

Isaiah chapter 62<sup>1-5</sup>; 1 Corinthians chapter 12<sup>1-11</sup>; Mark chapter 2<sup>18-22</sup>.

It is not always easy or obvious, especially for the person preparing the sermon, to see how the different Bible passages we read on a Sunday morning have been selected or how they hang together. Of course it doesn't have to be – they can give us bearings on the truth of God from widely different angles. But there is no such problem this morning. As I began to get to work on them, or perhaps, as they began to get to work on me, today's three readings seemed to fit together like a jigsaw, and I hope your experience may be the same. In each case the central points could be written and kept on something the size of a bank card; ready for use at any time but with a different sort of value, and together covering a large part of the Christian gospel message for today.

The first passage, from the book of Isaiah, says, things have been, and could continue to be, worse than ever they have been, but they can become better than ever they have been, through God's unchanging restoring love, if received and responded to. This is about the general state of the creation, and the prime mover is the creator God. The second passage, from St Paul, was written when the Christian church was very new. It identifies the three essentials of the Christian church – the variety of peoples' personalities, gifts and states, the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, and a focus on the common good. This is about the church, and the prime mover is God the Holy Spirit. The third passage, from St Mark's gospel, is a New Testament incident. Jesus' disciples were saying "What about these other people, we are bothered about why they aren't doing things in the same way that we are"; and Jesus said, "That is secondary. You and I have other business together more important than that, it centres on the fact that I am with you, pay attention to me and to my agenda for you." This is about the individual person, and the prime mover is Jesus.

So each passage can be summarised very briefly and in a similar way, addressing us clearly, simply and in unison. Between them they cover the character and work of each person of the Trinity, and link together the inner personal life of the individual, the church and other human relationships, and wider society and creation as a whole. That is an intense concentration of a huge amount of material, and we are invited to become aware of it and to start an endless process of unpacking it and putting it to work: concentrated like the richness in large sums of money, which recalls Jesus' teaching about the men who were given large sums of money and told, take this and see if you can do something with it; or like concentrated food-packs that mountaineers and arctic travellers take with them, with enough in a small space to give nourishment for a very long time, if used properly, which recalls another New Testament phrase about the meat or solid food required for mature Christian living. So I hope if you find this solid, you will also find it feeding. How to handle great wealth or very rich food doesn't necessarily come automatically, it has to be learned, and that is not always done successfully, as Jesus' story made clear, and as many lottery winners have found. These three Bible passages are like that. Also remember that the word of God is alive. Keeping three small business cards in your pocket is one thing, it is another to put your hand in your pocket and feel something that is alive. This is alive. Being near the start of a new year and a new decade, wondering what it will be like, personally, for the church, and in the wider world, there are resources here intended for our use and to see us through. Being a Christian is about knowing how to use them, a matter of responsibility, discipline, training and experience, so that their potential is unlocked and they are put to work: serious business, in which it is easy to fail and where the most important things of all are at stake. So what is it, inside these three passages, and these three little summaries of mine ?

In the incident of Jesus with the disciples, they were wanting to have a discussion about religious practices, and Jesus said, yes that discussion has its place, but there is something which matters more, here and now – the fact that I am with you and we have other business to do together. How irritating it can be to realise that someone we are having a conversation with isn't really paying attention to us – and I am sure we are also quite skilled ourselves in withholding our attention from another person or subject. And I guess we all know plenty about opportunities lost, sometimes relationships irretrievably ruined, due to a failure to give attention; it's only afterwards that we see that and say "If only I had given that person proper attention . . ." Equally I am sure we all know what a valuable corrective it is to re-focus our attention properly on the other person and how a relationship can be deeply renewed when that happens. The finest attribute of being human is the capacity to relate in a good way to another person. Jesus died, returned to life, and ascended, so that everyone since then, and we here and now, can be in a personal relationship with him – the best possible friendship, closeness, understanding, companionship, encouragement, stimulus and love that we can receive. That relationship is what we are designed for, to enable us to be at our best, and not isolated, stunted or harmed by inferior relationships. I hope we all know something of this, and of the difference it can make. The first disciples proved that it did not depend on the risen Jesus being physical, and they must have been the hardest people to convince of that. Like all personal relationships, it needs to be learned, to grow and be worked at, it can deteriorate or fail to develop at all from neglect and lack of awareness or attention. Remember that 19<sup>th</sup>-century picture of Jesus standing at the door, courteously waiting for the individual to invite him in and allow that relationship to start. Key relationships form our lives and life-histories profoundly, as I am sure we all know. None has greater potential for good for you and me than this one, that depends on opening or re-opening that door and giving proper attention to the person who is there.

