try and make it into something special. But the really special thing was that Bart had become a disciple. His Rabbi had allowed him to see. He forget to go back for it, and it seems he did not really worry. If he could see that was the main thing at this point. And so he became a follower of Jesus.

In another account of this story there are two blind beggars calling for

help from Jesus. Read Matthew 20:29-34. The account in Luke 18:35-43 has one blind beggar. I wonder why that is? Let's think about this for a bit.

Have you ever noticed the differences between bibles? Well there are differences in the words and there are also differences in the paragraphs, where one story ends and another one begins. If you look at bibles that have been published recently they give you a whole lot of headings. Don't believe the headings. They are not reliable. For instance, in the bibles I have the passage after the healing of Bartimaeus are all headed "The Triumphal Entry Into Jerusalem". Well there was a triumphal entry but it didn't begin exactly at the point where the new heading indicated.

You have to be real careful about the bible. The problem is that so many people think it is a church book - as if the passage about Jesus riding on a donkey is in the bible so we can have something to read on Palm Sunday!! But that's the problem with churches. They get the bible all around the wrong way. And anyway look at what Mark is telling us. Before the crowds came out waving their branches, before the disciples finally accepted that Jesus was really going up to Jerusalem to be tried, the man who was as blind as a bat had indicated to Jesus that he knew why Jesus was on the road. Bartimaeus understood who this man was. That's what he was saying:

"Son of David! Son of David, have mercy on me!"

But, once again, the crowd got it wrong. Why don't you be quiet Bartimaeus. Can't you understand that Jesus is an important Rabbi? He hasn't time for a beggar like you. Just be quiet. Shooosh. Let's listen to what he says! The crowd obviously thought it was a festival or a parade. They didn't want this strange old man who couldn't see interrupting their experience of this famous Rabbi.

"Can't you be quiet!"

Now that's how it was for the people on the outskirts of Jericho as Jesus passed by. We'll come back to them in a minute. Let's look again at where this is in Mark's story about Jesus on the road to Jerusalem.

This healing is also told in Matthew 20:29-34 and Luke 18:35-43. The story in Matthew has it that Jesus actually healed two blind men on this occasion. So why has Mark (and Luke) only mentioned the healing of one, the person Mark identifies as Bartimaeus?

Remember I said that it seems as if Mark is written to remind the people of Galilee of what had happened in their region and how that was all a preparation for what was to come when Jesus went up to Jerusalem?

My hunch is that Mark only mentions Bartimaeus because his concern was with what was happening to the disciples and how this healing actually helped the disciples over a very difficult period. Remember what had happened just before this?

Think about it.

The disciples are very confused. They are also angry and beginning to lose it.

James and John may have thought they were doing Jesus a favour by taking his message seriously and trying to reassure Jesus that they would be there until the end. But it led to big strife among the disciples. Jesus disciples were like that. I should have said "are like that".

Later another James, who is said to have been Jesus' blood brother, wrote this:

*James 3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him share it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.*

*14. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.*

*15. Such 'wisdom' does not come from heaven ...*

Read the full passage sometime. Jesus didn't condemn James and John for their commitment. Nor did he rebuke their mother for her ambition for her sons. What he said was said to the entire body of disciples. They were on the verge of losing it completely, because they simply had not understood what it was He was doing.

And the same with Jesus' disciples ever since. They are jealous of

one another; they are bitter toward one another because they feel they have a relationship with Jesus that they don't have. It is almost as if being a disciple of Jesus means fighting and brawling with each other. Anything rather than facing up to the awful truth that this man's mission in life was to be sacrificed *for the sins of his own disciples!*

Well think about it!

What else could they do? Should they be happy and contented? That would be a very tall order. Here is Jesus trying as hard as he can to explain what he is doing out there on the road, with Herod after his blood. With the scribes and pharisees trying to trump up some fake case against him so they don't have to listen to his wisdom. And he is telling them that the Son of Man is on his way to being victimised, humiliated and killed.

Could anyone have been happy and relaxed about this?

The funny thing - if you can call it "funny" - is that Jesus seems to be relaxed about it; he seems to continue his reaching work, as their Rabbi, as clearly and decisively as he had done previously. That's what they were wanting Him to be for them. Their teacher.

But he's not letting their squabble and unresolved disagreements stop Him from getting on, from walking up the road to Jerusalem. But it's beginning to get dangerous. They are tense and uptight. They are feeling the pressure.



Have you ever been in a situation where you feel people are losing it? Perhaps there is an argument going on and you are not too sure what going to happen. It sounds serious, awfully serious. It might be when you listen to your parents arguing, either with someone else or with each other. It might be grandparents or uncles or friends. It might be at school. And you are all ears. And you are wondering: "What is going to happen next?"

Sometimes when a person is very sick, or dying, the whole family comes together and gather around. You'd think they'd use the opportunity to be loving and supportive and caring ... and what happens? ... they try ... but they can't .... they just can't ... they open

their mouths and hurt comes out ... even if they don't mean. They become miserable and they start quarelling and pointing the finger and they are sad and they are angry and they begin to get vicious. Just like James had written; it is because they haven't learned to be humble. They think they are coping. And they are not coping. They are just trying to show others that they are.

