

The Gospel
according to
Saint Matthew.



Bible Notes
April-June 2013

50p

April 1st

Matthew 1 v1

It seems a long time since we studied one of the gospels. So I thought we would give Matthew a look. It is tempting to imagine that the four gospels are the easiest part of the Bible, but that is deceptive. You could say that the gospels are simple, but we must not underrate their profundity. We shall not plunge the depths of the gospels this side of eternity. This is because they bear witness to Jesus the Son of God. At the Communion service, we stand for the Gospel and turn to face the book from which it is read. We greet the Christ Whom we meet in its pages with the words *Glory to you, O Lord*, and we praise the Christ Whom we have met in its pages with the words, *Praise to you, O Christ*. There are probably four gospels because one man, even one inspired man, would have been insufficient to give an account of Christ. The four Gospels complement one another. They cannot define God or even Jesus, the Word made flesh, but they can point us in the direction of the mystery of faith. They can begin to reveal to us something of the wonder of God. They can point us in His direction. As we read them and seek by God's grace to live by them, we may grow into the mystery of the Godhead.

There are four canonical gospels, the four in the Bible. These are the ones you can trust and which have been recognised as the Word of God by the Church from the beginning. There are other "apocryphal" gospels, probably written later than the four in the New Testament, never accepted as Scripture by the Church and to be read, if read at all, cautiously and in the light of the four canonical Gospels. The "apocryphal" gospels probably tell us little about the real Jesus and a great deal about the sects which produced them to justify their own deviations from the Church founded on the apostles and the faith once delivered to the saints. Traditionally the Gospels are believed to have been written by the apostles John (the beloved disciple) and Matthew (also called Levi), the tax collector, and Mark, under the tutelage of St Peter, and Luke the doctor and companion of St Paul. For various reasons modern scholars challenge these traditional attributions. There is no room to go into all that here, but never forget that gospel means Good News and that all the gospels were written to bring the readers eternal life.

April 2nd

Matthew 1 vv 1-17

If you want to get your novel published, they say you need to arrest the attention of the potential publisher with an exciting first couple of paragraphs which will so fascinate him that he'll feel obliged to read on. I doubt if you would adopt the tactic of beginning your book with the genealogy of the principle protagonist. But suppose you aren't trying to get a book published or to captivate the interest of a casual reader. Suppose you are telling the story of Someone Who is so fascinating in Himself that people want to know the truth about Him. Maybe they are Christians already. Maybe they want to know what (or Whom) all these Christians are so excited about. Either way you reader wants to know Jesus. If that is the audience you are writing for, you tell them Who Jesus is and Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament, the promises made to Abraham and to David and to the generation that went down into Egypt and to the generation that went into Babylonian Exile. The Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets, is God's Word to His people and Jesus is the fulfilment of that Word. The people of God today are the heirs of the promises God made thousands of years before Jesus came into the world. The redemption of Creation (your redemption and mine) through Christ crucified is God's eternal plan and we have to read the story of Jesus, the story of Israel and the story of the Church in that context. And what about engaging the uninterested reader? Do we dumb down our precious gospel in order to reach out to those who really don't want to know? I think not. The aggressively uninterested aren't going to listen and we deprive sincere seekers after the truth of the divine treasure with which we are entrusted if we continually dumb down to the level of those who just don't want to know.

April 3rd

Matthew 1 vv 18&19

Years ago, when I was still a youth, I remember a youth weekend away in which someone raised the question wasn't Joseph harsh to consider *putting Mary away privily*, but I should think even today a man who discovered that his fiancée was pregnant with a baby which he knew could not be his would be hurt and angry. It is to Joseph's credit that he wants to avoid Mary suffering public disgrace, but it is understandable that he no longer wants to marry her.

April 4th

Matthew 1 v 20

Joseph has a dream in which an angel explains that Mary's baby is a miraculous baby. It would take some believing on Joseph's part and no doubt many people didn't believe it then as many people don't believe it now. But it is true that Jesus is the Son of God. If that were not true there would be no point in being a Christian. Without Jesus we might well believe that there is one God. Jews and Moslems believe that and so do some secular philosophers. Without Jesus, we might well believe in people being good. We might even believe that there are rewards and punishments depending on whether we have been good or bad. But we should not be Christians. Our relationship with God depends on the fact that the Word is made flesh. He became human in order to make us humans divine. This is the essence of Christianity. God acts on earth and, once you allow that, anything becomes possible. Anything is possible and God can do anything, including arrange a virgin birth. Believing in God's infinite possibility does not, however, make us credulous. Faith partners reason in leading us into Truth.

April 5th

Matthew 1 v21

The baby's name is Joshua. The Jo part is from the divine Name which must not be taken in vain and which was only pronounced just once in the year when the high priest went into the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement. It is the same Jo that you find in names like Jonathan, John and Joanna. They all refer to God – to His gifts and His grace. Also Joel, which means the LORD is God, because El too means God and is also found in names like Michael and Gabriel and Nathaniel. The same Name appears in Hallelujah and – praise the LORD. The shua part comes from the Hebrew word for salvation, which we also find in the word Hosanna, save us. So the baby's Name means that the LORD is our salvation. Abbreviated, transliterated first into Greek and then into Latin and English, the baby's Name is Jesus, the Name above all names, to which every knee shall bow. Jesus is the Christ. As Christians we bear the Name of Jesus. The Name of God is hallowed. We are hallowed, consecrated by the Blood of Christ. His Name is hallowed by us insofar as our lives are dedicated to God and we are conduits of His gifts, His grace and His salvation into the world.

April 6th

Matthew 1 vv 22&23

Sorry if this is a bit technical, but I think we need to know. Matthew here is referring to Isaiah's prophecy in Is 7. In the King James Bible and the standard Greek and Latin translation of the Bible used by Christians for centuries, Isaiah's promise to King Ahaz is *Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel*. Many scholars like to point out, however, that the word here translated *virgin* in Isaiah's original Hebrew simply means *young woman*. In fact many scholars think that Isaiah originally meant his own wife and that all he was saying to reassure Ahaz was, *Don't worry. The conspiracy against you (by the Kings of Syria and Israel) will all come to nothing in the time it takes for a child to be conceived, born and weaned*. Some people argue that the original Greek translators of the OT misunderstood Isaiah and should not have used the word *virgin*. Some people have then gone on to argue that the writers of the New Testament took this misunderstood prophecy to refer to the birth of the Messiah and made up the story of Christ's Virgin Birth to make it fit the prophecy. A lot of passages in the Gospels (especially Matthew, Mark and Luke) tell the same story of, e.g., the Feeding of the 5,000, the Parable of the Sower, etc.. In such cases they very often use nearly the same words, which scholars take to indicate that they consulted one another's work (or conceivably used a common source or sources now lost). Only Matthew and Luke, however, tell the Christmas story and they tell it in entirely different ways. They did not copy one another or use a common source. Thus the story of the Virgin Birth cannot be something that Matthew or Luke made up. It goes back further in the tradition. It is a question of faith whether you think it possible or likely. It is so much part of Christian belief, the belief of the holy, catholic and apostolic Church, the Body and Bride of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and included in our creeds, that I believe the Virgin Birth story is most likely to be true. It was not made up to fulfil a misunderstood prophecy. Given that the Virgin Birth is the truth, I see no problem in regarding Isaiah 7 as being fulfilled by the Birth of Jesus, whatever its original and partial fulfilment might have been 700 years earlier. *Virgin* is therefore a legitimate translation in Is 7 in the Christian Bible and maybe we should make sure to use a version such as the King James at our Nine Lessons and Carols and other translations on other occasions?

April 7th

Matthew 1 v23

Emmanuel – God with us.

The baby's Name is Emmanuel, God with us. What does that mean to you? Originally perhaps it means that God is on our side. That doesn't mean that God will support us in whatever we do. It means that God always looks after us. This means not only blessing the good things we do and looking after us when we are in trouble; it means rebuking us and perhaps punishing us when we don't live up to our status as the people of God, our Christian calling. Indeed the Bible says that the people of God have a special responsibility to live in accordance with His perfect Law of Love. It is a privilege that we can say that God is with us. But the Gospel is that this privilege is on offer to the whole human race. All people have to do is to repent and be baptised. Jesus the Word made flesh is God with the human race, God with His Creation. It is God's Will that everyone should come into his inheritance as a son or daughter of God. God is on everyone's side. It follows that those of us who know God have a duty to *teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; Teaching them to observe whatsoever I have commanded you.* (Matthew 28 vv 19&20).

April 8th

Matthew 1 v23

Emmanuel – God with us.

God is with His Church as a corporate Body. He is with His people generally. What I want to focus on today, however, is the fact that God is with us as individuals. God is with us every minute of every hour, wherever we go, whatever we do, whatever happens to us. *For in him we live, and move, and have our being* (Acts 17 v28). God is with the whole human race. Specifically, He is with His people –*that we may dwell in him and he in us*. I find this a wonderful thought, that God is always with me. He is always looking after to me. I can talk to Him in prayer whenever I want about whatever is on my mind. I live my life in the context of God. It follows that, by His grace, I try to live generally in accordance with His commandments, set forth in the Bible and the teaching of the Church. It follows that in particular decisions I make about myself or about the Church of which I am rector, I seek His Will in prayer. This is not just true for the clergy, but for all Christians.

