

# Bible Notes



April – June 2007  
Bible Stories

50p

April 1<sup>st</sup>

Matthew 21 vv 1-11

Very often the Bible brings us the Word of God by telling us stories. These are, of course, stories about people who lived a long time ago and a long way from here. The historian will be interested in what actually happened then and there and the historian might or might not be a Christian. Faith makes no difference to a dispassionate history – although, of course, contemplation of the wonderful things which happened might move a person to faith.

The preacher, however, has a different task. His job is to discern the Word of God in these stories for us here and now. The preacher has prayerfully to interpret the Bible stories and to relate them to the lives of people in Britain today. One way of doing that is to try to imagine what the Bible describes as happening to us in C21 Britain. How would people react? What response does God get to His Word today? In the February parish magazine I tried to imagine the story of Jesus as it might have happened here and now, rather than in Palestine, 2,000 years ago. I am going to attempt the same with a number of Bible stories over the course of this quarter. No preacher is, however, perfect.

You must come to your own conclusions as to whether I have got it right and you can only do that by reading the original for yourself.

Maybe the biggest crowds in modern Britain are those drawn by major sporting events. Pop festivals like Glastonbury, cannot be far behind. Sports fans sometimes exhibit a near religious fervour and at pop festivals there are many opportunities to take part in meditation and spiritual healing and to try various chemical ways of altering consciousness and experiencing the other. Hundreds of people will gather in the hope of seeing royalty or of meeting a celebrity. Political rallies and demonstrations can still raise a (sometimes violent) crowd if people are sufficiently interested in an issue. Even the churches can still bring people together in their thousands for events such as Spring Harvest or to hear the latest evangelist from overseas.

Joshua, however, somehow fell outside all these categories. He was not rich or famous, but he could attract the sort of people who go to football, which was more than the churches generally do. He cared passionately about God, but didn't fit in in the churches. He cared passionately about society, but was uncommitted to any political grouping. He was at one with God without the use of mind-altering drugs or exotic religious exercises. Nobody quite knew what to make

of him. Was he a threat to our contemporary life style or was he our Saviour or was that one and the same thing? Nobody was sure, but, when he marched on parliament, it was to the universal acclamation of the masses. Would it, however, last?

April 2<sup>nd</sup>

Genesis 1 vv 1-25

Mary lay back on the grass. The sky was a brilliant blue. Wild flowers spattered the meadow. Birds sang in the trees and all was right with the world.

Mary let her mind wander over the possibilities of creation, different theories to account for the universe and everything in it. “Surely,” she thought, “It means something. It isn’t blind chance or the mere impersonal outworking of scientific laws. There must be a meaning and purpose, a logical Mind behind it all. Surely all this beauty is evidence of a divine love.”

April 3<sup>rd</sup>

Genesis 1 vv 26-31

“Why ‘why?’?” said Janice. What do you mean “Why ‘why?’?” asked her teacher. “Well,” said Janice, “You keep on telling us how things are and why things happen and how we just need more research to explain what is now inexplicable. But why should there be explanations for things? And if there is an explanation for the way the world is, what right do we think we humans have to think we could possibly understand it?”

Well, suppose we were made in the image of the God Who created the universe. Might that answer Janice’s question, the reason we expect the world to make sense, the reason why we can in fact make some sense of it?

If we were made in the image of that God, surely we would not only be able to begin to understand the universe and to have some sense of what it is for, but we would be able to use its wonders for our benefit and have some responsibility for the well-being of the whole creation – animals, plants and inanimate things as well as ourselves.

April 4<sup>th</sup>

Genesis 2 vv 1-3

Irene worked in a shop. She was married to a husband who worked long hours and often travelled on business. She had three children who went to two different schools and, when they were not at school, always seemed to need ferrying to Brownies, football practice or ballet. By working weekends, Irene could just about juggle her life so that her husband or her mother could look after the kids while she manned the till at B&Q. Irene's life was fraught, rushing from one appointment to another, often late, never in time for a good gossip. Irene had no time to worship or pray, very little time even to think. She hardly saw her husband. She never spent time with friends anymore. She only saw the children when they needed feeding, dressing or driving somewhere.

When the vicar told her that even God rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, what Irene said is something I could not print in a publication which might be read by churchgoers.

April 5<sup>th</sup> (Maundy Thursday)

Matthew 26 vv 17-35

Following the excitement of the march on parliament, Joshua's enemies decided that they would have to get rid of Him. He was too much of a threat to the current social order, an order which placed them at the top. His promises of a "kingdom not of all this world" seemed too unlikely to be true and, if they were true, then they were very dangerous, because this world would be second best and its priorities – money, power, fame, etc – would have no real significance. On the other hand, His friends thought that He would at last take power and establish Himself as King and them as His ministers. He shocked His friends when He told them that He would soon be taken from them. They did not understand Him. One of them would betray Him. They would all let Him down. Nevertheless, He said; His friends would continue His work. They would win the world for Him. He told them that, when they ate their fellowship meal, they would not only remember Him, but proclaim His Kingdom until that Kingdom finally came, in the mean time experiencing His presence and His power as they carried on His work on earth with Him and in Him and for Him until He came again to receive them to Himself.

April 6<sup>th</sup> (Good Friday)

Matthew 27 vv 33-38

It must be hundreds of years, if not thousands, since our ancestors last performed human sacrifice. It is forty years since we last carried out an execution. So how can we understand the significance of the death of Joshua? Someone the authorities wanted to get rid of because they didn't understand Him, but saw Him as a threat anyway? A celebrity the fickle crowd rejected because He did not give them what they wanted even when they lionised Him? Victim of a miscarriage of justice? False witnesses, a weak and corruptible judge? A man sacrificed to the political and religious tensions of the Middle-East? Betrayed by well-meaning but ultimately false friends?

How can we understand that Joshua's death atoned for the sins of all of them and all of us? How can we understand that the death of Joshua puts things right with God for everyone who puts his trust in Him?

We would need to contemplate the holiness of God and we would need to have a true sense of our own sinfulness if we were to begin to comprehend the breadth of the gulf which separates us from God and the magnitude of Joshua's achievement in bridging that gulf by His sacrifice of Himself.

April 7<sup>th</sup> (Holy Saturday)

Matthew 27 vv 62-66

Scene – the Cabinet Office.

Home Secretary: This Joshua business has got to stop. His followers are a threat to national security.

Chancellor of the Exchequer: His teachings about money could ruin the economy.

Head of MI5: He was far too open and honest.

Joint Chief of Staff: His followers say that He isn't dead, that the movement lives on.

Prime Minister: Let's keep our heads. We control the military. We can sit on the press. We've got the whole government propaganda machine behind us. I think that we can see that He stays dead. No-one is to talk to the press, except authorised spokesman and they will be told what to say. The public need never know the truth whatever that is!

April 8<sup>th</sup> (Easter Day)

Matthew 28 vv 1-10

“It was good while it lasted,” said the acting head of the Joshua movement. “All those adoring crowds, the people we healed, the teaching He gave. It’s been an incredible 3 years. I thought it meant more, though. I thought we would change the world. And now look. He’s dead. The Government have clamped down on information about Him. I expect they’re out looking for us now. They’ll probably arrest those women who’ve gone to lay flowers on His grave. More fool them! Though I suppose it doesn’t matter. It’s all over. It’s only a matter of time before they catch us all. If we don’t get locked up by the police, we’ll probably be lynched by the mob. They loved Him all the time He was popular, but, once He was down, they didn’t stop kicking Him. Now they’ll be looking for us, I reckon.”

A woman rushes breathlessly into the church. “The grave’s empty,” she pants. “The stone’s gone. The soldiers have run away. An angel told us to tell you that He is risen from the dead.”

April 9<sup>th</sup>

Luke 24 vv 13-35

We came to church this Easter because there didn’t seem anything else to do. Joshua was dead and we didn’t know what to do, but we wanted to be together, to think it out and to try to pray. The vicar did his best, but he wasn’t getting anywhere. He talked about re-birth and hope and resurrection but I don’t think he even really believed it himself. Joshua was dead and His Church was very soon going the same way. Then, quite suddenly, the atmosphere began to change. The readings from the Bible came alive. There was a new urgency in the prayers. I really felt the need to confess my sins and felt an amazing peace when I heard the words of absolution. The vicar went up to the altar to say the Eucharistic Prayer. At the words “We lift them to the Lord” dazzling sunlight beamed in through the east window. We could no longer clearly see the man at the altar. I felt the vicar was down in the nave as one of us. Surely (it couldn’t be) that Voice saying, “This is my body; this is my blood.” Wasn’t it the Voice of Joshua Himself? I couldn’t help myself as I offered myself, my soul and body, to be a living sacrifice, to love and serve my Lord always and for ever.