*James 4:6 God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.*

And when you are in the middle of all that .... What can you call it? You can only say it is a mess! A pile of pooh! ... it is like nothing else you'll ever experience. It's not just that this brother or that sister, or this cousin or that cousin, or that friend or that auntie or some or all of them, are off their trollies, but it's almost as if the whole world is off its trolley. Ever feel like that? It's as if the end of the world is about to arrive. Everyone and everything has just gone stark, raving bonkers.

*And then in the middle of this squabble and misery and confusion,  
maybe a doorbell rings, or*

*maybe the kettle starts whistling, or*

*the dishwasher overflows, or*

*maybe someone farts*

*and everyone looks at each other, and realises : How stupid we've  
been, and we look embarrassed and some start smiling and some  
might even start laughing and the madness disappears, at least for a  
while.*

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Well, my hunch with Bartimaeus is that something like this happened here .... The disciples were really seething; they were arguing with each other and Jesus was giving it to them straight .... If you can't learn how to serve then you are not following the One who came to serve and give His life as a ransom. If you are only concerned about your position, then forget it. God's Kingdom is not for you. Jesus was again trying to explain to them what was going on. And they were really finding it all too much. The world was out of joint and then, all of a sudden as they are walking on the outskirts of Jericho a shrill voice is heard:

*"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"*

This man knew who Jesus was. He also knew that what He was

about to do was according to what the prophets had said about David's Son taking up David's Royal Throne. **And he wasn't even part of the band of disciples.** That would have been difficult. He couldn't see. He couldn't even see the person of Jesus walking by on His way to Jerusalem. **But He had faith to know who He was calling out to. He asked Jesus for mercy!** He knew he needed God's healing if his sight was ever to be restored. But he knew he stood in need of God's mercy and forgiveness.

You recall that I said I had a hunch that Mark refers to Bartimaeus and not to the other blind man as well. Well when Bartimaeus called out "Son of David!" it had the effect of bringing the miserable, arguing disciples back to reality. It was not only the disciples who welcomes the good news. It was not only those who walked with Jesus along the road who thanked God for the coming of the Kingdom. My hunch is that Bartimaeus is in the story because as a follower of Jesus he made an important contribution to the life of the disciples. Bartimaeus is in the story because in his calling out to Jesus, the son of David, he distracted the disciples when they needed to give up their arguing. A bit like a door-bell or a telephone distracts us.

As I said, we have to be careful about the bible. The publishers put in headings to make it easier to read. But remember that the publishers were not Mark. The story of Bartimaeus reminds us that a blind man rejoiced to see the Son of David before the crowds pulled down palm branches to welcome Him with their "Hossanas". And my hunch is that the disciples remembered Bartimaeus as a fellow disciple who helped to keep them together, walking on the road to Jerusalem, when they were at the end of their tether and about to call it quits. For the disciples blind Bartimaeus in his need saw more than they did. They had been given personal lessons from their Rabbi, but they still had much to learn, and it wasn't going to be easy.

# GOD'S DELIGHT AT THE BEGINNING

Did God want the bible to have hard covers? Or did he want soft covers?

When God got Moses to work on the writing out his story did he tell Moses how keep it simple for children? I have a strong hunch that he did. In fact I think it had taken Moses a long time to realise this important part of his obedience to God's law, and in particular to how this related to his Torah writing vocation. The story had to be God's word for all God's people, and so it had to be able to be told to children without their parents thinking they were hiding anything from them. After all, who can hide from God? And who can hide God from anyone?

The bible is written for those who are children of God and so God wanted his book written in a way that adults could pass it down to their children like it was a family story. It was like the story that grandma told you when she was a little girl. The story did not have to be a fairy story or made up or anything like that. It had to be about what had truly taken place, but it had to be written so that parents could read it to their children and pass it on.

The bible in most of its parts is written so that the story can be told to those who do not know it, and in particular to children. So when Jacob was wrestling with the angel, and had his name changed to Israel, the angel was also telling him how the story had to be told from then on. Jacob was too concerned with being a big man and having a big family, and his two wives and his servant girls who also had his children. He had got into a frame of mind that the true story, as it has to be conveyed to children, could no longer be passed from parents to their children, from one generation to the next. He had started thinking that the story was there so he could be a King Dick (sic!), the Big Hero, like they used to tell across the sea in the Hellenistic regions. But after the wrestling took place, with Jacob limping the rest of his life, he was put in a frame of mind that he could

really pass on the covenant.

It was also in this way that Jacob's dealing with God in that all night wrestling match prepared the way for that great prince of Egypt, Moses, to compose his five books. He had had to come to his senses about the way God wants us to train up a new generation to come after us. He had to learn how to write in a way that the message of God the Creator of heaven and earth could be understood by children.