April 9th

Matthew 1 v24

Joseph recognised that he had an authentic vision of what God wanted him to do. It is possible to have false visions. Some people hear or see things because of mental illness. Some apparently sane people are quite deluded and think that God is calling them to martyrdom as a suicide bomber or to burn the heretics or go on a crusade against the unbelievers. Because someone claims to be acting in response to a vision or revelation, is not sufficient reason in itself to support him or her. The person may be deceived himself or deliberating trying to deceive others. Possible visions or revelations have to be considered in the light of what God has already revealed of Himself in Scripture and in Church history, of what other contemporary Christians prayerfully believe God to be saying and in the light of common sense and sanctified reason. There are however genuine visions and Joseph had such a vision and acted on it, as indeed we must.

April 10th

Matthew 1 v25

Maria Sempervirgo?

Maria Sempervirgo is one of the descriptions of Mary celebrated by vast numbers of Christians. It means Mary ever virgin. All mainstream Christian denominations believe that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived and born, but many Christians quite early on came to the view that she then remained a virgin for the rest of her life. For various reasons, it was felt that someone whose life was consecrated to being the mother of the Son of God would become too holy to have a normal married life and bear ordinary children for her husband. If you believe that, you have to believe that the people described in the Gospels as Jesus' brothers and sisters were either children of Joseph by a previous marriage or that they were really cousins and words like *brethren* were used somewhat loosely to mean *relatives*. Both these theories are perfectly possible and millions of people believe them. The doctrine of Maria Sempervirgo is very precious to millions of Christians. If you didn't know all this, however, I think you would take Matthew 1 v25 to imply that Mary and Joseph had a normal married life after Jesus was born. As the Bible doesn't make it absolutely clear either way, Christians are free to make up their own minds, but not to cause offence to other Christians who have a different opinion.

April 11th

Matthew 2 vv 1&2

In the OT the idea of the people of God increasingly focuses. All humanity is represented in Adam. Then we focus in on Noah's family. Of Noah's three sons, it is the sons of Shem who carry the torch. Of the Shemites it is Abraham's family. Then it is Isaac, not Ishmael or their half brothers. Then it is Jacob not Esau. Then it is the descendants of Judah rather than the remaining 11 tribes of Israel. Eventually all humanity's hope for redemption, all God's plan for salvation, focuses in on Jesus. Jesus is the only One Who fulfils God's Will for His life, but, in so doing, He redeems the whole of Creation. Having narrowed the focus of God's light from Adam to Christ, the Light now shines in the darkness and illuminates everyone who comes into the world. God's salvation is not merely for Israel or for the descendants of Abraham or for the Shemites in general. God's salvation is for everyone of every race and nation and we see this right at the beginning of the gospel when *there came wise men from the East*. All the sons and daughters of Adam are (potentially) the children of God. It is up to them whether they accept this great salvation.

April 12th

Matthew 2 vv 1&2

The fact that the wise men came because they had seen his star is often taken to mean that they were astrologers, which is quite embarrassing for Christianity. We don't believe in astrology. Pagans worshipped the sun, moon and stars as gods. The people of the Bible know that God made the sun, moon and stars and indeed that the sun, moon and stars worship Him as they exist in accordance with His Laws (of physics and chemistry). The stars don't control our lives. The stars don't determine our personalities or decide what is going to happen to us and there is no reason to believe that they can foretell the future. Astrology is nonsense whether looked at from a scientific or a religious perspective. While we are on the subject, there is no such thing as fate and neither is there any such thing as luck, good or bad. Superstition is rubbish and dangerous rubbish if people take it seriously and act on their superstitious beliefs. God is in control of the Universe, including our lives. We live under His Providence in a world which obeys God's Laws – scientific and moral. If the wise men were astrologers, God was reaching out to them where they were at in order to lead them to something better.

April 13th

Matthew 2 v3

Contrary to what the carol implies, presumably the star didn't lead the wise men all the way because they first went to the wrong place! It's also worth remembering that the Bible does not tell us how many wise men there were. Matthew doesn't say that they were kings, but this is inferred from Old Testament prophecies about gentile kings bringing gifts of gold and incense to the King of Israel, the Messiah. Herod died in what we call 4BC. So Jesus has to have been born before that. There was no year 0 and Jesus was not born in the year 1. (If you want to know how people dated things in biblical times, see Luke 3 vv 1&2 or Amos 1. People dated things by the reigns of important people or by reference to significant events like earthquakes. The Romans dated things from the supposed date of the foundation of the City of Rome.) Time is not absolute (at least so far as we can measure time) but always relative (to the movement of the sun or moon, the behaviour of subatomic particles, the running down of a spring, an electrical current, events in history, the lives of human beings). If it is 1.00 in London and 8.00 in New York, what is THE time? Galileo worked out that a pendulum beats regularly by comparing its movement with his pulse. Now we measure our pulse by reference to clocks or watches. Go figure.

April 14th

Matthew 2 vv 3-6

Herod had reason to be troubled by rumours of the birth of a new king. While he had been a consummate politician and a great builder – his works including the splendid Temple in Jerusalem - he was also a loathsome tyrant, a foreigner ruling Israel with the backing of the hated Romans. Plenty of people would have been happy to launch a coup against him and a baby rumoured to be the Messiah would have given them the backing they needed. Whether or not Herod believed Micah's prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, he knew that other people would believe it. So he acted to snuff out any possible rebellion at the moment of its inception. For Matthew and us his readers, of course, this is not just about the sordid, blood-stained politics of Palestine. God had given Micah that prophecy centuries before not only as a word of comfort to the people of his own age, but as a pledge of universal salvation and a way of recognising Jesus.

April 15th

Matthew 2 v7

We usually include the visit of the wise men in our telling of the Christmas story. In our nativity plays we often have the wise men arrive while the shepherds are still there, which creates a splendid tableau around the manger. Even if we are a bit more strict in following the biblical story, we put the magi in the crib on the thirteenth day (Epiphany) and the crib scene is still the baby in the manger in the stable. However, Herod, having enquired when the star appeared, decides to kill all the boy babies of two years and younger. Matthew talks about Jesus as a young child (not baby) and describes the place where they found him as a house. It seems to me likely that Joseph would have found more suitable accommodation as soon as possible after the birth, that the wise men arrived after the shepherds had gone, and that it might well be that Epiphany was as much as two years after Christmas. That would give time to fit in Mary and Joseph taking Jesus to the Temple when He was forty days old (Candlemas), returning to Bethlehem and then the flight into Egypt. We can't be sure, but we must be careful not to base our picture of Jesus on possibly false impressions of what actually happened.

April 16th

Matthew 2 v 8&9

Herod says he wants to come and worship too. Ugh! Hypocrisy! Lies! How they disgust us. To pretend to worship when he actually intends to murder. But what place honesty? Maybe I'm getting old and cynical, but I often wonder whether it would be possible to be a politician and to rise to a position of power if one were entirely honest. There are things in the life of everyone of us of which we are ashamed – actual wrong-doing, mistakes, failures, weaknesses. Wouldn't we have to cover them up if we wanted to get elected? And the voters want leaders who really can solve the country's problems. Wouldn't we be obliged to promise more than we know how to deliver in order to get elected? And politics necessitates unpopular choices and compromise – developments in sites of outstanding natural beauty, foreign wars, caving into the improper demands of big companies or powerful unions, the surrender of sovereignty (e.g. to Brussels) in return for economic benefits. Might we try to keep those choices under wraps during the election campaign? And if we were honest and our opponents were not, what would be our chances? I hope I am wrong. Otherwise we shall drift towards being governed by the likes of Herod.

April 17th

Matthew 2 v10

They rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

It sounds like a biblical expression, doesn't it? *Rejoice with joy* would be considered poor style in English or indeed in classical Greek or Latin. It is a pity if such expressions are lost in modern translations because they go right back to the way the Bible is written. *Rejoice with joy* might be poor English style, but it's the normal way to express in Hebrew how utterly joyful these men were. Its use here suggests that Matthew's Greek was very much influenced by Hebrew or Aramaic (which is a language like Hebrew spoken in Palestine in Jesus' time). That would make sense if the Gospel was written by Matthew the Galilean tax-collector. Maybe Matthew's Greek consciously or unconsciously became more "Hebrew" when he was thinking about religion and his background in the Hebrew Bible (= Old Testament), just as some Welsh people who've lived in England for many years start to sound more Welsh when they are reminiscing about their childhood in the valleys. Or maybe Matthew is using a written or oral source for this story which was originally in Hebrew or Aramaic. Some people think that Matthew's whole gospel was originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, but that theory is out of fashion now and most scholars believe that the original was in Greek, albeit influenced by the Jewish background of the Church. Anyway, in whatever language, Jesus came to bring abundant joy to all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues.

April 18th

Matthew 2 v10

When the OT prophesies that the kings of the gentiles will bring gifts of gold and incense to the King of Israel, the original thought is probably that these precious gifts are an acknowledgement of the King of Israel's greatness. In the same way the Queen of Sheba brought magnificent gifts to King Solomon. As understanding develops, however, it becomes clear that the Messiah (the anointed King of Israel and High Priest) is not only the Lord of the gentiles; He is also their (our) Saviour. The gifts are then reinterpreted in Christian tradition (but not in the Bible) as signs of His vocation as King, Priest and Sacrifice, that is His being both God and the archetypal human being, the son of God and son of Adam who was the son of God (Luke 3 v38).