April 10<sup>th</sup>

John 20 vv 24-29

Thomas wasn't at church last Sunday and, quite frankly, he thought we'd all gone a bit mad. "Joshua is dead!" he cried. "I hate it that He's dead. I loved Him as much as any of you. I even warned Him to keep His head down. But would He listen? No! And now He's dead. Dead, I tell you. It doesn't honour His memory to pretend that He isn't dead. And, if you really think He's alive, you're mad. Thousands of people saw Him die. The coroner signed Him off as dead. Even this government wouldn't lie about that. We know that He was buried. The fact that His grave has been violated doesn't mean He's alive. It's just sick! If you really want to carry on His work – which I do – the first thing to do is to survive. Lie low till all this blows over. Then we'll see what we can salvage from the wreckage. But I'm not listening to any more rubbish about resurrections. I shan't believe in any resurrection unless I see Him for myself and touch the wounds that killed Him!"

Just then, of course, Joshua walked in and the rest, as they say is history. Thomas accepted Him not as a friend mysteriously returned from the grave but as "My Lord and My God". We all felt the same and now we have to tell the whole world so that even those who will never see Him in the flesh will still be able to believe in Him and in Him find eternal life.

April 11<sup>th</sup>

John 20 vv 30&31

So how do we go about it? I was going to say we've got to keep His memory alive, but that isn't right, is it? It's not His memory; it's Him. And we haven't got to keep Him alive; He is alive. You and I know that. We talk to Him in our prayers. He is present with us when we break bread every Sunday in church or every day if we are lucky enough to be able to attend. We feel He is never far away from us and especially we feel His presence when we meet with other members of the Joshua movement. We know He is alive and we know that He transforms us, that He makes us mortals immortal as He gives us the gift of eternal life. But how can we pass that on to other people? How can we tell them the story of Joshua in such a way that they will believe and that believing they may have life through His Name.

April 12<sup>th</sup>

John 21 vv 1-14

Time passed and nothing happened. So the members of the Joshua movement went back to work. They still met together in their leisure time. They sometimes prayed together. They broke bread together. But it was somehow never the right time to start sharing their faith with other people. They went back to work. It didn't do them any good, though. They'd lost their zest for their old way of life. It no longer satisfied them. They didn't seem to be achieving anything. Even their skills appeared to have deserted them. Then, one day, Joshua stood at the factory gates. "Put your backs into it lads. Try it from a different angle." And, lo and behold, it worked; the machines were churning out the product better than they had ever done. "Now bring me what you have made," said Joshua. And they did and Joshua mixed what they had made with what He had made and they all broke bread together.

Could it be, they wondered, that, if we seize our opportunities and put our skills and talents at His disposal, that together we might achieve great things?

April 13<sup>th</sup>

John 21 vv 15-17

At that time our leader was Simon. Joshua had called him "Peter", because he was supposed to be the rock on which the church would be built. Well, for now, Peter was Simon again. He had after all denied Joshua three times and here he was fishing when he ought to have been preaching and teaching – maybe! So Joshua asked Simon whether he (Simon that is) loved Him (Joshua) more than these. Well this made us all a bit uncomfortable, because none of us was too sure whether we loved Joshua more than these. In fact, as so often with Joshua, we weren't entirely sure quite what He did mean. Did He mean to ask whether Simon loved Him more than the rest of us loved Him or did He mean did Simon love Joshua more than He loved us, or the tools of his trade, or indeed his family? Knowing, Joshua, He might have meant any of those things. Simon just said he loved Him and Joshua made Him say it twice more. Joshua told him to feed His sheep. I got the impression that we were all supposed to love Joshua "more than these" i.e. with all our hearts and that, if we did, we would feed His lambs.



April 14<sup>th</sup>

John 21 vv 18-25

According to Joshua, there is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends. So He did Peter a great honour when He hinted that he would die a martyr's death, but that raised the question of John.

Whichever of us loved Joshua most, it always seemed that John was the most beloved. I don't think we were jealous, but what was it about John? If Simon was to wear the martyr's crown, and there could be no greater honour than that, what about John? What would John do? Peter was always the one to open his mouth, even at the risk of sounding silly. So he asked Joshua and more or less got told that it was none of his business. We've each got our own job to do and we're not supposed to judge others or compare ourselves to them. In the end we shall each answer to Joshua individually for what we have done with the lives He has given us.

Incidentally, the writings which bear John's name are some of the sublimest accounts going of Joshua and what it means for a man or a woman to be part of His movement. Perhaps that was what John would do.

April 15<sup>th</sup>

Acts 5 vv 27-32

The hot sun beat down on the market square. "What are you doing, proselytising?" demanded the tall Arab in the long white robe? "We know that there were Christians here even before the prophet, blessed be his name, brought us the holy religion of Islam. We have honoured the people of the book as the Quran teaches us. We have even protected you from your enemies. But now the American crusaders are ravishing our lands. They claim that "In God we trust". They call themselves Christians and regard us Moslems as evil terrorists, part of an axis of evil. They bomb our cities. And you, you Arab Christians, you blasphemously claim that Jesus is the Son of God. You worship Him, though Allah alone is God. You dare to try to convert others to your errors. You would sell us out to the American Satan. We can no longer protect you. You must surely die."

"Even so," came the calm reply, "we cannot deny our Lord."

April 16<sup>th</sup>

Genesis 2 vv 4-7

Christopher came in from his first Biology class. “You know, Mum, the human body is truly amazing. It’s like a highly efficient machine. Food is fuel. We are just like engines, turning that fuel into work or locomotion. Our skeletons are marvels of engineering. Our nervous system connects the organs just like the world wide web. Our livers and kidneys are into waste disposal. Our brains are massive computers.”

“Yes,” said Mum. “Human beings are amazing. Do machines appreciate art or music? Do machines make moral decisions? Do machines love? Do machines worship?”

April 17<sup>th</sup>

Genesis 2 vv 8-25

Jennifer was very blessed. She had a lovely home with all mod cons. Her job was interesting and fulfilling and in no way onerous. She had good looks and enough money to dress well. She lived in a beautiful part of the country and knew lots of people. Yet, somehow, she felt it was all not enough. There was an emptiness at the centre of her being.

She tried hobbies. She got a cat and felt a little better, but there was still something missing. What Jennifer needed was human love and, perhaps paradoxically, that was a gift she could only receive from God Who is love. True human love would mean, not an exploitative relationship for what she and her partner could get out of it, but a true union of bodies and souls that would remain faithful through good times and bad and only be dissolved by death, at which point both partners would enter into that complete union which all faithful people will have eternally in God.

April 18<sup>th</sup>

Genesis 3 vv 1-24

In 597 AD, St Augustine landed near Ramsgate and preached the Christian Gospel to the men of Kent. Over decades and centuries, England came to see itself as a Christian country. There were very many lapses – some of them completely appalling – but at least we tried to be a Christian people. The Bible and specifically the Ten

Commandments underpinned our law and public life was informed by Christian principles. Over the centuries, this nation prospered. Then, for all sorts of reasons, in the second half of the twentieth century, the English people decided that they did not need God. Most of them stopped going to church. Christian values ceased to be taken for granted as the norms of behaviour. Even our laws began to deviate from biblical principles. Granted that there is a God Who commands us to obey His Law of Love, it is not too hard to foresee the likely consequences for a race which turns its back on Him.

April 19<sup>th</sup>

Genesis 4 vv 1-16

When John was born, he was the apple of his parents' eye. They lavished all their attention on him and he became used to his own way. Then Steve came along and John's nose got put out of joint. When they grew up, they both went into the family business, but John got stuck at the work bench making thousands of boring widgets, while Steve was the flash salesman, enjoying expense account trips all over the world. One year at the AGM, the company chairman praised Steve to the heavens for all the orders he had obtained, while patronising the more humdrum labour of the shop floor. For John, it was all too much. 20 years of jealous rivalry erupted into a quarrel which turned into a fight, which left Steve's body buried in a shallow grave. John felt it was all so unfair, yet his conscience gave him no rest until he confessed. Justice demanded that he be punished for that one act of murder, but surely it was true that the murder was only the last and worst of a series of wrong actions springing from a wrong attitude, and surely, too, John's jealousy was a product of growing up in an imperfect world where the parents' sins inevitably twist the development of their offspring.

April 20<sup>th</sup>

Genesis 5 vv 21-24

I suppose you could say that Nellie was a mystic. She was certainly a very nice old lady. She was courteous to a fault. She would always help anyone. She could be fun to be with. Yet there was something more about her. You might call it a radiance. You might call it a peace. Certainly, she wasn't perfect. She had her temper and her funny ways.

But she was special. And that can only be attributed to her faith, her prayer life and her submission to the God Who reveals His Will in Scripture. Then finally, after one last test, she was no longer with us, but certainly she is with Him.