Think of it. One of the big reasons why Moses had to go through all that time in Egypt, being found in the river in a basket by the Pharaoh's daughter, being nursed by his real mother when lots of his fellow Jewish children had been slaughtered, being educated in all the knowledge and wisdom of Pharaoh's court, was so he could write down God's Law, God's story, his-story, the Covenantal Promises of God so that children could understand that God indeed keeps his promises, all of them, and that He loves us with an everlasting love and will be with us throughout our lives, until we die or until Jesus comes back to complete the Kingdom and complete the story He wants us to know and understand. So Moses grew up in Egypt, fled into the wilderness, and then led the children, the great-great grandchildren of Israel out of Egypt on the long way back to the promised land. And on the way one of the things they were learning was ....

yes you've guessed it ....

how to tell God's story in ways that even children could understand

and ways that will make grandmas dance and grandpas go out the back and have a big swing on the tire! God wants his story to be told to us so we can live happy lives. Remember Jesus' most famous sermon! You know, where he says: Happy are the poor in spirit etc etc Well all that happiness is what is in mind when the story of God is written down for us and when we here it.

In fact that is why, if we have been hearing the stories about God told as God wants them to be told, then at Church there shouldn't have to be a time when the children go out for "their" church. Why? Because the children, at least those you can tell stories to, should be able to understand the story of Jesus because the bible was given to adults

so they could tell it to their children. This rule holds for all of life and is not to be suspended just because we enter church. Still if church traditions mean that "church for kids" is held in kitchens and backrooms then this can't be changed immediately and overnight. And my hunch is that the way to bring about change is by learning to listen to, and then to read, the bible in a way that even children can understand. But if on occasion sermons have to be difficult and complex and hard to understand it may be best for children to go out and have someone read them bible stories on their own. Sometimes, but only occasionally in my view, sermons at church should be for adults, but usually a talk for adults is called a lecture and sermons in church are not meant to be lectures. They are meant to be a proclamation of God's word for the whole of life, where minister and congregation are obediently sitting at the feet of Jesus Himself and listening to his word.

Well that's just another of those introductory things that I seem to be saying a lot of these days. But now I want you to listen to the first part of the bible. We don't know for sure whether it was the first part of the bible we now have that was written down. It may have been. It doesn't have a date on it saying 4057BC 4.59am on 19th January or anything like that. But it is written about what God did when he set things up "in the beginning."

When was that? We don't know. Some scientists seem to imply that they are close to identifying the exact time and place. Amazing! Sounds very much like what Archbishop Ussher tried to do for me, except they work with a very old earth theory and the good prelate was determined to maintain his view of a young earth. If they also want to say that science has no proof that God created the heavens and the earth in seven days, I am not sure they can prove that. They isn't provable. It's just what they say has to be because without such a view they feel science is meaningless. Science tells us what happened and all else is merely made up, so many people, scientists and others think. But even that view about science is made up so where are we? Not very far advanced I'd say.

But if someone or anyone wants to tell us that God didn't create the heavens and the earth because to believe that you have to have some silly idea about creation happening on the 4<sup>th</sup> January 4004BC then all we say is that we do believe God made the heavens and the

earth and we don't believe that silly theory.

Jesus said that it wasn't even in his knowledge when God had planned to wind up his creation as we now experience it. Jesus seems to have implied that he believed God had a special purpose for him to complete His purpose for His creation. But if Jesus the Son of God didn't know when his second coming was to take place then I think it is a sure bet that we can't either. And if we cannot locate the date in the future when that will be - whether before or after the sun finally runs out of juice and begins to die - he didn't know, so we don't know either. And if that is about the future, how can we hope to be able to explain everything because some scientist somewhere has worked out when the first wave of energy rolled onto the beach of time.

It's not only a question of when - as it how many trillions of years it took for God's creation to unfold to where we are today - but also where. So it is still the truth that a lot of these questions about big bangs and black holes and quasars and quarks still can't explain everything. They can't explain where time came from. They can't explain where space came from.

We should try to gently tell those who pooh-pooh believing in God that they actually think that something was "there" to make everything happen. We don't believe fantastic theories but we don't believe things just because someone says the initial big bang occurred at a number of years that has a lot of zeros at the end of it. It takes a long time to write it out and their life isn't even long enough for them to count up to this amount of years. Let alone the numbers of minutes or seconds that are in these fantastic numbers. We believe those numbers exist but nobodies ever counted up to these numbers, except they may have down the ten-zillion times table.

Ten-zillion times one is Ten-zillion

Ten-zillion times two is Twenty-zillion

Ten-zillion times three is Thirty-zillion

Ten-zillion times four is Forty-zillion

Ten-zillion times five is Fifty-zillion

Ten-zillion times six is Sixty-zillion

Ten-zillion times seven is Seventy-zillion

Ten-zillion times eight is Eighty-zillion

Ten-zillion times nine is Ninety-zillion

Ten-zillion times ten is Tenty-zillion

Ten-zillion times eleven is Eleventy-zillion

But how much is a zillion anyway and who has every counted that much?

We can't. So we don't have to say "Gee whizz. The universe began Eleventy-and thirteen squillion zillion years ago with a big bang! Must be true some scientist said so. So much for God! It was the Big Bang that did it! I don't have to read the bible any more. Goodbye to all that religious stuff."