April 19th

Matthew 2 vv 12&13

Have you ever felt impelled to do a particular thing? I have. Occasionally I think I have been fantasising and there is no compulsion outside my own imagination. At least once I am sorry to say I didn't do what I felt impelled to do and then it was too late to do anything. I am sure that sometimes God does speak to us and nudge us in a particular direction. I am very cautious about imagining divine prompting for something either because I want to do it or (perversely) because I very much don't want to. I also think that we have to consent, that God doesn't force us against our will. But I do think God tells us what to do sometimes, sometimes in answer to our prayers for guidance, sometimes out of the blue. Then it is up to us, to heed the voice or not. I think it is safe to say that if it is something good we should do it. We should listen and use our common sense to evaluate what we think we hear. After all, if the wise men and Joseph hadn't acted on this bit of divine prompting, the story of Jesus might have come to an abrupt end. Or might God have found another way? I'm sure God's purposes are not ultimately thwarted by our failure to obey Him. Or is that not a problem because God knows in advance whether we will obey Him or not and factors our predictable response into His plan? If so, even if I did fail to follow God's prompting in the case above, there are grounds to hope that God's plan for another person were not thereby thwarted – though that is no excuse for me.

April 20th

Matthew 2 vv 14&15

Out of Egypt I have called my son.

This is a quotation from Hosea (11 v1). It refers to the Exodus. God treated as Israel as a son and set the people of Israel, the people of God free from Egyptian slavery and led them through the Wilderness into the Promised Land. Jesus the Son of God epitomises the people of God, the children of God. He represents Israel. He represents the Church. He represents the whole of humanity who will accept Him, believe in Him and be baptized in His Name. In the Hosea passage, however, God goes on to point out that His redeemed children rebelled against Him, worshipped false gods and consequently sinned against their neighbours bringing upon themselves the punishment they deserved. By contrast Jesus, the Son of God, is obedient even unto death.

April 21st

Matthew 2 v16

Every year the Gospel story is re-enacted in the open at Wintershall near Guilford in a day long passion play. It is well worth going if you get the chance. They re-enact this scene of the slaughter of the innocents very dramatically with armed soldiers on horseback scattering squealing children. At Wintershall the children are obviously having a great time and their squeals are mingled with laughter. It does make you think, however, of the real tragic massacres of history and going on in the world today. Children are being massacred by armed men in Syria and in Africa and in far too many parts of the world today. This is the world Jesus came to redeem in which children whose angels (Jesus tells us) always behold the face of His Father in Heaven are killed by young men a little older themselves also made in the image of God. What do we make of such a world? We know how much God loved the world. We pray. We do what we can to bring peace and justice on earth. Start by being people of peace with the people among whom you live and work. Support missions and charities working for God's peace at home and abroad. Use your vote and such political influence as you have to further God's cause of justice and mercy in the world today.

April 22nd

Matthew 2 vv 17&18

Jacob's second and favourite wife Rachel's tomb is near Bethlehem. It is still sadly the site of periodic conflict between Jew and Arab. As Jacob's wife, Rachel is one of the mothers of Israel. So she weeps at the death of her children. Jeremiah's prophecy is about Rachel weeping for her children who died when the Babylonians invaded the Holy Land 600 years before Christ. We are also to think of the time centuries before that when Pharaoh ordered that the boy babies of the Hebrew slaves were to be murdered and Moses was saved to be the redeemer of his people. The massacre of the Holy Innocents when Jesus was born is unique and special in that it was occasioned by the birth of the Messiah into the world. The forces of evil are stirred into action by the coming of the good which presages their final defeat. It is also, however, typical of this wicked world which so much needs redemption. Christmas so easily becomes a fairy tale with Jesus and Santa Claus interchangeable icons of benevolence. It is very tempting to leave out altogether this incident. But Christmas is real and deals with reality.

April 23rd (S George)

Matthew 2 vv 19-22

S George, England's patron saint. The Holy Family stayed in Egypt as refugees until it was safe for them to return to their own land. Even then they had to be careful because Archelaus was likely to be as dangerously cruel and ruthless as his father Herod. Still true in so much of the world today that people may be persecuted – killed, imprisoned, discriminated against – because of their religious or political beliefs. Christians are persecuted today in much of the Middle East in China and in North Korea to give just a few examples. We are thankful that by and large this is not true in England – though we have to remain vigilant. There is nothing special about English people that makes them incapable of persecuting their countrymen as our history shows only too plainly. If we do behave better than people in so many other countries behave I am sure it is because of the beneficial effect of 1500 years of the Christian religion. S George's flag is a red cross on a white background. It is supposed to represent the blood of the martyr shed on a Roman pavement. The blood is in the form of the cross. Christians are called to take up their cross and follow Jesus the archetypal Martyr, to offer ourselves in love as a sacrifice in the service of God and humanity. The white represents purity and the red stands for self-sacrificial love. If we want our country to become and remain part of the Kingdom of God what is required of English Christians is self-sacrificial love and holiness.

April 24th

Matthew 2 v23

Two things. Matthew does not seem to have known that Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth before they went to Bethlehem for our Lord's Birth. So Matthew's account at this point is quite independent from Luke's, which means we have two witnesses for these events, which in turn makes their account more reliable if anyone is inclined to doubt the truth of the Christmas story. *He shall be called a Nazarene.* This is difficult. It is not at all obvious which prophecy Matthew is referring to. A Nazarite in the OT was (like John the Baptist) dedicated to God, but he didn't drink or shave at least for the period of the vow. Jesus was dedicated to God, but He also drank wine and we're not told whether he shaved. No prophet says the Messiah will come from Nazareth. In fact some people thought that very unlikely (John 1 v46). Nazarene could be related to the word for branch as in *And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots* (Isaiah 11 v1). The great Dean Alford says, *I leave it, therefore, as an unsolved difficulty.* So we are not the only ones who are sometimes stumped. Forgive the pun.

April 25th (S Mark)

Matthew 3 vv 1-6

This is where Mark starts his gospel and where Luke starts running in parallel with Matthew. In a sense the mission of Jesus begins with St John the Baptist. His work is prefigured in the stories around His Birth and His visit to the Temple as a 12 year old, but we learn nothing about what He did growing up with Joseph and Mary and His brothers and sisters in Nazareth except that He became a carpenter like Joseph. Maybe He supported the family if Joseph died while Jesus was still a young man. We are not told when Joseph died, but he is never mentioned as being alive after Jesus was 12. In some sense we may assume that Jesus was preparing for His mission in these years and He was of course already living that perfect human life which was so pleasing to the Father and an example to all human beings. His whole life epitomises what our lives ought to be.

O Almighty God, who hast instructed thy holy Church
with the heavenly doctrine of thy Evangelist Saint Mark;
Give us grace, that, being not like children carried away
with every blast of doctrine, we may be established in the
truth of thy holy Gospel; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

April 26th

Matthew 3 vv 1-6

Again the story of Jesus is set in its Scriptural context. God had already made Himself known through Moses and the prophets to the people of Israel in addition to His general revelation of Himself to all humanity in such things as the wonders of Nature and the voice of conscience. Now He is making Himself known in Christ in fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets. The redemption of the whole human race, of the whole of creatio, in Christ is God's eternal plan and it becomes apparent in the Old Testament when we read it in the Light of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, and the Old Testament is itself one of our principal guides in interpreting the significance of Christ. So John the Baptist, when he prepares for the coming of Jesus, is fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah and Malachi and performing the work of Elijah – the forerunner of the Kingdom of God, looked for at every Passover meal.

April 27th

Matthew 3 v7

If you can picture John preaching in modern Britain and attracting crowds of thousands and baptizing all those who repented of their sins in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom of God, who, do you imagine, are the Pharisees and Sadducees, the ones who *really* need to repent but probably don't themselves see any need to do so? Thinking of who the Pharisees and Sadducees were, we might think church leaders – bishops in their finery, too good to think John's message could possibly apply to them. Or you might think hypocrites masquerading as ordinary churchgoers. Perhaps you think that self-satisfied, worldly, deceitful, complacent politicians are the Sadducees of our own day? Or celebrities, buoyed up on the adulation of the public to the point at which they lack all self awareness? Or maybe you think of bankers still drawing their bonuses with no acknowledgement of their part in causing the present financial crisis? Matthew is the patron saint of bankers! Maybe all these people would deservedly come under John's condemnation. The question we should really be asking ourselves, however, is *What do I need to repent of?* Where do I fall short of being the person Jesus wants me to be?

April 28th

Matthew 3 v8

Some people act as though repentance were cheap. We do something we know is wrong or we fail to do what we know we ought to do and we say sorry to God and then we go out and commit the same sin again. We don't even try to resist the temptation to gossip or to make that extra effort to love an unlovable person. We know God always forgives. In fact we get to thinking He doesn't mind about what we easily come to think of as our minor sins and slip ups. Maybe we stop naming the sins for which we need forgiveness and just rely on the General Confession in Church. So we stop becoming better people. We are just ordinary people and surely God doesn't mind that. He must understand. John says *Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance*. If we are truly sorry for our sins, we'll try to stop committing them. We'll try to become better people. We'll seek the grace of God to become more Christ like. If we really repent of our sins, we hate them. We know God always forgives and we should not therefore feel weighed down by guilt and fear, but neither ought we to be complacent.

April 29th

Matthew 3 v9

The Sadducees and Pharisees thought that their status was secure because they were true descendants of Abraham, foremost among the people of Israel. For all sorts of reasons people feel complacent because of their status. The disciples found it very hard to believe that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The prophet Hosea points out that we thank all the wrong things for the blessings we receive. Our false gods are social class, talent, money, hard work, good luck. We think we have things like these to thank for our prosperity and security. So we worship them; we live our lives for them. We put success in exams, promotion at work, good looks, physical fitness, popularity, lottery tickets, cleanliness, effort, all before God. We make idols of them all. But it is God from Whom we receive everything that we have. It is God Who makes us the people we are. Everything else we do – career, family, leisure – has to be in the context of God. All the Pharisees' advantages and privileges mean nothing if they don't turn to God (Philippians 3 v7). On the other hand, God can work with nothing to make us blessed people.