April 21<sup>st</sup>

Genesis 6 vv 1-8

You don't have to look far to find a world in which people do what they like irrespective of whether it is right or wrong. Greed, lust, bloodshed. Where don't you find them? What could wipe out such a world today? Without any help from God or Satan we could allow war to escalate to the point of large scale use of nuclear weapons. We could put such pressure on the environment that the earth becomes unfit for human habitation. We could consign millions to death by famine or disease just by our inaction. It is certainly not beyond the bounds of possibility that the human race will destroy itself by its rejection of the Law of the God Who is Love. Yet would not a God of Love try to save such a race? Might He not send warnings? Might He not provide an ark, an ark of salvation? The Church is traditionally represented as an ark in which anyone and everyone can be saved from the wrath to come. How do you enter the ark? Through faith and repentance and Baptism in the waters.

April 22<sup>nd</sup>

Revelation 5 vv 11-14

Do you want to go to Heaven? Today's reading is a description (insofar as a description is possible in human language) of the worship of Heaven. Heaven is to worship God eternally. That is our destiny as human beings made in His image, which is love, to be eternally united with Him in love and praise. Our worship on earth – especially our participation in the Holy Communion – is an aspect of the heavenly worship. We are worshipping now with the angels and the archangels and our worship in the Church on earth is a foretaste of what it will be like to worship in Heaven. To those of you who think that worshipping in the Church on earth and participating weekly on the Lord's Day in the Holy Eucharist is something you can live without, I put the question, Do you really want to go to Heaven?

April 23<sup>rd</sup>

Genesis 9 vv 8-17

Christopher had now started Physics. “Mum, Mum! Did you know a rainbow is only white light split up into the colours of the spectrum by refraction through water droplets.”

“Yes, Christopher, I did know that. Don’t you think it’s wonderful the way the universe is ordered by scientific laws? Apples always fall to the earth. Every year, the seasons come one after the other. White light is always split up into its coloured components when it passes at an angle through a refracting medium. It is wonderful that the universe is so ordered that scientists can study it and make sense of it and that these scientific laws are so reliable that we can depend on them. But, don’t miss the wood for the trees. A rainbow isn’t just a demonstration of the dependability of science. It’s a thing of beauty and a pledge of God’s Love.”

April 24<sup>th</sup>

Genesis 11 vv 1-9

In days gone by, when Science was in its infancy, human beings turned to all sorts of remedies for their problems – food production, housing, transport, healing the sick. There were early applications of technology, magic and prayer. In modern times human beings have learned the value of science and the way it can underpin technology. Scientific agriculture has increased food production enormously. Transport is faster and safer. Buildings are cheaper to construct, more comfortable, better heated, fitter for purpose. Modern medicine and public health have added decades to our life expectancy. So we have no need of God. Science has solved (or will solve) all our problems. It has given us nuclear weapons, drug resistant germs, the technology to exterminate millions in concentration camps, the ability to cut down an area of rain forest the size of Wales. Actually, without God, we’re lost children with some very powerful toys.

April 25<sup>th</sup> (St Mark)

Acts 15 vv 35-41

Gillian and Valerie were two of our best workers in the church. I suppose Gillian was the real leader. She could hold an audience in the palm of her hand. Nothing was ever too much trouble. But Valerie was

close behind. She went everywhere with Gillian and, truth be told, Valerie's money paid for a good deal of the good work which Gillian did. The rift was over Olive. Olive was much younger than the other two. She had her own life outside the church and her own responsibilities. Olive got fed up with travelling round with Gillian - too many tedious journeys to drafty halls, where a handful of old ladies tried to take an interest in Gillian's work, but couldn't realistically be expected to get involved. Sometimes the response was downright hostile. So Olive walked out on Gillian and Gillian vowed that she would never trust her again. Valerie was more understanding and took Olive's side and Gillian stormed off on her own, swiftly recruiting Pat to her cause.

All these quarrels and divisions went completely against what all four women truly believed and the whole incident was a tragedy for our church and for the individuals involved. You will be pleased to know that they all eventually made it up and supported one another in working together for the glory of God.

April 26<sup>th</sup>

Genesis 12 vv 1-9

Phyllis was pretty comfortably off. She'd made quite a lot of money in her younger days. Now officially retired, she went into the office to do the creative work she loved when it suited her to do it and left the boring paper work to various underlings. She had a comfortable flat with central heating and a view of the park. Enjoying good health, she anticipated a very pleasant old age. Till she got this bee in her bonnet. At 75 years of age, she decided that she was too comfortable and that her easy life was cramping her spiritual development. She sold her flat, bought a mobile home and set off on a long journey with no particular end in view, camping wherever she happened to wind up when night fell. She said that she thought this would not only benefit her, but generations to come, because God had something better than comfort and security to offer the human race.

April 27<sup>th</sup>

Genesis 12 vv 10-20

Peter was an old man, but his wife Amanda was beautiful. They'd had a wonderful evening at the opera. All that spoiled it was that, on arriving at Victoria in their fine evening clothes, they found they had missed the last train to Dulwich. There was a huge queue for taxis. It was a fine night. They'd already spent too much money. So they thought they'd try to walk some of the way. Round about Kennington, a gang of youths surrounded them, making suggestive remarks to Amanda and threatening Peter. "Tell them you're my daughter," Peter said, thinking they might beat him up if they thought he was her husband or boyfriend. So Amanda did and they were both invited back to the gang leader's flat. There Laurence, the leader, obviously hoped that Amanda would sleep with him. The couple were really feted by the gang, draped in bling and offered drugs. When the couple were reported missing, the police started harassing all the gangs around Kennington. It put real pressure on Laurence. Reading the papers, Laurence saw that Amanda was really Peter's wife and felt defiled by the thought that he might have slept with her. "Hey, man!" he said, "That's gross!" and ordered Peter and Amanda to be released. Peter was sure that God had protected them.

April 28<sup>th</sup>

Genesis 16 vv 1-16

Malcolm and Lorraine desperately wanted a child. It wasn't just them. Their parents wanted grandchildren. Malcolm had always hoped to pass on the family business. Eventually, they decided to adopt and were delighted with little Donna, until, as quite often happens after an adoption, Lorraine conceived and they had their own child, Alan. Now Alan was the heir and the delight of his parents and grandparents, while poor Donna found herself out in the cold. You can imagine the pain and resentment this led to and the trouble it stored up for the future.

The Arabs claim descent from Hagar's child Ishmael and the Jews are descended from Sarah's son Isaac. The effects of unfairness and insensitivity can last a very long time.

April 29<sup>th</sup>

Acts 9 vv 36-43

Shirley was a remarkable woman. Quietly she did a lot of good for a lot of people. Then she fell ill and died. She was obviously going to be much missed and it seemed so unfair that such a good person should get ill like this and die. So much everybody knew and agreed.

David was a famous preacher and evangelist. Everybody respected him for his leadership in the Church. So they fetched David and asked him to pray for Shirley. When David prayed, Shirley opened her eyes and got up. And people certainly don't agree about this. Some people say that Shirley is dead and buried and the whole story is untrue. Some people say that Shirley never was dead, just in a coma and she came round when David prayed. Some people think that there never have been any miracles. Some people think that miracles ended in biblical times. Some people think that David is a charlatan. Others think that God wrought a great miracle for Shirley through David. Of that last group, some people think that we should thank God for doing something so unusual that it was almost unique, and others think that, if only we had enough faith, God would do miracles like this every day. What do you think?

April 30<sup>th</sup>

Genesis 17 vv 1-14

The local comprehensive had a terrible reputation. So naturally Doris wanted to get her daughter Jean into St Mary's Church of England School. Unfortunately, the rule was that only baptised children could go there and Jean wasn't baptised. Doris asked the vicar to "do" Jean, but the vicar was awkward. He said that being baptised meant belonging to the Church. It meant faith and repentance and he couldn't baptise a ten year old who wasn't willing to say these things for herself and come to church or Sunday School. Doris thought about all the baptised people who never went near the church except for weddings and funerals. She thought about all the unchristian things that churchgoers both said and did. And she felt not only excluded, but unfairly excluded. If there was a God, didn't He love her Jean just as much as all those other kids who'd had water sprinkled on them when



they were only a few months old? Suppose Heaven was like St Mary's School; you could only get in if you were baptised. Would that be fair?

So, what do you think? Is Baptism something so important that it should be offered to everybody or is Baptism so important that it should only be offered to those who sincerely appreciate it?

1<sup>st</sup> May (St Philip & St James)

Ephesians 1 vv 3-10

From the Bishop

Dear Parishioners of Cuxton & Halling,

I would like you to know how much I thank God for you. Ever since I first became a Christian, I have been overwhelmed by the thought that God has prepared a place in Heaven for me. And now I know that this is true for you as well. The very fact that you are Christians shows that God has chosen you. All your sins are forgiven. You are holy people. You are God's people. Jesus died for each one of you, just as He died for me. And the marvellous thing is that this isn't just for us and the small minority of people in the world who are Christians already. God has redeemed the whole creation through Christ – plants & animals, planets, stars, angels and archangels. All that is required is faith on the part of those beings which have the freedom to choose.