Well. What a load of Colac rubbish tip garbage it would be to say that! But I think some people might actually think like this. Except at the tip there is more worthwhile things than in this kind of thinking. You see this kind of thinking is not about Big Bang's or Blackholes at all. People are fascinated by big bangs and black holes and quasars and quarks and they should be.

But people don't only believe in science; they also want science to prove their pet theories. Those who believe in God and Jesus and all that use science like that. But so do people who don't believe in God or Jesus. One of their pet theories, pet hunches if you like, is that God doesn't exist. And in fact it sometimes sounds like "I don't believe in God because as far as I am concerned God shouldn't exist!"

So when you hear anyone say that because of Big Bangs they can't believe in God, listen carefully. It's possible they are saying "I'm not really interested in God but just in case he might exist I have read about Black Holes which I want to believe prove he shouldn't exist."

You see we are not just interested in Black Holes we are interested in what black holes, or dinosaur bones, or fossils or whatever can tell us

about this creation in which we live. Humans are interested in the things that have been made. That's how we are. That's how we have been made. So it IS important to look up at the stars and wonder what's on the other side of the sky. It is important to try and think how old the earth could be. Since God created us in THIS world he created us to investigate these kinds of things.

It seems that many people, scientists and others, think that because we can measure the universe, in time and space, then somehow our activity of measuring means that somehow what we measure is not the result of God creating it. This is a very ancient idea. Many people hold this view so tightly they do not even know that that is what they believe. Now that is a very strange belief. If you can measure something then it proves that the measurer, the person with the stopwatch or the person with the measuring tape, is somehow in control of what they are measuring. And since they are in control then God couldn't be in control. This is indeed a very strange view. And often you cannot argue with people who hold this view.

It's a bit like another way people say they don't believe in God. "OK they say if God exists who created God? See," they say, with a look of triumph, "it doesn't make sense. So why should I believe?" We should be able to tell people why, but they mightn't understand us.

When we say: "I believe in God the maker of heaven and earth" we are not saying "Hey listen everybody I have proved God made the heaven and the earth by my mind!" We are saying what we believe.

And we are certainly not saying: "Atheists suck!" "Neh nerdy neh neh! I believe in God and you don't!" We aren't firstly saying something to our neighbours at all. When we say "I believe in God ... " we are saying something to God and there's no use saying it if you don't believe in God as if you can trick God about it.

We don't ask people to say what they don't believe; it's better for them to wait until they do believe in god than for them to try and show how good they are by using the words. I suppose people who do believe in God, we believe in God because they have heard the stories about Him in the bible, say they believe in God because God made it possible for them to believe in him. After all he made us with hearts and minds to believe in Him.

So when someone says that the sound waves from deep space which are still bouncing around in the universe help us to work out just how long ago it was that the first sound wave, or light wave, or mega-byte of energy came into existence - pop! - that's one thing. When they say that this explains where everything came from or even that this means that God doesn't exist, they are going on to say something else. Sometimes people want science to find out the time and place everything started because then, they think, they can with a loud voice "No-one's out there! It's all just a big bang and it all just happened!"

There is a big problem with this approach. It is this. What did it pop into? You know the story of the tree crashing the forest. If there was no-one there did it make a sound? How could you tell if there wasn't something there to pick up the sound waves? Hearing something is not only about something happening, It's about something else listening.

We have already said we want to know how all things, everything came into existence and how old everything is. Well when that first bit of wave energy popped into being where was it? In space? In time?

The problem with measuring is that you can go on measuring for ever. You say it was seventy squillion years ago (plus or minus 15 grillion) you can still ask the question: "But what about seventy squillion 15 grillion years ago plus one second? What was in existence then? You see we might measure time to go back until not only our head spins, and we pass out and faint and in our dreams we dream of ourselves fainting, because it is so far away in the past it's like looking up on a starry night. You look into the sky and it just goes on for ever and you think I wonder what's on the other side of the end of the universe and before you know it you are sound asleep.

But that's not the only way we measure by time. We don't only measure time after an event. We also measure time before an event. You know about BC and AD. But you also know about 3 years before you were born your parents got married. Or 6 years before Dad was born his parents got married. So when we measure time we also measure before events not just after them.

Some people get really worried about all this, because it means that

our measuring is always limited. We need to think carefully about it. It's important that we do. So when we hear about people saying

they have worked out how old the universe is or

when the big bang happened or

how millions of years ago DNA and genes started  
bubbling in a particular kind of way in  
chimpanzee-like creatures

that finally became our own species

or that genes are like special computer chips in our  
bodies which tell us everything we have  
ever been or ever will be

we can look at their discoveries and say, "Oh boy, this is big." But there are bigger questions which these discoveries never seem answer like:

Where did it all come from? and

What was there before? and

What is it all about anyway?

Some people say that before the big bang was nothing. Well that is hard to believe. After all for something to make a bang there has to be something in which it bangs or something it bangs into.

But for people to believe in "nothing" before the big bang is not that much different from those who believe that before God created there was nothing - only God. But for those who believe in God "nothing" means that only God has made things happen. For those who don't believe in God "nothing" just happens.