April 30th

Matthew 3 v10

One of my most important tasks is to take funeral services for people. Sometimes I don't know the deceased at all. Sometimes I may have reason to believe that they have no religion. I may know that they have not lived very good lives. One of the functions of a funeral is to provide comfort for the bereaved. So it would hardly be appropriate to suggest at that point that in eternity their loved ones are paying the penalty for their wickedness and unbelief. It is always my hope that they are in heaven and I share this hope with the funeral congregation. God is merciful. He will give every chance to absolutely everyone to return to Him. He does not desire the death of a sinner (Ezekiel 18). He will have all men to be saved (I Timothy 2 v4). God devises means that his banished shall not be expelled from him (II Samuel 14 v14). But what about judgment? Do we really believe that the wicked will receive the same reward as the righteous? Do we assume that all those people who couldn't be bothered with God in their lifetime will nevertheless settle down to a cosy place in heaven?

May 1st (S Philip & S James)

Matthew 3 vv 11&12

The Kingdom of God. The time when (or rather the end of Time “when”) everything will be in accordance with God’s perfect Love. No more sin, no more, eternal joy. John preaches to get ready and those who want to be ready repent of their sins and are baptised. In Christ the Kingdom of God comes. Believers in Him not only repent of their sins and receive forgiveness; they receive the Holy Ghost; they become the Church. The Church is a foretaste of the Kingdom, a witness to the Kingdom and an earnest of the Kingdom. As Christians on earth we are citizens of Heaven on earth, called out to live by the values of the Kingdom – justice and mercy. Christ instigates the Kingdom of God in His first coming in C1 Palestine and the Kingdom grows and spreads throughout the world as the Gospel is proclaimed to every nation, men and women are baptised in the Name of the Trinity, and taught to obey everything that Christ taught, and Christ (as He promised) is with us to the end, and then the Kingdom is fulfilled at His Second Coming when He returns in glory to judge the living and the dead. [By the way, John doesn’t say, *Stop worrying about judgment because Jesus will get rid of all that Old Testament stuff about sin and punishment. On the contrary he says that Jesus will be the one to sort out the wheat from the chaff and gather the one into the barn and throw the other on the fire!*]

May 2nd (S Athanasius)

Matthew 3 vv 13-15

I’m rather a fan of Athanasius. He helped the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) to formulate the doctrine that Jesus the Son of God *is one in being with the Father* or *of one substance with the Father*, depending on how you translate the Greek ‘ὁμοούσιος (homoousios). He then refused to change his mind when everybody turned against him and he had to go into exile for many years and lived to see the Church return to the truth about Jesus and incorporate this doctrine in the Nicene Creed which we say every Sunday. The point that Athanasius grasps is that Jesus makes us human beings at one with God because He is both one with God and one with us. He is baptised because He is human and human beings are baptised in Him so that we might become divine. Jesus is wholly God and wholly man. God makes Himself wholly known in Him. Our whole being is redeemed through Him.

May 3rd

Matthew 3 vv 16&17

What happens to Jesus, happens to all of us. When we are baptised in His Name, God acknowledges us His children and pours out His Holy Spirit upon us. We thus become citizens of Heaven and live our lives on earth in the light of eternity. We are richly blessed here and now and these rich blessings are a foreshadowing of the infinitely richer blessings which await us when time and space cease to matter to us. We are privileged, as the Body of Christ, to continue His work in the world – to reveal the love of God in our words and deeds and by just being the people God has made us.

May 4th

Matthew 4 vv1&2

Some people worry that they can't be very good Christians because they are so often tempted to sin. But there is nothing wrong with being tempted. Jesus was tempted. It is when we yield to temptation that we go wrong. Yet God promises us that we will not be tempted beyond what we can bear (I Corinthians 10 v13) and, when we fall, there is always forgiveness for those who repent. Jesus was tempted and some people say that it is good people who are tempted most. The devil doesn't have to worry about bad people. They're his anyway. So, when you feel tempted, remember that Jesus was tempted too. He fully understands you. Commit your cause to Him.

May 5th

Matthew 4 vv 3&4

What would have been wrong with Jesus turning those stones into bread when He was hungry? How would it have hurt anyone? I think the usual answers are along the lines that He would have been doubting God if He had tested Him by demanding a miracle and that He would have been abusing His own vocation if He had used His gifts not to reveal the love of God for everybody but to meet His own selfish desires. It is worth noticing that Jesus answers the devil on each occasion with a quotation from Scripture. The Word of God is the Sword of the Spirit – the only weapon in the Christian's armoury (Ephesians 6 v17). It is worth studying and memorising the Bible. You don't know when it's going to come in handy!

May 6th

Matthew 4 vv 3&4

There are always new fad diets coming out in the newspapers. One of the latest suggests going without food altogether for a couple of days a week and then just eating normally the rest of the time. The claim is that you will lose weight and feel healthier. The rationale is that our bodies are still more adapted for the Stone Age than for modern life when human beings were hunter gatherers who ate well when they found food and fasted when they didn't, rather than stuffing themselves everyday. I was slightly offended that the people suggesting this diet looked for support to Islam which requires its followers to fast on occasion. Most religions have a tradition of fasting, including Christianity, and I thought it was odd that, in a supposedly Christian country, the article didn't even mention the Christian tradition of fasting in Lent and on Fridays, on the eve of major festivals and, indeed, on Wednesdays and Saturdays for the really keen. It is likely that most of us would be healthier for eating less and maybe it is true that it is sometimes good for us not to eat at all. Physical health isn't usually given as the reason for religious fasting, however. Fasting is thought to show we are serious about God. Some people fast in penitence. There are occasions when fasting goes with prayer (Matthew 17 v21). Some people claim that fasting heightens their spiritual awareness, opening the way to a deeper experience of God. Maybe it says something about our so-called Christian culture that very few of us (and I certainly am not one of the few) are prepared to give up anything meaningful for Lent or to fast on Fridays or the eve of major festivals, whereas people are prepared to go on all kinds of crazy diets and start extreme exercise regimes in the pursuit of physical health and sexual attractiveness. Perhaps this is why the author of the article mentioned above turned to Islam rather than Christianity for an example of regular fasting and its beneficial effects. What I think C21 needs to focus on about religious fasting is maybe the same as one of the many good reasons for observing a sabbath rest (apart from making time for worship, time for family & friends, time to do something different, time for actual physical & mental relaxation). To go without food, to abstain from work, shopping, producing and consuming makes the point that ultimately these things don't matter. We are not merely what we consume. We don't exist merely to produce. We are the children of God.

May 7th

Matthew 4 vv 5-7

Jesus quotes Scripture, but so does the devil. Down through the ages people have quoted the Bible time and again to “justify” oppression and persecution. You can make the Bible say practically anything if you quote it out of context and without considering how it is interpreted by the Church and if you disregard sanctified common sense. Jesus answers the devil’s abuse of Scripture by quoting Scripture in context and in the light of common sense and the experience of the people of God over the centuries. Read the whole Bible, not just the bits that support your prejudices. Consider it prayerfully, exercising your God-given common sense. Read the Bible in the light of the faith of the Church. And still there will be times when you don’t come to the same conclusions as the conclusions come to by other good, sincere Christians. In such cases, be ready to give a reason for what you believe, be ready to change your mind if you turn out to be wrong, and, if you really can’t agree, don’t break the bonds of love.

May 8th

Matthew 4 vv 8-10

Worship the devil in order to obtain wealth and power. Go to war. Commit crimes. Sweat your workforce. Bully your suppliers into offering goods at impossibly low prices. Cheat your customers. Elbow your colleagues to one side. Suck up to the boss. Make claims you can’t substantiate. Exploit the environment. Take a cavalier attitude to health and safety. Evade taxes. Work on the Sabbath day. Harden your heart to the needs of the poor. There are lots of ways of growing rich and powerful by worshipping the devil. You can even justify them by telling yourself that you will use all this wealth and power to do good. Yet Christ doesn’t need to worship the devil. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the King Who reigns from the Cross. He already has everything He needs in the love of God. And so have we. In Christ we are a royal priesthood. We have everything we need in Him. Paul is specifically writing to those who would do the devil’s work by dividing the Church into factions following different leaders, but what he says has a much wider significance applicable to all that I have written above. *Therefore let no man glory in men,. For all things are yours; Whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; and ye are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s.* (I Corinthians 3 vv 21-13).

May 9th (Ascension Day)

Matthew 4 v11

I wonder where the devil went. Revelation 12 depicts him being cast out of heaven and rampaging about the earth. At this point Luke says that the devil left Him for a season. The devil didn't stop trying to deflect Jesus from His mission and he does not cease trying to deflect us. St Peter (5 v8) warns Christians, *Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.* St James, however, encourages us with the words, (4 vv 7&8) *Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God and he will draw nigh to you.* Angels from heaven ministered to Jesus. I am sure they also minister to us. Jesus wholly defeated the devil when He died on the Cross. He rose again and ascended into Heaven. Through Him our prayers come to the Throne of Grace. Through Him God's Holy Spirit is poured out upon us. We thus have the victory. All we have to do is to claim it. Here on earth we are citizens of Heaven. In Christ we have the resources with which each one of us may play his or her part in establishing the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth.

Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that like as we do believe thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens; so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with him continually dwell, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

May 10th

Matthew 4 vv 12-16

Later on in the Gospel, we discover the reason that Herod had imprisoned John – because he had told him that he ought not to have taken his brother's wife Herodias. There was an overlap between the times when John was preaching and when Jesus was keeping. There was a continuity, but also of course Jesus made a new and wonderful fresh beginning. Matthew locates Jesus' mission in the context of Isaiah's prophecy (another reading we often hear at the Nine Lessons and Carols.) The coming of Jesus is God's eternal plan for the redemption of the entire Creation (not, as some people appear to think, that Jesus was God's plan B when the Old Testament plan A didn't work out.)