I remain your humble servant, Roffen +

May 2<sup>nd</sup> (St Athanasius)

Matthew 10 vv 24-27

“Daddy,” I think the Creed's boring. I enjoy the songs we sing. The Bible readings are sometimes interesting. The vicar makes me laugh. I know why we pray and I know Communion is something very special, but the Creed just goes on and on and I don't even know what it means.”

“Well, son, you have a man called Athanasius to thank for the Creed we say at Holy Communion. What it's trying to say is that Jesus really is God as well as a human being and that the Holy Spirit Who lives in the heart of every Christian is God as well, but there really is only one God. It's hard to understand, but Athanasius worked hard to help us and he was also very brave when his enemies tried to shut him up.”

May 3<sup>rd</sup>

Genesis 18 vv 1-33

Norman's wife, Peggy, had no children and it looked as if she never would. This was the only disappointment in the old couple's contented and religious life. One day, three visitors turned up at Norman's house and Norman hospitably offered to feed them. While the meal was cooking, they chatted and the visitors said that Peggy would have a child. The old woman laughed at that, but it did turn out to be true.

The talk moved on to the question of whether the wicked really get punished for the wrong they do. It is easy to see that those who live by the sword very often die by the sword, dishonest people are not trusted, adulterers lose their loved ones, drunkards ruin their health, but good people get hurt as well. Civilians die in bombing raids. Naive people are conned. The wronged wife also loses her marriage. The alcoholic's family sometimes suffer worse than he does. Doesn't God do right? The raised lots of issues, but essentially left the question unanswered, which is how it will probably remain this side of eternity.

May 4<sup>th</sup>

Genesis 19 vv 1-26

Two travellers arrived in a remote village out on the plains. They went straight to the house of the only Christian in the place – and he was a pretty feeble Christian. Night fell and all the other inhabitants of the village – the animists – banged on the door and demanded to know who these strangers were. They intended to inflict unspeakable indignities on these foreigners who might, after all, be spies or slave traders or some other kind of enemy. In desperation, our feeble Christian offered his own daughters to entertain his fellow villagers. Now the travellers took charge, repelling the savages banging on the door and warning our Christian to leave the village because, on account of its wickedness, it would be destroyed. He finds it hard to leave the prosperous world he knows and his wife, in the end, can't let go and suffers the same fate as all the others. A horror story or a parable demonstrating the alluring power of evil and the certainty that the power of evil destroys its devotees?

May 5<sup>th</sup>

Genesis 21 vv 1-8

Peggy had her baby. She had laughed at the idea that she could ever have a child. Now she laughed with joy because she at last held her own baby in her arms. If he'd been a girl they would have christened her Joy. In another age they might have called their son Gaylord. As it was, she went for Isaac, which, as everybody knows, is the Hebrew for laughter.

May 6<sup>th</sup>

Acts 11 vv 1-18

Michelle was only young, but her heart was in the right place. So she readily answered an advertisement asking for volunteers to assist young, single mothers by helping with simple household chores and perhaps minding the baby while the mother had a rest. Things were going fine, visiting mostly girls a little younger than she was, helping out with the basics, offering advice. Some of these young women hadn't a clue! Then there came a request from the caravan site from a slightly older woman who already had three children. The woman had a bad back and needed help desperately. Michelle had heard that gypsies were dirty and dishonest. She had been warned as a child not to mix with them. The gypsy children were always in fights at school or playing truant. She was a bit afraid of offering help to a woman older than she was, one who already had 3 children. She wondered what she would do if she was asked to share a meal. Didn't gypsies eat hedgehog? The reading in church that Sunday was Acts 11 vv 1-18.

May 7<sup>th</sup>

Genesis 22 vv 1-19

Sylvia only had one child, a boy of 14. His father was pretty old and past it and the boy, John, was the light of Sylvia's life. He did quite well at school sports. He got good grades. He was generally popular and good looking. Already, the girls liked to hang out in his company. Sylvia thought he was a genius, an Olympic medallist and more than a catch for any lucky young girl. He could have everything with a little effort and surely he deserved to. And then John said he was going to become a priest.

May 8<sup>th</sup>

Genesis 23 vv 1-20

*If I should die, think only this of me:  
That there is a corner of a foreign field  
That is for ever England.*

All over the world, there are war cemeteries full of the graves of British servicemen. In some places they are honoured, where the British came as allies and liberators. Elsewhere they are forgotten as empire fades into history. Perhaps there are places where they are despised as reminders of oppression and defeat – though usually soldiers in any war honour the graves of their fallen foes. There remains a link between the place where a young man fought and died and the place where he grew up and left his family and friends behind him. It would be good to think that those links could contribute to understanding and mutual sharing between countries which have formerly been allies or enemies in war.

Hebron gave Abraham's family a stake in the Promised Land. It was the first land they owned there and thus the beginning of its occupation by the Jews. Sadly Hebron is still fought over, claimed by Arabs and Jews, who both claim to be descendants of Abraham. Couldn't we pray that all our shared pasts might be the foundation of a just future, rather than a continuing cause of strife?

May 9<sup>th</sup>

Genesis 24 vv 1-67

Norman's boy Isaac was getting desperate. To be honest, he had been a bit of a Mummy's boy. Now Peggy was dead, Norman was getting old and Isaac was feeling a bit lonely and frightened of what the future might hold. He was already 40 and still unmarried and Norman didn't want to die without any (legitimate) grandchildren. Perhaps, the real problem was faith. Isaac didn't want to marry a non-Christian, but you don't meet many young people in church. Should he date girls he met at work or in clubs or pubs or should he wait till he met Miss Right at a Christian rally or church service? In the end, he went to a Christian singles club with his father's advice ringing in his ears. "I hope you will get married, but don't get married to the wrong girl. You'd be better off single!" Anyway, that is where he met Thelma and now they are man and wife.

May 10<sup>th</sup>

Exodus 1 vv 1-22

There are plenty of places in the world today where people are oppressed. There is still (in some places) actual slavery. Christians like William Wilberforce, who worked for the abolition of slavery in the British Empire 200 years ago, were no doubt inspired by biblical passages such as this. In many parts of the world, the poor have little chance – no work, or working long hours in atrocious conditions for low wages. There are plenty of régimes which deliberately use oppressive measures to keep down or exterminate those who are of the wrong race or religion or whose political views are opposed to the government. You sometimes wonder what the human race has learnt in 3,000 years apart from new methods of torture. That is too cynical, however, there have been millions of people like Moses and William Wilberforce who have worked down the centuries to set the slaves free. We can make a difference. We can pray. We can support missions and charities with our money, our time and our talents. We can put pressure on governments. Most of us won't make much difference, but we can all make some difference.

May 11<sup>th</sup>

Exodus 2 vv 1-10

These events happened a long way away a long time ago. We know that the same sort of thing goes on in the world today. Chinese girl babies are still aborted or allowed to die because parents are only allowed one child and want a boy. In many parts of Africa, boys are snatched by guerrilla groups and forced to become guerrillas themselves. The children of poor prostitutes in South America scratch a living on the streets, abused by criminals and become criminals themselves as the only way to survive. We know these things happen, but they usually happen in distant countries to people whose skin is a different colour from ours with unfamiliar sounding names. But, what if it was Lily left to die, because her parents wanted a boy? Neil abducted and compelled to become a soldier? Ann and Elizabeth running errands on the streets for drug dealers till they are old enough to sell their bodies? It brings it home to put it like that – a point to bear in mind as we approach Christian Aid Week and we can't even find enough collectors to cover the whole parish.

May 12<sup>th</sup>

Exodus 2 vv 11-25

Jewish opinion was divided in the ghetto. Mrs Goldberg had agreed to allow her baby boy to be adopted by the gauleiter's daughter. A spoiled girl, her latest fancy was a Hebrew baby. Her father had given in to her whim (as he always did) and Mrs Goldberg had even acted as wet nurse for her. Some people said she was smart and had probably saved her son's life. Others said she was a traitor and it would better to be dead than to collaborate with the Nazis.

The boy grew up and strutted round the town like any young member of the ruling class. One day, however, he saw a German beating a Jew. Quickly he waded in on the Jew's side. There was no-one about. So he killed the German and hid the body. Next day he attempted to break up a fight between two Jews. Why, they wanted to know, should they take any notice of him? Who did he think he was? Was he going to kill them, like he killed the Nazi? Chastened and frightened, he fled Germany on the first boat to New York, where he married, got a job and settled down to an obscure life.

May 13<sup>th</sup>

Acts 16 vv 9-15

For once, things were going quite well in our church. A decent bequest had enabled the PCC to pay off the quota. Congregations were slowly growing. The quinquennial reports had found absolutely nothing wrong with the buildings. The confirmation class had turned into a youth fellowship and all was right with the world. We were settling comfortably down into a period of modest growth. And then Marie stood up at the Annual Meeting. She had read about this new Christian project for the homeless in Medway. They wanted 12 volunteers and £10,000 in donations and the need was really great. Marie said she had this vision. Surely we could supply six volunteers and at least £1,000. And, do you know? We did.