And as I said for something to make a bang there has to be a before and an after. Before, in both time and space, so that the bang could occur and break the silence and so the sound could travel not only in time but in space. If the scientists believe they have "picked" up the sound waves of the "first bang" it has had to travel. To travel somewhere something moves. To move it goes from place to place.

Now here's an interesting problem. The bang some scientists sometimes talk about seems to be "the answer to life the universe and everything". OK suppose it is. But as we have said for a bang to be a bang it has to travel.

Get Dad to go out in the next paddock with a fireworks cracker or a starting pistol. Watch him carefully. Ask him to walk a mile away so you see him only as a speck on the horizon then ask him to set off the cracker or fire the pistol. What do you see? Watch him carefully. What do you see?

He lifts up the pistol and smoke comes out and then a second later you hear the bang. You SAW the bang before you HEARD it. Now that is interesting. Call him back.

"Dad come home!"

Get him to fire the pistol at the end of the yard. The smoke and the sound appear at the same time. Did you see the smoke come first and the sound come second when he was a mile away? Were you just imagining it?

Why did this happen? The answer is that the bang travels faster for you to SEE than it is for you to HEAR! We say that light travels faster than sound. You SAW the smoke and then you HEARD the bang!

Now this is very interesting. Because it means that not only things like trains or rocks or bullets travel. But so does sound and so does light. And when things make a bang then some other things will travel. When the pistol goes off BANG! then the SOUND travels. And the SOUND travels on the AIR. If we were on the moon we would not hear the sound, at least not without some listening device. We can also measure the speed of SOUND and the speed of LIGHT.

So when scientists tell us that there was a BIG BANG of LIGHT and SOUND many years ago they are saying that something seems to have occurred to have brought LIGHT and SOUND into existence. But we experience LIGHT and SOUND as they travel to our EYES (if we are not blind) and EARS (if we are not deaf). And for anything to travel they have to travel through something - like air - over time and through space. IF there was a BIG BANG, and if some scientists say it helps us EXPLAIN EVERYTHING TO DO WITH THE ENTIRE

UNIVERSE (as some imply) there is a big problem of explaining what they mean. They seem to be saying that the BIG BANG was so big that it brought TIME and SPACE into existence. The problem here is that to ever have a BANG you seem to need to have both TIME and SPACE and so what they mean by the BIG BANG seems to be very mysterious and beyond our knowledge.

That's why I think that many people who do not believe in God but who do believe in BIG BANGs seem to have accepted something that is more mysterious than anything we have ever confronted. The bible admits that God is mysterious but this big BIG BANG which just came out of NOTHING and if it was the means of bringing SPACE and TIME into existence then I think these scientists are asking us to believe in mysteries that are just as useful as fairy stories. We can listen to them; we can imagine what they mean. But they are not really helpful in understanding the universe or ourselves. At least the part where they begin to say that the BIG BANG explains why we are here. It only explains why we are here if everything is a MYSTERY.

BANGS have a before - when everything was bangless and silent - and an after - when the echo we hear fades away like a train traveling off into the distance.

So even with BIG BANG ideas we still have to wonder where space came from. Could a bang make space? Or would not a bang be impossible if there wasn't a space for it to be in the first place. Did the bang make time? Or does the bang only come about when something hits, before and after. If you say there was no space or time before the bang then this is a bang like bangs we have never experience. And that is a bigger mystery than all the mysteries we have ever come across. How come we can measure this bang? How come we can work out when this bang happened if the bang made time? Where did the bang come from?

But if like Moses we say that God created everything right at the beginning of time, then we are saying that God even made little bangs and stars and black holes and space and time and light to be measured. He even set the entire universe up so that you and I can wake up in the morning when it is time to wake up and a new day has begun. Before God made things - his purpose in making things also includes that we could investigate them - then there was nothing.

Why? Because God hadn't created it. Things that are part of our life are there because God made them! Everything.

So when we listen to the story that Moses wrote down about how God set things up, let's remember that God told him to write it down in a way that parents could tell their children about what God is doing in His creation. Those who read and follow the bible have always told their children about God's creation and they help them understand just what is up in the world.

And it is because of this that we should now really enjoy school. What? You're joking?

Yes God created the heavens and the earth and because of that - no matter what anyone says or tries to say - schooling is one of the most meaningful things we can ever do. Why? Because we are investigating what God has made.

And you know, I have a hunch! The bible was written down, and God made sure it was written down so that you and your sister and your brother could hear the stories about God AND ENJOY SCHOOL!

You've got to be kidding.

No. Fair dinkum. It all makes sense when we realise that God has set things up so that we can learn about Him, his creation and ourselves, and each other, through reading stories and listening to the stories he told Moses and other bible writers to write down.

I have said enough. Here then is Genesis Chapter One.

First and foremost, God established both the heavens and the earth. And the earth was desolate and empty (at first), and a profound emptiness and deep darkness was covering its face, whilst God's breath was there brooding over the face of the waters.

And God said Let light be - and light was.

And light saw and was pleased that the light was good.