May 11th

Matthew 4 v17

Jesus' message is the same as John's, but, whereas John prophesied the Kingdom, Jesus effects the Kingdom. John proclaims the Word. Jesus is the Word. He baptises with the Holy Ghost and with fire.

May 12th

Matthew 4 vv 18-22

Jesus needed companions. He needed people to work with Him. He needed people He could send out to proclaim the message. He needed people to whom He could entrust His teaching. He needed people to found the Church and to preach the Gospel to the whole of Creation. The people He initially chose had been followers of John the Baptist. To some extent they were prepared and they had some knowledge of what it was all about. When it came to it, they left their old life behind, the securities on which they had depended, and followed Jesus. These four men became apostles. As members of the apostolic Church, you and I are called by Jesus. Some of us may be called to leave our former employments, even our families, behind to follow Him. Many more of us will be called to follow Him where we are. Are we ready to hear His call and to follow wherever He leads? Are we prepared to be sent out to play our part in Christ's mission in the world? If we are called to serve Him where we are, shall we still look to our jobs or pensions, family, the bricks and mortar we own, for our security or will we now find our security in Him, even though we shall continue to go to work and to live in our own homes with our own families? Might this be a harder way to be a disciple than actually to leave home and make a completely fresh start?

May 13th

Matthew 4 vv 23-25

One of the things I find hard to understand is the enthusiasm to hear Jesus in those days contrasted with the indifference there is to Him in the world today. Maybe poor people living in an occupied country without any decent medical services were more desperate for salvation. Maybe people today have their spiritual senses dulled by a surfeit of material goods. Maybe the Jews in Jesus' day had been taught enough of the Bible to know to watch for the coming of God's Kingdom, whereas our children are brought up to be materialists. Maybe Jesus was more inspiring than the Church is today!

May 14th (S Matthias)

Matthew 5 vv 1&2

The following three chapters comprise the Sermon on the Mount. The parallel is with Moses giving the Israelites the Law on Mount Sinai after they had escaped from Egyptian slavery and “been baptised” in the Red Sea (I Corinthians 10). The teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is sublime, but what did Jesus expect His hearers to do about it? Does the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount describe life in the Kingdom of Heaven? Is it a manifesto for an ideal society which can never exist? Is the Sermon on the Mount something we can aspire to but never attain? Is this teaching meant just for Jesus’ twelve apostles and the few hundred (?) disciples who followed Him around during the three years leading up to the Crucifixion? Did He intend that the people of Israel in the C1 should live by the precepts and principles contained in the Sermon on the Mount? Is this teaching for all Christians everywhere in every generation, a teaching in fact by which the Church ought to govern itself and by which Christian people should be governed? Or are the principles of the Sermon on the Mount an aspect of the Good News, the Gospel, which people of all nations are to be taught to obey? Is the Sermon on the Mount a blueprint for human society? My own personal belief is that it is God’s Will that all human beings should come to know Him and be baptised into the Church and live in accordance with God’s holy Law of love, the principles of which are laid out in these three chapters. It would be very difficult to live by these principles, but not impossible. Jesus did live by them and I believe we are called to imitate Him. Anything less is sin.

May 15th

Matthew 5 vv 3-11

These verses comprise the beatitudes and head up the Sermon on the Mount in the same way that the Ten Commandments head up the Law or Torah in the Old Testament. They are called the beatitudes because the Latin for *Blessed are the...* is *Beati qui*. Common Worship allows the beatitudes to be used in the same way as the Ten Commandments in the preparation for confession and Holy Communion. They are perhaps much more demanding than the Ten Commandments. They seem to overturn our notion of the way the world works. It would be easy to suppose that the blessed were the rich and powerful, the people without a care in the world. Apparently not!

May 16th

Matthew 5 vv 11&12

In the Church we are often concerned about numbers. We worry about declining numbers of regular worshippers. We are concerned that with too few people to sustain our work and pay the bills we might have to close. Maybe at a deeper level we fear that somehow the fact that so many people do not believe what we believe or are indifferent to the claims of religion undermines our own faith. Why would we believe and indeed devote our lives to what many people regard as irrelevant? Why does it matter to us to worship Sunday by Sunday and do all the other Church things when it obviously doesn't matter to most people in our community? Does it somehow invalidate our faith that so many people regard it as unimportant? We may envy big suburban and inner city churches with large congregations of people who support all the church's activities in the week and who at least tithe their substantial incomes in favour of the churches they belong to. We'd feel so much better if we were popular and sometimes we compromise what we claim to believe in an effort to become more popular.

Yet mostly in the Bible (though not always) we are told to beware of popularity. The popular preacher is only too often the false prophet who tells people what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear. Only a faithful remnant is saved out of the multitudes worshipping false gods and feathering their own nests at the expense of the poor. What matters is to be faithful to God and to proclaim His Word. People may or may not accept the message, but it is our duty to see that they are given the chance to hear it. It is not our place to water down what God is saying in order to make it more palatable.

Incidentally, when you look around at the church scene in contemporary Britain, it is often the case that the churches which are successful in attracting large numbers are counterintuitively the ones with long services and sermons which make serious demands on the hearers based on a profound reading of Scripture and a perceptive reflection on the problems and opportunities of the modern world, in which it is taken for granted that supporting the churches programmes of study, charitable and missionary work is not optional and in which what people contribute financially is more sacrifice than tip.

May 17th

Matthew 5 vv 13-16

The Church does not exist for itself. We exist for God and for the world. Hopefully as individuals we treat other individuals decently, charitably. As individuals we bear witness to our faith. The Church as a body is also involved in pastoral care and evangelism. Yet it is more than that, the Church exists to transform the world – to work for the day when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ. Humanity is divided into two – those who believe in God in Jesus Christ and those who don't, the Church and the world. Our mission is that the world should become the Church, that everyone should know God and Jesus Christ Whom He hath sent, because that is eternal life. In the interim, however, the Church serves the world insofar as she serves God Who so loved the world.

May 18th

Matthew 5 vv 17-20

When Paul was still Saul the Pharisee he experienced the wrong side of the Law. For Saul the Pharisee obeying the Law was keeping an enormous number of commandments in pernickety detail in order to win God's favour. If you thought you had succeeded you looked down on the people you thought had not succeeded. If you were more realistic, you realised that you could not please God by being good because you would never be good enough. That way is the road to despair. Either way, you dishonoured God by suggesting that He might owe you. Through his conversion and subsequent meditation Paul realised that God loves us just we are and our relationship with Him depends solely on His grace. Some people took that to me that it did not matter how Christians behaved. God would love them anyway. In fact our response to God's love ought to be such that our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.

May 19th Pentecost

Matthew 5 vv 17-20

Some Christians think that Law and Spirit are contrary to one another – that the Spirit brings freedom whereas the Law brings servitude. To think like this is to misunderstand divine Law. The Summary of the Law is Love. The Holy Spirit is the God of Love dwelling in our hearts. Thus to be filled with the Spirit is to be filled with love for God and for other people and if we love we keep God's Commandments.

May 20th

Matthew 5 vv 17-20

And finally on this passage, some Christians seem to think that the New Testament replaces the Old, that Jesus somehow makes Moses and the prophets redundant. In fact, of course, Jesus fulfils the Law and the Prophets. The Old Testament (Law, Prophets and Writings) is one of the most important ways in which God reveals His eternal plan in Christ for the redemption of the entire cosmos. Much of the New Testament will make little sense to you if you do not know the Old Testament. You will be seriously disadvantaged in understanding Who Jesus is and the significance of what He accomplished if you do not know the Old Testament. Don't despair if you are new to reading the Bible. There's plenty of time. But don't give up on any of it. The more you read it throughout your Christian life, the better you will come to know God and the more effective you will be in His service.

May 21st

Matthew 5 vv 21-26

Thomas Cranmer was Henry VIII's Archbishop of Canterbury. Delicately handling Henry, he steered the English Church in the direction of Reformation. He encouraged the making available of the Bible in English. He gave us our English Prayer Book. Under Henry's son Edward VI, Cranmer was able to bring about a more thorough Reformation in England with the protestant emphases on the Bible in the common language, justification by faith alone, an absolute dependence on God's grace. After Edward's death, his sister Mary became Queen and tried to reverse the Reformation. Under Mary Cranmer was burnt at the stake. The Ten Commandments forbid killing. Jesus here extends this to a prohibition on anger against one another. We're not to call one another "fool" or any other rude name.

What a contrast between what Jesus requires of His Church and that terrible period of the Reformation when Christians insulted and even killed one another over their different interpretations of the Gospel. Whatever may be unclear about what we are supposed to believe about the Trinity or the Eucharist or Justification or homosexuality or female clergy, it is perfectly clear that Christ commanded us to love one another. The same point is taken up in the 1662 Prayer Book. Don't come to Communion unless you are in love and charity with your neighbour. We can't live without communion with God. So we must love one another!