May 14<sup>th</sup> (S Matthias)

1 Corinthians 4 vv 1-7

The vicar's name was James. The professional men in the congregation admired James' professionalism in chairing meetings and conducting the church's affairs in a business-like way. The curate was a very sweet

young man called Raymond. Raymond was a huge hit both with the youth club and the old ladies. A lot of people, however, looked back on earlier days, when Dave had been their vicar, presiding over the construction of the new building, establishing the Sunday School and the Luncheon Club and generally moving and shaking.

Dave was now the archdeacon and some of the PCC wrote to him complaining about James and Raymond and asking for a new vicar who would bring back the spirit which had been around in Dave's time. Although they did not know about the letter, both James and Raymond had visited Dave, telling him how miserable they both were because they felt so inadequate for the task and so unappreciated by the congregation. Dave came and preached. He told the congregation that they were there to worship God, not himself or James or Raymond and that any church work that people might take on was an offering of service to Christ not a favour to the vicar or the curate. He reminded everybody that the clergy are answerable to God and are required to be faithful to Him and that the clergy are not candidates in a popularity contest!

May 15<sup>th</sup>

Exodus 3 vv 1-12

Alan Goldberg settled down to life in the USA. He was happily married to an American girl and had a steady, if unspectacular, job on the production line in Ford's automobile plant. Working on a production line hardly occupied his mind and, one day, his thoughts were invaded by an overwhelming sense of the presence of God. He had tried very hard not to think of what was happening to the Jews back in Hitler's Germany. His religion had become merely formal. But now he was suddenly convinced that God was very real and that God had a very real and very difficult and dangerous task for him. Who was he to save the Jews? The only guarantee was that God would be with him.

May 16<sup>th</sup>

Exodus 3 vv 13-16

What a jolt. That distant figure formally addressed in the synagogue service is real and immediate. He is all consuming and demands complete obedience. Those old stories in the Bible about what He has

done for His people are true. They are not merely legends to pass on to our children. They are presently true. They are a pledge that God will act on behalf of His people today. He is the One Who Is Who commands absolute surrender as a prerequisite for absolute deliverance. How will Alan, a simple labourer on Ford's production line, respond to the divine imperative?

May 17<sup>th</sup> (Ascension Day)

Luke 24 vv 44-53

I never finished telling you the story about the day Joshua himself seemed to take over leading our service. God was so really present. The Bible shone. Confession was so deep, but so completely cleansing. The intercessions were an expression of pure love. We just knew our God as we broke bread together. Needless to say, at the Offertory, the collection plate was so heavy that it took both churchwardens to carry it. I never finished telling you the story because what followed was so overwhelming. We all just knew that we had to tell the whole world about what God had done in Christ. We didn't know how we were going to do it, but we just knew that we all had to do it and that somehow, He would give us the power.

May 18<sup>th</sup>

Exodus 3 vv 16-20

“Alan. You are to go back to Germany. Tell the leading Jews that God has spoken to you in America. Then go with them into the presence of Hitler and demand permission for all the Jews to emigrate to America, where they will worship God as one people.”

If putting it like this helps us to appreciate what Exodus means, this story gives us plenty of material for thought and prayer. If God saved the Israelites in Moses' time, why does He not save them at other times of persecution? Why does He not save other oppressed peoples? How necessary is it to have leaders called and inspired by God? How much dedication does God require of those whom He calls?

May 19<sup>th</sup>

Exodus 4 vv 1-12

I'm not going to invent any more stories about what an “Alan” might have accomplished in Nazi Germany. It would be in danger of



disrespect. So, come up to date. Is there a Laura, an Elizabeth or a Christine, maybe a Doug or a John, are there people in the church today looking for excuses not to answer God's call? We can play up our inadequacies. Our lives are very full. There are so many demands on our time, our talents and our money. Are we wilfully blind to the signs God puts in our way? Or could we recognise the signs and use them to validate our ministry?

May 20<sup>th</sup> (Easter 7)

Acts 16 vv 16-34

Josephine and Jean thought it would be a good witness to organise a carol singing event on the Sunday before Christmas in the local shopping mall. The mall management and the local council claimed a fear of upsetting people of other faiths as an excuse for refusing permission. The two "J"s were, however, made of stern stuff and went ahead anyway. A large choir assembled from all the local churches and people stopped to listen. Instead of spending money, the crowds were listening (and some were joining in) an act of worship. The police were called and J and J were taken rather roughly off to the police station. The duty solicitor noticed a mistake in the paper work and the desk sergeant told them that they were lucky and he was letting them go, but not to cause a nuisance in future. J&J, however, refused to go until the authorities apologised for their highhandedness, but then graciously forgave the over zealous officers who had manhandled them. Their stand so impressed the duty sergeant that he wanted to know more about their faith.

May 21<sup>st</sup>

Exodus 4 vv 14-17

Diane has all the qualities needed to be PCC secretary. She has the time to come to the meetings. She is quick at taking notes and has a ready grasp of issues. She quite enjoys coming to terms with bureaucratic complexities. But she has always refused to do the job. She just couldn't stand up at the APCM and give her report in front of all those people. So she really can't do the job – not unless she lets her sister Carole help her, anyway!

May 22<sup>nd</sup>

Exodus 5 vv 1-23

Years ago, it was mainly the Church which provided such health care, education and social work as was available. Encouraged by Christians and others, in the centuries following the Industrial Revolution, the state invested its enormous resources in schools, hospitals and the welfare state. Churches and charities, however, remained important. They not only provided help in areas where the state was unable to act; they also brought a moral dimension to care and education. As the state became increasingly powerful, however, and England became ever less Christian, the state wanted to determine exactly what education children should receive, and how care and medical services should be administered. This led to increasing pressure on churches and voluntary organisations to raise ever more money to comply with ever more regulation and pressures to conform the activities of the charities concerned to secular rather than to religious rules. The churches found themselves being asked to make bricks without straw and church leaders found themselves blamed both by the secular establishment and by their own members for the general decline.

May 23<sup>rd</sup>

Exodus 6 vv 1-12

James and Raymond, our clergy team, had a great vision for the youth club. They brought it to PCC. The hall manager was worried about mess and damage. The treasurer said there was no money. Some PCC members recalled successful youth clubs in other parishes and bemoaned the lack of leaders and good facilities here. Some members recalled how earlier youth clubs in our parish had closed amidst chaos. Some members recalled that there had been no youth clubs in the churches where they grew up and they were none the worse for that.

Bitterly disappointed, James and Raymond went back to God in prayer. It was clear that there was a very real need to do something to help young people grow into mature adults rather than making complete nuisances of themselves. Do James and Raymond give up? Do they try to talk the PCC round? Or do they go ahead and start a youth club in spite of the PCC?

May 24<sup>th</sup>

Exodus 6 vv 13-27

James found that he was distracted from his work surprisingly often by e mails from people researching their family history. Church records are usually the best source of information on weddings, funerals etc before 1837. This delving into the past took up time and he sometimes felt a bit used by people who wanted him to find their ancestors' graves or entries in old registers, but did not seem the least bit interested in the worship, witness and work of the Church today. People seem to feel the need to know where they come from and where they belong. It is good to try to meet people's needs and James often found that the people who came with these questions were very friendly. It is a good way for the church to make contact with people. The past sets the scene for the present. We must not, however, become fixed in the past or even the present. We are called to the future which God has prepared for those who love Him.

May 25<sup>th</sup>

Exodus 7 vv 1-7

Hilary opened her paper. Figures for violent crime were up. A leading politician was accused of scandal. Whole pages were devoted to a celebrity divorce. Letters from readers dripped with indignation. On the foreign pages, there were accounts of wars and an earthquake. Hilary wondered. Was all this just chance? Or did it mean something? Were all these phenomena symptoms of a world in revolt against God?

May 26<sup>th</sup>

Exodus 12 vv 1-11

"What we need," said the Prime Minister, "is a national festival, something to celebrate our common values, our identity as a nation." "St George's Day would do, except that it has Christian overtones and excludes Scotland and Wales," said the Home Secretary. "It had better not be Remembrance Sunday," responded the Minister for Europe. "It can't be anything from before the C20, like Trafalgar Day, because that would exclude more recent immigrants;" said the Minister for Diversity, "Maybe we should have a celebration of diversity." "How can multicultural diversity affirm common cultural values?" inquired the Chancellor. "I know," said the PM, "Let's draw up a list of values we all share but which owe nothing to any religious tradition, nor to any

secular western philosophy.” “What about eastern philosophies?” asked the Chancellor. “Better exclude them in the interests of fairness,” said the Diversity Minister. “So,” said the PM with a flashing smile, “Let’s make a list of the values we all hold, independent of religious belief or any of our histories.” The page remained blank.

May 27<sup>th</sup> (Whit Sunday)

Acts 2 vv 1-21

It seemed impossible. There were black people and white people, people who spoke no English and people who spoke only English. There were young people and old people, upper, middle and working class people, people with very different tastes, people with different ideas about how things should be done. How could they worship together or work together? It was indeed impossible – so long as they remained closed to the Holy Spirit.