*[COMMENT TO READER: The dark emptiness and shadow was covering the face of the earth and God was in some sense holding his breath or in suspense watching what he had worked upon. Think about this. Think about the middle eastern ancient imagery. Think about God as our Father in Heaven. Think about what this means for His creation which he loves dearly. Think of the metaphors that are playfully being used here to tell us about His tenderness. It is almost as if the Lover (God) is there finally being brought together under the one canopy of heaven with His beloved (the earth part of the creation) which is itself veiled. And having invited earth and its waters into his tent he puts on the light. The poetic image cannot be stretched too far but it is poetically sensuous.*

And God turned back the light and the dark to separate them

and he proclaimed the light to be Day!

and the dark he announced was to be Night!

And there was twilight and there was day-break. For the first time!

*[COMMENT: already God is revealed as deeply affectionate for his creation alpha to omega if not "go" to "whoa".*

And God said, There shall be canopy spread out in the midst of the waters, and this shall turn back the waters to separate them from other waters. And he was working on the canopy of water, separating those waters and spreading out those which were below from those which were spreading out all over until it was done just right.

And God proclaimed the spreading-out to be Skies/Heavens!

And there was twilight and there was daybreak. For the second time!

*[COMMENT: see comment at the end about the two stories that have been recounted here in the 7 chapter book of Genesis One.*

And God said, Come all you waters spread-out under the canopy of heaven and congregate in one place to let the dry land appear. And it was done just like that. And God proclaimed the dry land to be the Earth/ground!

And the synagogue of waters he proclaimed to be Seas.

And God saw and was pleased that it was all good!

Then God said: Let the ground flourish with grass and their seeds, with trees and their fruits with their seeds. All worked out to order throughout all the earth to secretly hold within the fruit the seed which would be that for its own kind. And it was done just right, just like that! Tender grass came forth from seeds to (give more) seed, whilst trees were to work (hard to bring) forth fruit which grows within them; all made exactly to order; and God saw and was pleased that it was (so) good.

And there was twilight, and there was daybreak for the third time.

And God said, let there be lights in the canopy above of the heavens/skies to turn back the day and separate it from the night. And let these lights be for fixed points to remember, let them be for a calendar, a means of regulating feast days, and (the counting of) years. And let them be for lighting in the spread-out canopy of the heavens so that they shine forth upon the earth.

And it was done just like that.

*[COMMENT: Is this written as a kind of getting up early just before daybreak to see the sunrise kind of story - the light comes but then the bodies in the heavens can only be seen later after the sunrise (i.e. let there be light!) - this apparent disjunction is further confirmation to me that the Genesis One is written to explain to children where everything comes from. It is not fixated on making up a story with everything logically and sequentially in its place, but gains momentum as a story of how God puts everything in His creation in his place in his time.*

And God commissioned the two great lights: the major general light he installed for the rule over the day-time and the lesser light to rule over night time and the stars.

*[COMMENT: Is this not imagery associated with government I detect here? (Yes suh said the sun). (Your wish is my command, my Lord,*

*said the Moon). It is to do with rule and subjugation.*

God had them all installed and ordained in the canopy of the heavens to give light to the earth; to administer and keep watch from their exalted positions during the day and during the night and also as a means of turning back the light and separating the dark. And God saw and was pleased that it was good.

And there was twilight and there was daybreak for the fourth time.

And God said, Let the waters well up, and let them abound in creeping-crawling life, and let birds fitted for flight patrol in full view above the earth, through out the entire spread-out canopy of the heavens. And God cared for and hatched the great whales and all the moving creeping animals which abound in the waters - all made to order - and every kind of big-winged and fitted for flight birds - also all made to order.

And God saw and was pleased that it was good.

*[COMMENT More military and governance imagery.*

And God by so favouring them mightily said, "Go ahead and be fruitful and increase (this reminds us of Matt 28:19 "In your going into all the world ...") and use up all the waters in the seas to the full - and you birds are to multiply yourselves over all the earth.

And there was twilight and there was daybreak for the fifth time.

And God said: "Come forth O earth. Your task is to warrant all manner of living creatures - all made to order; and also those creeping reptiles and beasts of the earth according to their own special rank. And it was done just right. And God assembled the beasts of the earth in the way that was right (for them), numbered and ranked according to their respective divisions, and with all reptiles of the ground he did likewise. And God saw and was pleased that it was (so) good.

And God said Let us establish our own special concern, one made according to our own specifications, just like us. And let this one subdue the fish of the sea, and the winged-flying birds of the skies and the mute-cattle - over all the earth and over all the creeping crawling things upon the face the of the earth.

In this way God established the human as his own special concern. God it was who fashioned him, and as celebrated-male and distinctive-female that is how he made them. And it was in just these terms that God favoured them, and God said to them (directly and explicitly) "You (too) are to be fruitful and increase and full the whole earth to the full as you walk around keeping the order for the fish of the sea, the birds of the skies - over everything that lives and creeps upon the earth."

And God said, "I have an order to deliver to you. It's all the vegetation with all their seeds which are upon the face of the earth as well as all the trees which are in it, the seeds that are in their seeds and these shall be for your nourishment, and all the living creatures of the earth and all the boirds on the wing in the skies and also all the creeping things upon the earth which have the vitality of life - all of which have green plants to eat.