May 22nd

Matthew 5 vv 27&28

Is adultery any longer regarded as a serious matter? The traditional view was that Christian young people would keep themselves pure until they made the lifelong commitment of marriage and that then they would remain faithful to one another. Adultery was one of the very few grounds for divorce and divorce was regarded as something to be avoided at all costs. It is the sin in our hearts which leads to sinning with our body. If we nurse anger, we may come to the point of hurting or even killing someone. If we covet, we may grow to dislike the person of whom we are jealous or steal what we need to keep up with the Joneses. If we entertain lustful thoughts for someone, we may be led on to fornication or adultery. That is part of the sense of this section of the Sermon on the Mount – the effect on others if we harbour hateful, jealous or lustful thoughts on which we then act. There is also, however, the effect they have on us. They eat away at us, making us unhappy and twisting our nations. Far better to turn to God in love, to receive God's love in our hearts and to love other people in the Christian sense – to forgive the wrong they may have done us, to be pleased for their success and to support them in their marriages. But is adultery any longer a serious matter? Prior to safe, effective contraception, you could never be sure that sex wouldn't lead to procreation. Children need a lot of looking after, preferably by both parents. Moreover, before the Welfare State, the family was the main provider of care for children, women and the elderly and an economic unit which tried to provide financial security for its members. So society had to discourage sex before marriage. Society also had to do everything possible to keep married couples together. Society had to disapprove of the undermining of the matrimonial home by adulterous adventures. But now, contraception enables people to have casual sex without fear of producing children for whom someone would have to take responsibility and (via the Welfare States and the court system) society undertakes to ensure that those from a broken home will be looked after – child support, alimony, benefits payments. Divorce may seem therefore the best solution to an unhappy marriage and adultery is not therefore so serious. You won't be surprised if I suggest that even so we lose something of what it is to be human if we cease to take family seriously. Relationships matter immensely if not infinitely.

May 23rd

Matthew 5 vv 29&30

I don't think we are meant to take these verses literally! However they do show how serious Jesus is about the Christian life. Being a disciple means being a disciple radically. One view of English society is that there is a minority of nasty people, that most people are nice people and that some of those nice people (a diminishing number) also happen to go to Church. The reality is that the nasty are equally welcome in Church with the nice and that Christ demands infinitely more of us than niceness.

May 24th

Matthew 5 vv 31&32

As many of you know, I used to take a strict line and refuse to conduct weddings where either or both of those concerned had been divorced. The marriage vows are quite clear. Each promises the other to *forsake all other* and to be faithful *for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health*. There are no exceptions because he or she didn't turn out to be the sort of person I thought they were or because they've changed or because I've met someone I like better or because we've grown apart or because my partner has been committed to a prison or mental hospital or because we can't cope with having our home repossessed or the death of a child or one of us being an addict or turning violent. God's love for us is unconditional and in marriage we promise to love husband or wife unconditionally. That means that nothing which happens to us, nothing my husband or wife can do or fail to do, would justify me in leaving him or her. That's what the vows say. The service goes on to say that God honours the couple who have made this commitment by making them man and wife. The two become one and *what God hath joined together, let no man put asunder*. This hard line seems to be enjoined here by what Jesus says and what He says on other occasions recorded in the Gospels. And yet, I now do conduct weddings where one or both has been divorced. Christianity is the religion of forgiveness for past wrong-doing and new beginnings. Refusing a church wedding to people who were on the brink of a committed relationship didn't seem to achieve anything and may be withheld the grace they would need to make their second attempt succeed where the first had failed. So now I do marry divorcees, but am I undermining marriage and trivialising the vows?

May 25th

Matthew 5 vv 33-37

Perjury is a serious crime which can carry a prison sentence (up to 7 years I believe). There are several situations in which we might be required to swear an oath – if we appear as witnesses in court, when we prove a will or purchase a house, etc.. Such a solemn oath is so important because society relies on us to tell the truth whether in convicting or clearing an alleged criminal or making some important financial transaction. We punish perjurers. And we are shocked and disgusted when we discover people in positions of trust telling lies or cheating (for example, police, bankers, officials, members of parliament). Society depends on trust. Yet honesty is not always convenient for us. So we distinguish between black and white lies. We make promises with our fingers crossed behind our backs. We feel we don't have to be quite so honest if we are not on oath as when we are. Jesus has no room for these distinctions. He says that we should always be honest. Now I don't think He is saying that we should tell the Gestapo where the Jewish children are hiding or draw attention to the fact that poor confused Grandma has put salt instead of sugar in the tea we try to drink with a straight face. (I know of one case where an old lady accidentally put Epsom salts in her friend's tea, but that's another story.) What He does mean is that we should always be honest without the need for any special oaths. Christians don't evade.

May 26th (Trinity Sunday)

Matthew 5 vv 38-48

God is three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These three are one. God is love. The relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit is love. Love is necessarily unselfish. It necessarily flows out to love. God creates the universe in love. He creates us in love. He creates us to be loved by Him, to love Him, to love one another and to be loved by one another. The people of God are the people of love. We are the people of the love of God. Our aspiration is to love as God loves. Jesus reminds us here of how God loves and what are the implications for us if we love in the same way that God loves. We don't respond to people as they deserve. We respond to people in accordance with our nature, as people of the divine love.

May 27th

Matthew 6 vv 1-4

I'm told that in America (and maybe in Britain and in some other places as well since we don't want to be guilty of anti-American prejudice) at Church stewardship events and charity galas, they get some very rich person to take the floor and pledge, say \$1,000,000. Everybody applauds. Then someone else pledges \$50,000. Everybody applauds. Then everybody starts pledging whatever they can afford (perhaps more) and they all congratulate one another on one another's generosity. The Church or charity comes away from the event very much richer and better resourced to do whatever good work is on their agenda. People leave the event feeling good about themselves. The most generous receive the respect they deserve and of course the recipients of the charity benefit enormously. I should be uncomfortable staging such an event because I would not be able to help contrasting it with what Jesus says here. In Jesus' ideal world people would give as generously as they possibly could with no idea of recognition, congratulation or respect. They would be behaving in a way better than ordinary human behaviour. At a C of E event we avoid embarrassing the generous donors by drawing attention to the size of their contributions and make it perfectly possible for a rich man to slip a few coppers in the bag or envelope with only God knowing just how mean he is! So, should we capitulate to ordinary human nature (what S Paul calls the flesh) and conspicuously thank our most generous donors or should keep our collections secret which would mean that there is no earthly reward for the generous nor shame for the mean?

May 28th

Matthew 6 vv 5&6

In some situations a reputation for prayer might earn you respect. You pray longest or most profoundly in the prayer meeting. You are often seen slipping into church. You conspicuously say grace in the restaurant. You make a point of praying in the dormitory or barracks or on the camping holiday. Maybe you even pray openly in the street. In other situations, people might think you strange or laugh at you or even persecute you if they know you pray. It depends on the context. Don't pray with a view to getting respect. Don't abstain from prayer because you are ashamed of the Gospel or afraid what people will think.

May 29th

Read Psalm 131

May 30th (Corpus Christi)

Matthew 6 vv 7&8

Quiet confidence. You don't gain God's attention by shouting or by going on at length. He hasn't forgotten you or the people you care about. He doesn't need you to tell Him what to do. You don't have to plead with Him to take notice of you. God loves you as you are. He knows what you need even before you do. Trust Him. You can tell Him anything. He knows everything anyway. You can tell Him how fed up you are, how angry you are. You can tell Him that you feel let down by Him if that's how you feel. He knows. He understands. You can tell Him how happy you are, how thankful. You can confess your sins. You can ask for guidance, strength, wisdom. Keep the channels of communication open whatever. Don't stop praying. But trust. Quiet confidence. God is your heavenly Father and He knows what you need before you ask Him.

May 31st (The Visitation)

Matthew 6 vv 9-13

I'm not going to comment at length on the Lord's Prayer. Suffice to say that it seems to say everything that needs saying and the more I think about and pray this prayer, the more true that seems to me to be.

June 1st

Matthew 6 vv 14&15

To forgive others is so important. It isn't just that if we won't forgive we might seek vengeance and hurt the person who has hurt us, possibly setting up a vicious circle of tit for tat revenge attacks. It is also that hating and resenting and bearing grudges embitters the person doing the hating. If you can't forgive, you hurt yourself as much as if not more than the person you refuse to forgive. It is all about relationships – our relationship with God and our relationships with one another. Our relationship with God is first ruptured by our sin against Him and then healed in Christ. The effect of our being in Him and He in us, of our being conduits of His love is that our relationships with one another must also be healed. There can be no holding back from forgiveness if we want to be Christians. We cannot be conduits of God's grace if our relationships are blocked by grudges.

June 2nd

Matthew 6 vv 16-18

These verses always leave me a little bit anxious. For one thing I have never got to the point where I can see why it would be a good thing for me to fast. So it is not something I ever do. Yet Jesus says, *When you fast*, making me think that perhaps I should sometimes. The second point is that on Ash Wednesday we do put ash on our faces as a sign of mortality and penitence. This could be interpreted as trying to gain a reputation for holiness, impressing people that we have been to Church on Ash Wednesday and been ashed to show what holy people we are. My answer to that would be that the people in church with us know who we are and what we are like anyway. We can't impress them. When we leave the church, people seeing ash on our faces are not likely to think how holy we must be. They might however notice that some people have been to Church on a holy day and ask why, which would be an opportunity to explain about mortality and penitence, the need for forgiveness and God's offer of eternal life.

June 3rd

Matthew 6 vv 19-21

Which way round is it? It is obvious that there is a great deal to do in the world. Just take this community. There is always a need for people to help run youth clubs and the uniformed youth organisations. The PTAs are always looking for help. Schools need governors. The various clubs and societies need committee members. There's local and national politics. There are charities to support. There's sport. There's nature and looking after the countryside. There are lonely people who need visiting, frail people who could do with a hand. Maybe there is a need for a new club for older people to go to. There's a great deal of good for good people to do on a voluntary basis as well as what we do in our paid employment, what we do to care for our families, to maintain our homes and gardens and what we do for a bit of relaxation.

And then there's Church and prayer and reading the Bible. Are these optional extras for a minority of good people after we have seen to the needs of children and young people, the elderly, the environment, a plethora of good causes, health and fitness, crafts, hobbies and social events for the whole community? Or is the spiritual the foundation for the rest? Where should our priorities lie?