May 28<sup>th</sup>

Exodus 12 vv 14-20

Celebrating Passover is a huge undertaking. The house has to be thoroughly cleaned from top to bottom in order to remove any trace of leaven. Special cooking utensils are used. Special food has to be obtained and carefully prepared. The family has to be got together, invitations sent out. There has to be just the right atmosphere of celebration and seriousness in which the family eat the meal of the year in the context of the story of their people’s birth. The Passover not only recalls what God has done for the Jews in history; it is an affirmation of who they are and where they belong in the world today, of where they fit into God’s providential plan for humanity.

By contrast, Christians have it easy. Their sacred meal is just a small piece of bread and a sip of wine. They can do it weekly or even daily. If what Christians claim is true, Holy Communion means even more to them than the Passover means to Jews. It is a communion with one another, with their Saviour, their God. It is hard to imagine a Christian missing his Sunday Communion, when it is so easy to come and it means so very much.

May 29<sup>th</sup>

Exodus 12 vv 43-50

Passover affirms that the people who participate are Jews, that they are the people of God. It is therefore only available to Jews and it requires proper preparation and has to be conducted reverentially as well as joyously.

Holy Communion affirms that the people who participate are Christians, that we are the people of God. It is therefore only available to the baptised and it requires proper preparation. We have to forgive those who have wronged us. We have to ask God (and other people) to forgive us our sins. We come expecting to receive God in Word and Sacrament and in Christian fellowship. We participate reverentially and joyously in the meal which is our “duty and our joy.” We expect to depart from the Communion meal filled with the Holy Spirit, sent out by the Son, just as the Father sent Him.

May 30<sup>th</sup>

Exodus 13 vv 1&2

People get very excited about the birth of a baby. It is a cause for celebration. Churching ceremonies and the more modern Thanksgiving for the Birth of a Child, celebrate a new life coming into the world and a safe delivery. There is also some sense of the sacred about it. Ritual uncleanness is the opposite side of the holiness coin and there is something deeply atavistic in the old idea that the mother did not go out after childbirth into the ordinary world until she had been churched. In the period immediately after Jesus, the Baptism of adults was the norm, but, very soon, Christian parents wanted their children to be baptised, to be dedicated to God, included within the community of God’s people and assured of eternal life. Those churches which believe that Baptism should be withheld until the child is old enough to understand that he is committing his life to God, very often have some other service of dedication, in which parents can celebrate a birth and commit their child to his Heavenly Father. For the Israelites, the first born son was special. Jesus is God’s first born Son and all baptised people are one with Him and therefore dedicated to God. Do you agree with me that we have lost something important now that mothers are hardly ever churched and many babies are neither baptised nor dedicated to God?

May 31<sup>st</sup> (The Visitation)

Luke 1 vv 39-45

Maureen was very excited because she was expecting a child. Any mother would be happy, but Maureen was especially excited because she was having her first baby at an age which most people considered impossible. Fertility clinics had written her off as a hopeless case ten years before. She was also excited because she believed that this child was a gift from God, someone who would grow up to restore this country to its former faith and bring about a renewed greatness. She was looking forward to a visit from her young cousin, Fiona. When Fiona arrived, the two women embraced. They were so happy. Fiona too was expecting. Her child was more special even than Maureen's. Even the baby in Maureen's womb seemed to know this.

June 1<sup>st</sup>

Exodus 13 vv 17-22

When Marie suggested supporting the homeless project, we were really quite comfortable. Life wasn't very exciting, but we were just about paying our way. Church life was something of a grind, but at least it looked like we would survive. Now Marie had persuaded us to give 10% of our income to the homeless and we had freed people from other church duties to go and work at the project. This meant everything else had run down. What were we to do? Where could we find guidance? The archdeacon came and conducted a parish retreat. First of all, he said, Don't panic. Be still and know that He is God. Wrestling with God in prayer, as well as resting in His presence, we came to realise that our decision making process must be based: on the Scriptures, on God's own witness to Jesus His Word made flesh; on what God had revealed to His Church by the Holy Spirit through the ages, Christian tradition; on what He is revealing in the world today, signs of His Kingdom; and on what He may be saying to us personally through prayer or the advice of other people or signs we experience.

June 2<sup>nd</sup>

Exodus 14 vv 1-31

Throughout the nineteen thirties, government policy was at all costs to avoid another world war. Millions more young men would be killed. Civilisation might be destroyed. There was a very strong chance that we might not win. At Munich we were promised "peace in our time" in

exchange for allowing Germany to annexe the Sudetenland, with its substantial ethnic German population. But then Hitler marched into Poland and, on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939, Britain, with France, declared war on Germany. British troops were deployed in Europe in support of the French and Belgians. In 1940, the panzers swept all before them and the British Expeditionary Force was marooned at Dunkirk. A huge naval operation, substantially supported by civilian craft, evacuated the great bulk of that force over an unusually calm sea, while the Germans held back from inflicting the killer blow most people thought they were capable of. The Royal Air Force successfully repulsed the Luftwaffe until any real likelihood of invasion was over. Hitler invaded Russia. The allies turned the tide and, by 1945, the Nazis were defeated. Do we see the Hand of God in human history? Or are there explanations for everything, which can manage without the God hypothesis? In other words, is there ultimately meaning in whatever happens?

June 3<sup>rd</sup> (Trinity Sunday)

John 16 vv 12-15

Thelma was a dreamer, but Bert was an activist. Thelma loved to meditate and to pray. In another age she might have become a nun or even a hermit. Bert, on the other hand, had a real passion for getting things done. There were so many things the church needed to be doing – mission all over the world and in this country, the youth club, the homeless shelter, bible study, confirmation groups ... In their different ways, they came to a sense of the Holy Trinity. Thelma was warmed and led by the Holy Spirit to a love of Jesus her Lord and the Father as her Father and she just knew that they were all ways in which she could enter into the heart of God and God could enter her heart. Bert felt a terrific sense of injustice because all human beings were God's children yet some lived such awful lives. He was very conscience that Jesus came from God in order to save us all. He knew from experience that the Church could only make a difference so long as she worked with the Holy Spirit. But these three were not three different principles. They were all of the one true God.

June 4<sup>th</sup>

Exodus 18 vv 13-27

Bishop Christopher was exhausted. There were so many diocesan committees and there was so much paper work. He was expected to sit in the House of Lords. There were all kinds of top social events at which the presence of the Bishop was expected. And all this was before he even began his real work of preaching the Gospel, administering the Sacraments and acting as chief pastor and focus of mission and unity for the whole diocese. So he took Jethro's advice to Moses and appointed people to run various departments, chair committees etc. People complained that too much scarce money was being spent on the bishop's staff. People complained because they wanted to see the bishop himself, not a deputy. The "staff" were reluctant to take responsibility, always referring decisions back to the bishop, a practice which he tended to encourage by looking over their shoulders all the time. Where staff did make mistakes, the public always blamed the bishop for whatever went wrong. This business of delegation obviously needed more thought in the Church of England.

June 5<sup>th</sup>

Exodus 19 vv 1-8

One year at the Annual Meeting, our vicar, James, stood up and told us that we were all holy. That raised a few eyebrows. I can only think of two or three holy people in our entire fellowship and I'm not one of them. Neither are you, come to that. Then he said that we were all priests. No, James is the priest and Raymond is the deacon. Then he said that we were all royal. Now I knew that he had gone completely loopy, till I realised that he was quoting the Bible. He was using church language in the hall! I do wish people wouldn't confuse the issue by saying the sort of thing we say in church when they are outside the church or *vice versa*. After all, you wouldn't swear in church; so why would you quote the Bible out in the real world? But if you wouldn't swear in church or quote the Bible in the boardroom, what about a church meeting? I suppose it would be safest to lay off swearing and quoting the Bible.



June 6<sup>th</sup>

Exodus 19 vv 9-25

*And if any of those be an open and notorious evil liver, or have done any wrong to his neighbours by word or deed... the Curate having knowledge thereof, shall call him and advertise him that in any wise he presume not to come to the Lord's Table until he have openly declared himself to have truly repented.*

It started as a bit of fun. The weekend of the Tudor Fair, we asked the vicar if we could have our Sunday Service just like it was in Tudor times. He agreed to turn the holy table round long ways, only to wear black and white vestments and to use the old prayer book. Then, the Sunday before the Tudor Weekend, James read us the part of the old prayer book where it says that all those coming to Communion must hand in their names in advance and that anyone who is known to have done wrong will not be admitted to Holy Communion unless he openly repents. There has been a lot of arguing going on in the parish this week, with some very harsh things said about the vicar. Personally, I shouldn't be surprised if James finds an empty church this Sunday and it serves him right. We were only joking.