*[COMMENT: Does God speak something like a delivery man from the creational supermarket - knocks on the back door of human house "Specially ordered delivery for humans from me .... Sign here please ...*

And it was done, just like that.

And God maintained watch over all on which he had given so much time and effort in his labour. And now it was achieved and completed, just like that.

And there was twilight, and there was daybreak, for the sixth time.

So that is (the story of) how the heavens and the earth were fully furnished, and how they were set up with all the abundant things (we have to enjoy). On the next day, the seventh rest-day, God surveyed and ruled over his work, the work he had done resting on that seventh day from all the many different things he had created to set things up just as they are.

And in so blessing this Sabbath day, God made it a very special occasion indeed. This was because on that day he rested from all the works he had laboured on, delighting in the special work of his hands.

So then, this is the story of the heavens and the earth, how they were established when at the right time God began work on it. God set

heaven and earth in its place.

*[COMMENT: Story telling - have a look at the story telling structure of Genesis - and Chapter One is part of this, the first of a series of stories that help the children of Israel locate themselves in the plan and purposes of the Living God, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. I wonder. Let us follow the hunch and see if these could themselves be 7 chapters each to be read both at sunrise and sunset for a day so that the entire chapter/book takes a week of reading. They are to be read when one gets up .... and the Chapter headings come at the end of each "day"/chapter. In other words - now that is the signal for "off to work now" when read in the morning and "off to sleep we'll come to the next day tomorrow morning when you wake up" when read at night.*

# The Dilemma of the Dispersed Christian

Bruce C Wearne (1979 - re-written 13.10.09)

If the church of Jesus Christ be that throng of humankind who, with heart and voice, believe the good news and offer up unceasing praise to the God of heaven and Earth, then this worship, at present, partakes of a life and death struggle where the front lines of opposition cut across our life in its entirety.

There is a great divide within the heart of humanity, and it was to this broken and dissonant disposition that the Gospel was proclaimed by the Coming of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. The divide is neither established nor guaranteed by the power of human reflection. as all people everywhere are call to believe the Gospel of reconciliation and to worship God alone.

Humans are called to believe in the midst of our everyday service, in all of our actions and reflections. The call of the prophet shapes and directs human action in all of its many domains and corners.

*Make straight in the desert a highway for our God!*

And if this call with all of its antithetical clarity could break the hearts of John's listeners in the desert, where human cultivation had not as yet achieved its cultivated and technical accomplishments, how much more should the roads now be made straight and firm to welcome the coming King as He passes on His way to glory through suburbs, city and public domain.

A hallmark of Christian writing world-wide over the past 30 years has been the willingness of writers to reappraise taken-for-granted denominational traditions in the light of scriptural teaching. Many people, high and low, in the various churches, denominations and sects, have begun to ask questions which should spur us on to discover whether and where, in fact, God's faithful people have been

busy throughout the world, making a highway for the Lord in our 21st century desert. Many Christians, young and old, high and low, have come to the conclusion that "even to preserve the organised church therefore we should fight for an integral Christian society."

Not only in private, but in public, the Christian way is to be followed. Not only in the church, but in scholarship, industry, art, family life, politics, recreation our service of the Living God is to be made manifest. Not only in the church but in these other social institutions and organisations and relationships as well. This leads us to an uncomfortable corollary: not only in these other areas but also in the church!

In the paragraph immediately above, I used the term "uncomfortable". Why should I use this term? Consult denominational newspapers and Christian books. See if you can identify works that are specifically related to the fight in the churches for an integral Christian way. There will be articles on "radical discipleship", there will be sermon outlines about serving Lord with heart and soul and mind and strength. But it might be worth reflecting upon the fact that in the struggle for an integral Christian society, little discussion is heard about the struggle within the church. And I suspect that this relative silence about church matters indicates, at the very least, that a measure of discomfort exists when the discussion about "Christian discipleship in all areas of social life" turns to the question of how that is to come to expression in churches, denominations and local fellowships. And to the degree that this discomfort is fruit of an obedient struggle to serve the Lord God in all spheres of life, it should be welcomed:

*Clear thou me of secret faults (Psalm 19:12b)*

it is clear then that "church" in the above sense is indeed a social institution with specially defined limits - it has its own calling to fulfill among all the different and various social institutions, organisations and relationships. It is not exclusive of any person whom God, through His Spirit, has bound to Himself. It is constituted not so much by what people may, by way of response, have brought about but rather by what God guarantees through His Son, the New Root by which the entire creation holds together in its purpose and meaning. By "church" I am not meaning "fellowship", though gathered

by the Spirit and the Word believers share their community in worship. Nor am I simply pinpointing a regular assembly where believers are gathered together for mutual edification; neither can "church" refer, in the above sense, to the voluntary adherence to some doctrine or creed which shows itself on special occasions set aside for renewal and revival.

I hope that what I have written already indicates the complexity of our problems. Many folk, sincere Christians to be sure, operate with an ongoing naïveté about church - its responsibility to them and their responsibility to it. In fact, many are in danger of having taken their membership in the church for granted simply because they have not reflected upon what it means to be an active part of the body of Christ.