June 4th

Matthew 6 vv 22&23

There are only two choices: God and the devil, life and death, church and world, faith and unbelief, for Christ or against Him. It is our choice and it is a simple choice – one or the other, no compromise, no mingling the good and the evil, one way or the other.

June 5th

Matthew 6 vv 24&25

Put the choice another way. God or Mammon. If you are concerned about the things of the world, you must inevitably choose Mammon. God gets what's left of you when you've done your work, paid the mortgage, married, brought up your children, dug the garden, completed your stint with various voluntary organisations, finished with your hobbies, carried out all the mundane tasks around the house, got the shopping, etc. God gets what's left of you and that's nothing. Because God is all or nothing.

June 6th

Matthew 6 vv 26-33

This is one of the most beautiful, best known and best loved passages in the Bible, but who would dare to live in the manner it commands? I think the clue is in v33: *Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.* It isn't that Jesus doesn't want his disciples to work for a living or to look after themselves and their families. What I think He is saying is that we should not live for our job or our house or our food or our clothes or even for ourselves. Christian disciples live for God. Paradoxically it is only when we live for God that everything else falls into place. If we serve Mammon we lose everything including what Mammon seemed to promise. If we serve God, we gain everything.

June 7th

Matthew 6 v34

I used to quote this verse when I was asked in my ministry reviews what my plans were for the future. That was a bit naughty of me. Jesus isn't saying that we shouldn't plan. He is, however, telling us that we shouldn't worry. We are to trust God for the future and the Bible also warns us that, thank God, God's future for us might turn out to be very different from our own plans.

June 8th

Matthew 7 vv 1&2

Well what about people whose job it is to be judges? And what about Christian pastors? If we didn't judge people to be in need of support or advice, how would we do our jobs? What Jesus is talking about here is judging in the sense of criticism. We oh so quickly find fault with other people. Maybe we like to feel that we are better people than they are. We perhaps like to put them down. But we're not better than other people. If we run them down to other people, if we put them down, if we condemn them in our hearts, if we dare to criticise them before God, we need to bear in mind that we shall be judged by the same measure. If we must judge, judge generously and with a view to building people up, not bringing them down.

June 9th

Matthew 7 vv 3-5

To my shame, even when I am conducting a service I can look at the congregation and be reminded of what's wrong with people. I fear that I am not alone and many of you will have your own ideas about the merits and demerits of fellow congregants. Yet I would be a fool if I claimed to have no faults and you would be foolish too if you thought you were faultless. In fact the very fact that we are judging other people is a failing on our part – especially in the context of a religious service when (of all times) our thoughts should be on God and building one another up into the full stature of Christ, not finding fault, fostering resentments and potentially creating division within the Body of Christ. S Paul says *Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God his able to make him stand.* (Romans 14 v4). We are God's servants answerable to God not to one another. We are, in the last analysis, judged by God alone and He does not want to condemn us. My task as parish priest is not to judge you but to preach the Gospel in order that you may aware of by what standards God is judging you.

June 10th

Matthew 7 v6

When I was at school I used sometimes to take assemblies. I remember causing quite a stir once when I told atheists in the congregation they could go to sleep because I wasn't prepared to cast my pearls before swine. There does come a point when there is no point in arguing.

June 11th (S Barnabas)

Matthew 7 vv 7&8

Over the years I have met a number of people who have claimed to be seeking God but say that they have failed to find Him. How can that be in the light of these verses? One question I suppose might be what do people expect to find when they seek God? If they are seeking some sort of emotional response, that may or may not be forthcoming. Faith isn't the same thing as feeling. Sometimes we do indeed feel very close to God, warm, joyful. But He is still close to us even when we can't feel His presence. If they want total certainty or absolute reassurance, they are unlikely to get it this side of eternity. We should not have the freedom to believe, there would be no place for faith, if God overwhelmed us with irrefutable proofs. If people think that their local Church ought to supply them with everything they want, again they are likely to be disappointed. If we join a Church for what we can get out of it, we deserve to be let down. I suspect that some people claim to be seeking God because they know that they ought to seek God but they don't really want to find Him. They don't really want to yield their lives to Him.

I suggest that anyone genuinely seeking God should persevere. Pray. Read the Bible. Join a Church and don't leave it if it doesn't instantly gratify your wishes.

June 12th

Matthew 7 vv 9-11

How does a preacher get the attention of his congregation. I knew one preacher who acted out this parable with bread in one hand and a stone in the other and then fish in one hand and a serpent in the other. I don't suppose the congregation forgot that sermon. There is, however, a potential pitfall. We remember the illustration, the vivid imagery, but do we take the message to heart? What is Jesus saying to us? Do we believe that what He is saying really means us? You know that you do your best to look after your children. Now don't you believe that God will look after you? He's never tired or selfish. Neither is He limited in what He can provide. So you can trust God for your life and embark on any adventure on which He might invite you.

June 13th

Matthew 7 v12

This is the so-called Golden Rule. You find it in a number of religions and secular philosophies. It's obvious when you think about it. Jesus says that it sums up everything the Old Testament teaches. It sums up everything He teaches. Note the *therefore* at the beginning of v12. The Golden Rule follows from the previous verses – that we should be like God in our generosity and that we can afford to be generous like God because God supplies us with everything we need with which to be generous.

June 14th

Matthew 7 vv 13&14

We're back to numbers again. We talk as if we think everyone will get to Heaven (possibly with a few exceptions such as Hitler). We rather envy churches with enormous congregations and the numerical success of other religious movements. We got concerned 30 years ago when we were told that there were more Moslems in Britain than Methodists. I dread to think what the figures are now. We may indeed be impressed with the thousands who go to boot fairs early on Sunday mornings compared with the dozens who come one or other of our two churches. Surely, if we were doing it right, the right form of service, the right music, the right preacher, the right timing, our churches would be packed. Hmmm! That isn't the implication of what Jesus says here.

June 15th

Matthew 7 vv 15-20

Church leaders whom we respect sometimes differ. They may differ from one another about what Christians ought to believe and how the Church should act. We may find that they differ from us. Sometimes they seem to be leading us in a direction different from what we were taught as children and have always believed. Sometimes they are resisting change that we may think is necessary. How do we know which are the false prophets? We recognise Christians by their fruits, the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance. If these are present in someone's life, he is on the side of the angels. Their presence doesn't mean that the bishop or theologian in question is infallibly right in his opinions. No human being is infallible. We should, however, suspect the vitriolic and respect the charitable as a genuine seeker after Truth.

June 16th

Matthew 7 vv 21-23

Not everyone who claims to be a Christian actually is a Christian. People may attract vast congregations. They may be widely respected. They may even perform miracles. But none of those things makes a man or a woman an authentic Christian. A Christian seeks to live by the Golden Rule. We certainly fail and God forgives, but we don't give up because we are Christ's and He is God's.

June 17th

Matthew 7 vv 24-27

These words of Jesus are certainly memorable. Some of us sing them every week! They are one of the children's favourite songs, but do we know what they mean and how they apply to us? What Jesus is saying is that all this counterintuitive teaching, this turning the other cheek and walking the second mile, lending to those who can't repay, doing good to those who do us harm, this exaltation of poverty, meekness and humility, and casting down of the mighty from their seats, is actually the secret of success. If you want to get on in life, stop looking after number one and start looking after other people, especially people who don't deserve to be looked after. Jesus says this is the way wise people behave. Fools grasp power, wealth and status. They treat friends as stepping stones. They always repay their enemies. They never do a generous deed unless they think they will be repaid or admired for their unselfishness. The wise person survives all the storms. The fool's ambitions turn to dust and ashes. The Old Testament teaches that wisdom is the secret of success and that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. According to S Paul Jesus is the power of God and the wisdom of God. Real wisdom is the self-sacrificial love which yields its life on the Cross in the service of God and humanity.

June 18th

Matthew 7 vv 28&29

A neighbour approached me about some land next to the church which he wanted to improve. He had consulted a lawyer who advised him that the legalities were unclear and it would be best to do nothing even though all the people likely to be affected were in favour. (On my advice he went ahead anyway!) Day after day on news and current affairs programmes we hear politicians, officials and businessmen evading giving a straight answer. We are frustrated by their obfuscation, but Jesus speaks perfectly clearly and authoritatively and we obfuscate His teaching.

June 19th

Matthew 8 vv 1-4

In the Bible the term *leprosy* covers a whole range of skin conditions, but it probably does not include Hansen's Disease which is what the word *leprosy* means nowadays. Hansen's Disease is caused by a bacterium similar to the one which causes TB. It does not clear up spontaneously and it is a long term condition which leads to the loss of sensation and consequently to injury and infection. Hansen's Disease is curable with modern medicine if caught early enough and it is scandalous that people still suffer the ill effects of this devastating disease because of poverty and ignorance. This is why it is good to support with prayer and financially organisations like the *Leprosy Mission*, which do so much to prevent and treat Hansen's Disease and to care for people in whom the disease is too far advanced to achieve a cure and return to normality.

In biblical times the skin conditions regarded as leprosy did sometimes clear up or were curable but so long as a person exhibited the symptoms that person was considered ritually unclean, untouchable. So as well as a distressing and embarrassing illness they were cut off from friends, family and their usual employment. The priests had to judge when a person was cured. Then sacrifices were made and the former leper could return to normal life. Jesus shows His compassion in touching the untouchable. He sets us an example.

June 20th

Matthew 8 vv 5-13

Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Blessed are those who are called to his supper.

Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.