June 7<sup>th</sup> (Corpus Christi)

1 Corinthians 11 vv 23-33

I was right. Nobody came to church last Sunday. So James said he was going to invite us to an agape meal instead. The idea of a Tudor Communion had gone very sour. He would try to re-create something more like what happened in the early church. We would meet for a fellowship meal. As this was to include all the family, it would start at 4.00 pm. The children came straight in from school and tucked in. They then started running around. When the grannies tried to eat their food, the children got bored. So the grannies had to stop eating and organise some games. When the grannies ate, Raymond got the children singing raucous action choruses. Just as those who had been at work all day got there, the food ran out. The grannies were now clearing away, talking loudly and clattering cups and saucers in the kitchen. Raymond was losing his grip on the children as they got increasingly excited. In this atmosphere, James suggested that the tired, hungry adults join him in a prayer meeting. There were some sarcastic comments, but they did manage to do some Bible study until an

argument broke out about just how many wives King Solomon really had. James then shouted for silence and informed us that he was about to break bread and bless the wine as Jesus did at the Last Supper and that we would all then participate in His Body and Blood. We were all about to do this when Raymond reminded us that we should have prepared carefully for what we were about to do and asked whether we could truly say that we discerned Christ's Body in this gathering together of our church. If not, we should be eating and drinking our own damnation if we continued with the Eucharist. Ouch!

June 8<sup>th</sup>

Exodus 20 vv 1-17

O Amanda! Amanda is the vicar's daughter and one smart child. James had asked the Sunday School to write an essay on "The Ten Commandments Today". Only Amanda (aged 12) had attempted to do so and he rashly asked her to read it out in church without checking what she had written. Try to imagine him hoping the earth will open and swallow him as he sits in his clergy stall.

"You can't say people have got to worship God because they might not believe in Him. You can't criticise images because some people think they are gods. Aunty Mary takes the Lord's name in vain every time she opens her mouth; it can't be that serious. Does God really think I shouldn't go shopping after Church on Sundays? Get real, Dad. If honouring your parents means me going to see Granny when my friends are playing on their computers, count me out. Murder isn't cool, but I suppose killing's all right in self defence or in war. If two people love one another, they don't need a piece of paper to be together. Not paying on the train is only stealing if you get caught. I wouldn't tell a real, black lie, but there's no harm in a bit of gossip. No, I don't covet my neighbour's ox or his ass, but I'd kill for his i pod.

June 9<sup>th</sup>

1 Samuel 16 vv 1-13

Pam and Colin were interviewing for a new sales manager. Ann had impressive qualifications. Veronica was good-looking. The vacancy needed filling. There were no other applicants and these two looked very good. But Pam and Colin never took a major decision without

praying about it and they both wound up feeling uneasy about both candidates. It was too late to re-advertise. So they just rang the job centre on the off chance. As soon as Janet made it through the door, they knew what they had been missing in the other two – character. Integrity is more important than looks or qualifications. It didn't hurt that Janet had looks and qualifications as well, however, and Pam and Colin were very pleased that they had “waited on God” before making the appointment.

June 10<sup>th</sup> (Trinity 1)

1 Kings 17 vv 17-24

Lillian was a widow. She did not have much money and she lavished all her love on her son. When an even poorer family moved in next door, she used to give them what she used to take them round meals and any odds and ends she had to spare. The vicar was a regular visitor and Lillian was a faithful member of her local church. One day, her son got it ill and died. Where was God in all this? Did He not love her? Did He want to punish her? In biblical times, there might have been a miracle. Do miracles happen today. If not, could Lillian find peace in the thought her son was in Heaven and one day she would see him again? Or might she be bitter against God? What would you tell her if you were her vicar?

June 11<sup>th</sup> (St Barnabas)

Acts 4 vv 31-37

Gladys and Phil were really worried. Their son Peter was at university studying computer science. He had 3 As at A level. A legacy from an old aunt had left him comfortably off with no student loan to pay back. In his first term, he had lived in a comfortable apartment and combined a sensible social life with steady progress in his course work. He hadn't fitted in with the local parish church at university. It wasn't like home. So he had joined the Christian Union and, at a house party, they had all shared some sort of charismatic experience. Now Pete had given up alcohol and dating. His grades were merely adequate as he cut back on study time in order to spend hours each week in prayer meetings and bible study with his new friends. They spent hours singing in tongues and listening to some older students who were their leaders. Most worryingly, he had given up his flat and gone to live in a commune, in

which they all pooled all their money, lived on peanut butter sandwiches and gave large sums to charity. He said he hoped to be a missionary when he graduated. When Phil and Gladys protested, Peter pointed out that he was just doing what the Bible said, which is what they had always told him he should do.

June 12<sup>th</sup>

1 Samuel 16 vv 14-23

Mental illness is one of the big problems of our age. We prefer not to think about it. So services for mental patients are among the least well-resourced in the NHS. Many mental patients finish up in prison for want of anywhere else to put them if they commit crime or are considered to be a danger. The causes of mental illness are often not well understood. Treatments are not always effective and sometimes have nasty side effects. Prognoses may be uncertain and some conditions last many years or even a life time. There are big ethical questions about whether patients should be treated against their will in what society believes is their own interest. Mental patients may make their carers angry and frustrated and may turn against them or become unreasonably fixated on them. It can be very hard for families and for professionals, some of whom may become indifferent or even cruel. Whatever the way through this maze, it surely needs to start with kindness, compassion and even friendship and it must surely be good to create an environment where there is beauty as well as pure functionality.

June 13<sup>th</sup>

1 Samuel 17 vv 1-54

Elizabeth was worried about the council's plans to close a women's refuge for battered wives and girlfriends. She suspected that the real reason was because they intended to sell the site to a developer, but the council had some powerful arguments. They insisted that new measures against family violence taken by the police had reduced the incidence of domestic violence. They insisted that the refuge was substandard and did not meet new requirements for health and safety and disabled access. They alleged commercial confidentiality as a reason for not making critical documents available to the public. They even hinted that she might get into trouble herself if she didn't shut up.

All her friends told her she was wasting her time. But Elizabeth knew she was right and persisted with her campaign till eventually a junior council officer accidentally let slip the name of the contact she needed in the property developer's office and it became clear that the council's actions were not only underhand and unethical, but probably also illegal. In the face of articles in the national press and threats of legal action, the council backed down and the refuge was saved.

June 14<sup>th</sup>

1 Samuel 18 vv 1-4

Mike was the captain of the church football team. For several years they had won the local league with Mike nearly always in the team. Mike's father, David, was churchwarden and manager and he always thought that Mike might one day be spotted and signed for a professional side. Then, one Saturday, it was very hard to get a team together at all. It was just before Christmas. Mums wanted to drag their boys to the shops. Teachers wanted course work before the end of term. The weather was lousy. The opposition was a notoriously dirty team of much bigger boys. Mike thought he might only be able to field ten men, till this cocky boy soprano from the church choir offered to play. He was two years younger than most of the team. He was very sure of his own abilities. He said some pretty rude things about the lads who hadn't turned out. But they had to play him because there was no one else. And John won the game for them. He was real class. Mike's father was quite angry to see the boy streets ahead of his own son, who had always been the best player in the team by a long way. Everybody celebrated John's victory, but there was a lot of muttering as well, until Mike, the team captain and two years older, stripped off his shirt and put it on John. In that gesture he demonstrated that John was a full member of the team and accepted that his days as captain were numbered. Generosity of spirit and friendship. Do you find them in most churches?

June 15<sup>th</sup>

1 Samuel 18 vv 5-9

The team really prospered with John in it. Young as he was, they made him captain and people went on and on how things had been good under Mike, but now they were infinitely better. Mike didn't mind, but David

hated to see his son playing second fiddle. David himself was getting old and ill. His business was failing and he felt that people no longer gave him as much respect in the church. He became fixated on John as the source of all his problems.

June 16<sup>th</sup>

1 Samuel 18 vv 10&11

One day, when John was now 18, he thought that, if he could lead the church team to victory in the local cup final, he would cheer up David considerably. Our team won 4,3 after an exciting match during which John scored a hat trick, but Mike was substituted after an injury in the first half. David had to smile at the presentation of the cup, but inside he hurt very badly. He started a rumour that John had been interfering with some of the children in the choir. Unfortunately for David, not only was the rumour disbelieved, people found out that he was the source of it and he lost even more respect in the church. David (somewhat unreasonably) decided that even God was against him.

June 17<sup>th</sup> (Trinity 2)

Galatians 2 vv 15-21

Emma had a strong sense of duty. She put 10% her income in the church collection and gave to charities as well. She never listened to gossip. She never had an unkind word for anyone. She was scrupulously honest, a conscientious worker and a spinster who never took any notice at all of men. Marion could also be very generous, but sometimes she could be selfish. Marion always tried to be kind but sometimes couldn't help being rude or passing on a juicy bit of gossip. Marion worked very hard when she felt like it, but took sickies when she didn't. A normally faithful married woman, flirting was sometimes too much temptation to resist.