What principles should guide Christian people in taking positive steps towards initiating, maintaining and encouraging the faithful fulfillment of those duties which should come to expression in the life of the organized church?

Such a question seems simple enough, yet is it so simple? With the recurring dislocations of modern life some congregations still operate with a mediaeval parish concept and do not even try to maintain care and oversight over members who move from their districts. This is merely to begin to discuss the kinds of issues that are not attended to in the day to day running of churches.

And many Christians remain outside the membership of the churches. They do not necessarily do this out of a foolish pride but to the contrary sometimes it is with an aching desire that a God-fearing congregation would take steps to acknowledge their contribution to the Christian way and extend an open welcome.

It is all too easy to lay a burden of blame upon the dispersed Christian. The with-holding of membership is, however, as much subject to the norm for obedience as is the joining. The question of a Christian's relationship to the congregation brings us to the problem for the congregation which must reach out and embrace all those who confess the Lord Jesus Christ not excluding anyone from full participation in its worship on account of that Christian's background, past or present denominational affiliation beyond their control, social

involvement and most importantly, critical misgivings.

What critical misgivings? The most important of these misgivings, held by the "dispersed Christian", are those related to the fact that many believe that the Churches have drifted away from integral Christian discipleship in any wholehearted sense. Thus the "dispersed Christian" poses a distinct challenge to the churches.

A congregation of Jesus Christ can afford to maintain openness in its societal setting to such "dispersed Christians". It does not need to close itself off from being (even "prophetically") confronted by those who reject its tendencies toward a neo-mediaeval mysticism or the post-modern "purpose driven life". It is important for churches, if they are serious, to confront the fact that there are many Christians who simply do not wish to have their Christian walk interrupted by the silly apostasies of denominations seeking their own local "niche" in the "religious market place".

Nor is the church some kind of secret society for the theological elect. The Christian churches should be open to being corrected by Christians who accept that they are indeed chosen in Christ Jesus. The "elect" are they who, in Christ Jesus acknowledge their complicity in their brokenness and assured of God's forgiveness serve Him in all ways. This is no philosophy or theology requiring Hermes be baptized to work it all out in a Christian perspective before it can be believed.

The Christian who believes that a congregations merits faithful participation and eventually takes up membership should note that this move will have consequences upon his/her relationships with Christians from other traditions, which may not be apparent at first glance. This relationship still requires obedient forming and should be protected and respected buy the way any congregation works together with its members in proclaiming the Gospel. Alas, many congregations have understood ecumenical matters solely in terms of external links with other congregations and other denominations and have failed to reckon with the ecumenical calling within their own internal organisation and to the dispersed Christians who, quite possibly, outnumber them in their suburbs. They choose rather to submerge real differences, opting for a bland traditionalist uniformity. Many churches have simply refused to face up to the fact that they

are maintained by office-bearers and other faithful adherents who are potentially dispersed Christians and who have not been nurtured in this particular denominational tradition.

But even when such a congregation does extend a welcome to the dispersed Christian, it should not expect that its welcome will be easily heeded. The dispersed Christian must weigh this invitation.

If the Christian withholds membership it remains true that

(i) *there is still a relationship with the church which requires obedient cultivation (of social relationships) from both sides;*

(ii) *this decision must also have formative effect upon the Christian's relations with Christians in other social contexts with different ecclesiastical affiliations.*

The answer to the problems dispersed Christians face in the early decades of the 21st century in our countries must lie in the Prophetic word:

*Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak ye peaceably unto Jerusalem. Tell her that her warfare is ended, and that her iniquity is covered.*

The dispersed Christian, no less than the Christian *in* the membership of one or other church, must still love the church, that is Christ's own Body, the People who confess His Name. It is the city unto which Peace must be spoken. The dispersed Christian should seek ways to embody that love in constructive action and if possible to help provide new garments of obedience to adorn Christ's bride. But just as much as the dispersed should not give vent to foolish pride and let the churches go their own sweet way, so the churches and all Christ's people should not turn aside from the call of the Gospel to go into the highways and the byways, and by Word and Spirit minister hope and comfort to all who come across their paths - telling all of the love and mercy of the Lord whether they be formal members of the church congregation, the dispersed Christians who continue to love and serve the Lord, and everyone else with whom the Lord brings across our paths.

One of these days the Christian churches are going to have to

reflect upon their own responsibilities to those who have been baptized under their auspices in the name of the Lord. When they do so then they will also have to confront the possibility that the "dispersed Christian" is creature of the church's own negligence. Why are so many who the church has baptized now, seemingly, so distant from the Christian life, let alone from church membership? What is the church's responsibility to those who have been baptized within the congregation of the faithful? That questions poses a truly significant problem of immense proportions for Christian churches if they would face up to their own contribution to the social malaise in which they find themselves. I would therefore suggest that one of the most urgent tasks facing the churches, if they are serious about reforming themselves to encourage "radical Christian discipleship", is the search for "dispersed Christians". The churches need to listen to such Christians and to become willing to learn about the Christian way of life from them. The churches may even find much needed refreshment by opening themselves to the hear what the Gospel has to say about this very perplexing situation.