The fact that it became possible in this way for the risen Jesus to relate closely to everyone everywhere and not just to one small group at a time as before, is why the church came into being immediately following his earthly ministry, and continues today; his followers brought into relationship with each other because they are in relationship with him: with God's Holy Spirit acknowledged and central in the life of the church, and a single-minded focus of attention on God's purposes, summarised today in that rock-solid and timeless phrase, the common good. Being a member of the church is to be in training, and that can be hard going sometimes – ("These endless meetings, and why on earth can't they, or he, or she, see it my way") – because being a Christian and church membership is not just for a like-minded minority. People learning to relate together, under the Holy Spirit, for the common good – the essentials in the life of the church: and intended as a beacon, an example and an encouragement for the rest of society around, because everything in society depends on people working together, anything worth achieving is for the common good, and if anything is good it is because the Holy Spirit is at work there in the face of the obstacles or inertia that would prevent or spoil it. The church as a whole, and every local church, however small, however idiosyncratic its people and however earth-bound its projects (like us here with our garden, that is quite earth-bound just now), exists and has the capacity to model this. What matters about a model is not whether it is big or small in scale, but whether it is true.

That links directly with the area covered in the first of today's Bible readings, God's purposes for the whole of creation. There is plenty of cause for concern about the future that our grandchildren will face – climate change, resource shortages, failure in international politics and in financial and economic systems, the weakening of social ties, the growth of attitudes of despair or denial in the face of these, and the increasing

intensification and extremes of which Haiti this week is just the latest example. Lord Rees, the UK's astronomer-royal and a scientist of the greatest depth and experience, rates the chances of the human race surviving the 21<sup>st</sup> century as no better than 50-50. I read this yesterday: "The Bible is full of pessimism. When the scriptures step into the abyss of darkness and failure, however, they tip into the light . . . [But] when the media plays with the fire of pessimism, it merely flirts with it. We are not given the opportunity to be serious. When the news gets too bad, the newsmakers begin to entertain us, with feel-good stories of unfaithful golfers and other people's marital woes"<sup>1</sup>. That won't do for the Christian. I hope we are formed more by the Bible than by the media. While we do have to be ready for the end at any time, there is also plenty to support the view, which I believe is truer to what people have known of God consistently since at least the time of Isaiah, that the planet and human life on it are not near the end but near the beginning. That view will transform us, and the church's prophetic gospel (or good news) witness to people today. A writer whose realism, authority and overview is the best I have come across (not a Christian but a scientist and guru) describes what our grandchildren will face as like a passage of white-water rafting through a fierce narrow canyon as the issues to be faced accelerate and converge. He also believes this is the best time ever in human history to be a young person, because of what he knows of the world of science and technology, and the resources and possibilities they are opening up at an increasing rate<sup>2</sup>. People who do white-water rafting are not so foolish as to risk under-rating the dangers, instead they cultivate training, discipline, teamwork and expertise to feed their motivation and confidence. The Christian responsibility is similar, to have foundations ourselves and in our church's witness that enable people to find the groundswell of motivation and confidence that is needed both for individual living and for politics at every level. It's no good blaming politicians for letting us down at Copenhagen when most of their constituents are still in denial and indifference. The only serious doubt the writer I have mentioned has, about the ability of the human race to come through this canyon successfully is in an area outside his own field – it is whether we will have the necessary level of wisdom, to match the challenges on the one hand and the expansion of technologies and resources on the other. Unwittingly, he hits on a word, wisdom, that runs right through the Old and New Testaments describing the character and work of God and the qualities that God wants to give to people: two brief Bible phrases to recall that - "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"<sup>3</sup>, and "Christ the wisdom of God"<sup>4</sup>. That writer's vision of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is unintentionally not far from Isaiah chapter 62 and the other parts of our thinking this morning.

None of this is new. The point about it all that is specially made by today's readings is how it all hangs together. The Bible phrase for it all is "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . ."<sup>5</sup>. This is the living word of God, and we are challenged today to learn and go on learning what it can do, as we let it nourish, enrich, shape, motivate, sustain and direct us.

<sup>1</sup> Laurence Freeman, in *The Tablet*, 9 January 2010.

<sup>2</sup> James Martin, *The Meaning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 2006.

See also [www.jamesmartin.com](http://www.jamesmartin.com) (NB. This is not James Martin the cook!)

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 111<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 1<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> John 3<sup>16</sup>.