In terms of “sanctification points” Emma was higher up the scale, but deep inside, Emma was not a nice person at all. She was full of hate and resentment against the world, even though she always behaved impeccably. Emma didn't really believe in God or anything loving. She knew her duty and expected her reward. For all her faults, Marion on the other hand, loved God and the human race. She knew she was no saint, but she did try. Which was the Christian?

June 18<sup>th</sup>

1 Samuel 18 vv 22-30

As he got older, John became much less cocky. He fell in love with David's daughter, the beautiful Dorothy. He hardly dared to ask her to marry him, however. Her father was a rich man and she was used to nice things, whereas he, John, had nothing. David saw a way to use the situation to hurt John. He offered him a franchise on one of his business outlets. It was a branch in a poor area, in danger of closure and bankruptcy. David offered to lend John the money to buy the franchise at commercial rates. To everyone's surprise but Dorothy's, John not only saved the branch from closure; he made it one of the most profitable in the chain. John was now admired not only by colleagues, but by business rivals as well. He was free to marry Dorothy. The only person who hated him was David.

June 19<sup>th</sup>

1 Samuel 19 vv 1-17

The three young people became very close, John, Dorothy and Mike. The closer they became, the more David was jealous, especially as John's business deals went from strength to strength, while the parent company, which he managed with Mike, stagnated. All three young people still loved David in spite of all this, but John at last realised that David would destroy him if he could. His wife and his brother in law kept an eye on their father for him and warned him in good time before David made his move. John had to get out of David's company, but he was just in time to save enough to keep from bankruptcy and to start again on his own account.

June 20<sup>th</sup>

2 Samuel 1 vv 1-16

David's hatred of John became an obsession and a vendetta. Wherever John tried to set up in business, David would open rival services, mount take over bids, make allegations to the tax office which would always take time to refute. David tried to turn his children against John, accusing them of treachery. Yet, strangely, John never lost his affection for the old churchwarden he had so much respected when he was a choirboy. Finally, David made such a mess of things that his company's shares plummeted and ruin was certain. They told John that David had thrown himself off a ledge, thinking it would give him a good laugh, but John had far too much love and respect to glory in his fallen hero's downfall.

June 21<sup>st</sup>

2 Samuel 1 vv 17-27

Ironically, it fell to John to give the eulogy at David's funeral service. Mike had fallen with his father. Everyone else was too numb. John composed and read the address with dignity and a generosity of spirit which would be remembered in the City for many years to come.

June 22<sup>nd</sup>

2 Samuel 6 vv 12-16

John and Dorothy prospered mightily, taking over most of David's business interests and running them far better than David had ever done. They were very well respected in the financial community and were celebrities to the press being not only successful but beautiful and talented people. When they heard that their old church needed major renovation work, Dorothy thought it would be an appropriate gesture to make a significant contribution to the work. She and John would hand over a large cheque at a gathering of civic dignitaries in a blaze of publicity. When she arrived in a £1,000 designer dress, she found all the dignitaries gathered, the cameras ready to pop and no John. Finally, 20 minutes late, he was located stripped to waist, smeared with brick dust, shovelling rubble with the parish working party – which it transpired had been his occupation for several days. Her comments on the pictures which appeared on TV, led to a rift in her marriage to the man who had no airs or graces at all and still felt he was just an ordinary guy in the church, serving the Lord.

June 23<sup>rd</sup>

2 Samuel 11 vv 1-27

Things had gone wrong with Dorothy, but John was still rich and powerful, an athlete, a musician and very handsome. He had no trouble getting female company. Unfortunately, he fell head over heels in love with Ellen. As a middle-aged man, he was flattered to attract such a beautiful young woman. Ellen, on her part, was bored with her husband Robert, a junior executive in John's companies. Robert was always away on business and, when he was at home, he was boringly conscientious and no fun. While Robert was on a business trip to Iraq, John got Ellen pregnant. This was very embarrassing for a man, who was not only company chairman, but also a pillar of the church. John brought Robert back from abroad in the hope that he would go home to



Ellen and believe the child was his. But Robert was so conscientious, he stayed at the office till it was time to return overseas. John sent a message that Robert was to accompany an expedition outside the safe zone. As John had half hoped, Robert's vehicle was shot up in an ambush.

June 24<sup>th</sup> (St John the Baptist)

Isaiah 40 vv 1-11

I don't know about you but I read very little poetry. When I do read poetry, it is usually comic verse. In ancient literature, poetry comes before prose. It is more memorable – useful when both messages and sagas are passed on by word of mouth rather than being written down. Poetry was considered to have a power which prose lacks, as I suppose it does. Just like setting words to music, converting a passage from prose into poetry enables it to engage with the emotions as well as the intellect. Much biblical prophecy is given in the form of poetry. Enjoy this passage in its poetic form and let it engage with your emotions as well as your intellect. It says a lot about God's love for His people, our helplessness without Him, the consequences of rejecting Him and His plan for redemption, but you need to engage with it emotionally as well as to acknowledge its intellectual content, to know God as well as to know about God.

June 25<sup>th</sup>

2 Samuel 12 vv 1-14

John was churchwarden. He had donated tens of thousands of pounds to the church. He organised the youth club and the football team and sang in the choir. He played squash with the bishop and was using his contacts with the Council to set up a shared project for addicts. And the vicar went to see him and told him that he had done wrong.

June 26<sup>th</sup>

2 Samuel 12 vv 15-23

John realised the vicar was right. He had treated Robert very shabbily. In due course, the child was born, but, very quickly, he became ill. People said that this was God's way of punishing John and Ellen. Some people might have said that this illness was really just coincidence. Some might have thought that God was very cruel if He was punishing

a baby for the crimes of his parents. Some might have railed against God or even rejected God altogether.

What actually happened was that John became frantic with guilt and grief. He fasted, prayed, wept. Yet, when the child died, he seemed to accept the inevitability and to take the view that life must go on. We can never tell how people will react to tragedy and we have to be there for them how ever they react and whatever they need. John seems to have been consoled by the thought that he would eventually come to the place where the child now was.

June 27<sup>th</sup>

2 Samuel 12 vv 24&25

Many couples fall apart when they have to face a tragedy like the loss of a child. This is a great shame, because they surely need one another most at such a time. If we see marriage as the giving of self in love, we are there for one another, not rushing to blame the other, to hurt the other for the way that we are hurting. John and Ellen stuck together. Their love upheld them through the tragedy and, in due course, they began to re-build their family. The result was the boy Matthew.

June 28<sup>th</sup>

1 Kings vv 1-14

Nobody lives for ever and you can't take it with you. Even John eventually grew old and frail. His family and colleagues became more interested in the question of who would inherit his business empire than in him. They plotted, conspired and tried to cheat him. If only they could get him to sign a will. Eventually, Ellen and one of John's more loyal colleagues persuaded him to make it clear and legal who was to inherit what. The money, the power and the responsibility were to devolve on Matthew. God would use this young man, despite the circumstances of his parents' marriage, to carry on and expand John's good work. There is always the possibility of a new beginning. Repentance leads to forgiveness and a fresh start, whereas complacency and self-satisfaction lull people into the sleep of spiritual death.

June 29<sup>th</sup> (S Peter & S Paul)

Matthew 16 vv 13-19

*If you would see a Church miswent  
Then you must go to Cuxton in Kent.*

This little rhyme refers to the slightly unusual alignment of S. Michael's Church. My theory to explain this is that the church is built on much older foundations and was accommodated to what was there already. I wonder what we think are the foundations of a church – the people and their activities – not the building. Do we rely on getting the right people? Is the most important thing a firm financial foundation? Is it actually looking after our buildings and other property? Is it loyalty to the diocese, the bishop or the rector? Is it having efficient administration and an effective parochial church council? Is it having a well defined mission statement? Is it a full programme of activities? All these things may be important. But isn't the foundation of our church what Peter the Rock discovered – faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God?

June 30<sup>th</sup>

1 Kings 3 vv 5-15

John was dead and Matthew had everything. He had inherited his father's prestige and a vast business empire. He was rich enough to indulge all his pleasures. He was surrounded by beautiful women. He had the power to make or break people in offices and factories all around the world. He was the blue-eyed boy of the gossip columnists, courted by politicians. He was the envy of much of the western world.

And he went into an old church and sat quietly in a pew. What a responsibility. All these peoples' lives effectively in his hands. What would he ask God for? Health and a long life? You can't enjoy being rich and powerful without your health. You can't do much good in the world if you die young, he reasoned. How about even more money? Think what good you could do with a huge fortune. If you had enough money, you could really make poverty history, find a cure for every illness, guarantee no-one ever went to bed hungry. It was just a matter of having enough money. Matthew knew he had many rivals, people who would drag him down if they could. Wouldn't it be good if he

could render them powerless? After all they were standing in the way of a good man who only intended good for the world.

No, Matthew didn't actually need any of those things. He needed what you and I need as we live out our daily lives. Matthew needed wisdom. And what is wisdom? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and that is an appropriate conclusion to these notes.