We sometimes recite these words prior to receiving Communion. The priest's words come from John's Gospel and Revelation. The response comes from this story. No one is worthy that Christ should enter his home or his heart, but Christ heals all our sickness of body, mind and spirit and washes us clean of sin and enables us to enjoy His hospitality. It didn't matter that this centurion wasn't a Jew. What mattered was that he believed God and that was counted to him for righteousness.

June 21st

Matthew 8 vv 14&15

I don't know how often I have sung or said the Benedictus. It is one of the canticles set for Mattins and as most people only attend Holy Communion services (and occasionally Evensong or Family Services) it has been largely forgotten by most people. The clergy, however, say Mattins daily and we still, therefore, use it regularly. Just occasionally we all sing or say together Benedictus at Holy Communion, especially on the feast of the Nativity of S John the Baptist because, of course, the Benedictus is the song Zachariah sang to celebrate John's birth – how God has kept His promises made in the Old Testament that the *day-spring from on high* (the Son of God) comes *to give light to them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death: and to guide our feet into the way of peace*. What a lot we lose when we limit our participation in worship to once on Sunday mornings and yield to the temptation to stick to easy liturgy for fear of putting off people who aren't prepared to make the effort! Anyway I had been familiar for this canticle for decades when I happened to read a commentary pointing out something I had never noticed before. There is always more in Scripture. It is a grave mistake to imagine that we don't need to read again what we think we already know well. There is always more. *That we being delivered out of the hands of our enemies: might serve him without fear*. Matthew Henry points out that we are delivered in order to serve. We are saved in order to serve. Like Peter's wife's mother we are healed in order to serve. We are set free in order to serve the One Whose service is perfect freedom (another quotation from prayer book Mattins!).

June 22nd

Matthew 8 vv 16&17

It was on the 22nd June 1980 that I was ordained deacon. Deacon means servant. Jesus, among His many, many other titles, is the Servant of God and the Suffering Servant. Jesus ministered to the sick. From earliest times the work of the deacon was to minister to, to serve, the poor and the sick. The deacon imitates Christ, the Servant King. But ordained ministers don't only serve the Church and serve on behalf of the Church. They epitomise the service of the Church. Ordained ministers certainly don't serve in the stead of the whole people of God. Rather their presence is intended to inspire and sustain all Christian people in their caring for the poor, the sick and people in any need.

June 23rd

Matthew 8 vv 18-22

If you are reading these verses for the first time, you will probably be shocked. If you are reading them for the umpteenth time, like most of us you will probably have rationalised them and thought up a reason why they couldn't possibly apply in any literal sense to people like you and me. Most of us behave as if God would be lucky if we could fit Him in when we'd done all the important stuff in our lives. What Jesus requires is that we follow Him unconditionally.

June 24th (Nativity of S John the Baptist)

Matthew 8 vv 23-27

There's a lot in this story. First of all there is the question of Whom do the winds and waves obey? The Creation story begins with darkness upon the face of the deep and God says, *Let there be light*, and then He makes the dry land appear. He sends the Flood in the time of Noah. He divides the Red Sea when the children of Israel are fleeing from the face of the Egyptians. *The sea is his and he made it*, says the psalmist. This is Who Jesus must be if the winds and waves obey Him.

Also His disciples followed Him into the ship. We are in the same boat as Jesus. There is therefore nothing to fear.

Finally (for now) the ship represents the Church. We are members through Baptism. In the Church we are saved, just as Noah's family was saved in the ark.

Jesus is the omnipotent, omniscient God and He cares for you and me. He is with us – Emmanuel. We follow Him. We dwell in Him and He is in us. We can have faith that we shall be saved amidst all the storms of life.

June 25th

Matthew 8 vv 28-34

We feel sorry for the pigs. Couldn't Jesus have cast out the demons without causing the whole herd to plunge into the sea? I'm sure there is a reason. We ought to be more sorry for the two possessed men. Mark 5 gives more details of the horrible effects of this possession. The story shows Jesus' compassion and his power over the powers of evil as well as His powers over Nature as in yesterday's reading.

June 26th

Matthew 9 vv 1-8

Again Mark and Luke give more detail. This is the paralysed man who was lowered through the roof – always an exciting tale for the Sunday School. The point at issue is Christ's power or authority. Does He have the right to forgive sins? Only the One Whom the wind and waves obey has the right to forgive sins and the scribes cannot believe that Jesus is the LORD and they do not believe that He is the LORD's agent. Jesus demonstrates that He has the power to forgive sins by healing the patient of his paralysis. Christ is all-powerful, omnipotent. He is God. He can do anything. Made flesh, the Son of God yields His life as a sacrifice on the Cross – priest and victim in the Eucharistic feast, the King reigning from a Cross. He is therefore the atonement for our sin and heals all our infirmities. I think this is the main point of the story. I can, however, think of a couple of subsidiaries. One is, how did the man feel between having his sins forgiven and being enabled to take up his bed and walk? Was he disappointed because what he really wanted was physical healing, not spiritual. I like to think that it might have been the other way round. People can put up with all kinds of physical pain and disability if they are at peace in their minds or souls. Maybe what this man was really concerned about was that his sins should be forgiven and his physical healing was then a bonus. Or, maybe, as is quite possible, his paralysis was psychosomatic. He couldn't walk because he was weighed down with guilt and, therefore, once he knew that his sins were forgiven, he was enabled to get up and take up his bed. I have known a much less dramatic case where a man in his twenties developed arthritis which was progressing rapidly so that his doctors told him he would be in a wheelchair by the time he was 30. Mentally his life was a mess. However, he started coming to Church, his faith deepened and he began to sort out his personal relationships. The arthritis went away and at 30 he was playing sport. Finally, notice that it is the paralysed man's friends who bring him to Jesus. It says that Jesus saw *their* faith. I don't know whether the paralysed man had any faith in Jesus or a little faith in Jesus or a great deal of faith in Jesus. It appears, however, that Jesus took the friends' faith into account too. It is worth praying for our friends and bringing them to Jesus if we can, speaking about our faith to them, bringing them to church, introducing them to Christian friends.

June 27th

Matthew 9 vv 9-13

There was a hole in Matthew's life. He may or may not have been aware of it, but there was. As a Jew, he was regarded as inferior by the Romans. Collecting taxes for the Romans, he was despised by his own people. People mostly don't like paying taxes. They certainly don't like paying taxes to an occupying power. Worse still many tax collectors were dishonest and took much more from their "customers" than they passed on to the Romans. Moreover, if Matthew mixed with the Romans socially, he would become ritually unclean by coming into contact with non-kosher food, etc. There was a hole in Matthew's life, a lack of friends, a lack of respect, a lack of self-respect perhaps, alienation from his religion. Because Matthew's life was manifestly unsatisfactory, he was able to hear Jesus call him and follow straightaway. When he turned to Christ Matthew experienced such joy that he laid on a party to celebrate and wanted to introduce all his friends to Jesus. That should be us. Acknowledge that without Jesus we are nothing. Discover from experiencing Jesus that He is everything. Rejoice. Invite everyone we know to join our celebration.

The Pharisees, however, refused to acknowledge that they needed Jesus. They were whole (they thought). They didn't need a doctor. They weren't sinners to need forgiveness. They might occasionally patronise Jesus; they might very often oppose Him. Either way, they saw no need to follow Him. They even despised Him for the company He kept and despised those who flocked to hear Him and to offer their lives to Him.

June 28th

Matthew 9 vv 14-17

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God. Thus Jesus answered the Pharisee Nicodemus. Becoming a Christian is a new beginning. It is a conversion, a turning round, a change of heart. It is a death and resurrection, crucifixion and citizenship of heaven. It is taking up the cross in order that, as Christ's servants, we may be where our Master is. Or Jesus' words to Nicodemus could be translated *Except a man be born from above, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.* He elucidates *Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.* Christianity is not an add on to an ordinary life. Faith in Christ transforms ordinary life into eternal life.

June 29th (S Peter & S Paul)

Matthew 9 vv 18-26

Both Jairus and the woman with the issue of blood were desperate. It is a terrible thing to have a child die. It was as true then in times of high infant mortality as it is now when we can reasonably expect most children to outlive their parents. I find it poignant that the stained glass window behind the font at Cuxton Church commemorates the death of a child. It seems likely that the child in question had recently been baptised in that very spot. The loss of a son or daughter is still a tremendous blow if the child has grown up and the parent is old. The window behind the font at Halling commemorates a vicar who did much for the children of Halling and baptised many of them. Jesus had a particular place in His heart for children. The woman with the issue of blood had a debilitating and embarrassing condition. Embarrassment (even humiliation) can be the worst part of illness when we are forced to ask for help to perform basic tasks or bodily functions which we would rather keep hidden for fear of their attention upon us. Her condition is far from unknown today, but is more easily managed with modern medicine and suitable care. At least a modern sufferer would not be considered ritually unclean as this woman would have been, though there is still the possibility of social embarrassment even today. Jesus has compassion on both these individuals and meets their needs. He overcomes the power of death. He heals all our infirmities.

June 30th

Matthew 9 vv 27-31

If you are alert, you will notice that Matthew has two Gadarene demoniacs whereas Mark and Luke have only one. He also describes the healing of two blind men in a context very similar to the one in which the other Gospels have just one. Matthew's apparent doublings is another unsolved puzzle of New Testament scholarship. What is significant is that these men are given their sight. Jesus can and does cure every kind of disease. The fact that He does so is a sign of Who He is, the Son of God. His compassion on the sick demonstrates to us what God is like. He sets us an example that we should care for the sick and heal them where we can. The fact that we are working with Him when we care for people in any kind of need is in itself a blessing. Jesus makes the blind men see clearly. He alone enables us to see clearly what life really is all about. (Shades of Ecclesiastes last quarter!)