



The First Book of Kings

Bible Notes
April-June

2014

50p

April 1st

I Kings 1 v1

We tackled some quite complex Theology and Philosophy in the last quarter – not to mention a little bit of Science. So I thought it would be good to have a change and to study a book of the Bible which is mostly stories. Stories help us to make sense of things. We learn a lot about life from stories. Hence the popularity of fairy tales and TV soaps, of novels and films. Narrative helps us to understand human behaviour and to make up our minds about moral issues. Stories provide us with a guide how to behave and how not to behave and what to think about things. Not all stories are nice stories. Certainly many of the stories in the Bible are not at all nice. If they were all nice, they would only deal with a small part of human experience. So I hope you have strong stomachs. If we omit the nasty bits of the Bible and the parts that are hard to understand we rob it of its power to empower people to face life's greatest challenges. People often leave the Church when they are teenagers or young adults, just as they are having to come to terms with standing on their own feet in a world which includes sex and some violence (perhaps) and the need to earn a living, make a home and maybe bring up a family. Do they leave because sometimes the Church presents only what is nice (the Werther's Originals of life) and therefore seems irrelevant to much of "real" life? We need to know about sex, violence, etc., and teenagers are curious about these subjects. Better to think about them in the context of the Bible and of God than through 18 rated movies and computer games.

The story so far, where we come in, is that David has reigned over Israel for forty years. He is now at the end of his life. Tensions between David's own tribe of Judah and the northern tribes will once again manifest themselves, as will the divisions within David's own family. On the one hand, there is God's promise to David that his seed will be established in the monarchy forever and the preparations which David has made for his successor to build the temple and to reign in peace. On the other hand, there are the consequences of human sin and frailty. God's eternal faithfulness and our human faithlessness in every age – only resolved through the crucifixion of great David's greater Son.

April 2nd

I Kings 1 vv 1-4

David was a middle eastern potentate and had a number of wives. Several of these had sons and at least two of them thought that they should be king when David died. We shall shortly read about the resulting conflict, but this little introduction makes clear that there won't be any more sons of David. The succession will be decided between those already in existence.

April 3rd

I Kings 1 vv 5-10

King David was a good king – the best king Israel ever had. He was, however, a real person, complete with all the human frailties, and he was a man of his age. You probably know the story. When he was past going to war, while the army was fighting the Ammonites, he committed adultery with Bath-sheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, who was serving with the army. When Bath-sheba became pregnant, David arranged for Uriah to be killed on the battlefield. He daren't get caught as an adulterer. Even kings were subject to the law. So he compounded his wrong-doing by committing murder. Part of David's punishment was that his family was that his family would henceforth be at odds with one another and with him.

Sometime later, one of David's sons, Amnon, developed a crush on his half sister Tamar. When she did not reciprocate, he raped her, and, then, disgusted, rejected her. Tamar's full brother, Absalom, then sent his own servants to kill Amnon while he was drunk. As a result of this Absalom was banished by David. He managed to worm his way back, but then started a war to put himself on David's throne. David's side won the war but Absalom was killed. *O my son Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!* One of the most poignant verses in the Bible, David's lament for the death of his rebellious son.

Now David is dying and the brother of Absalom and Tamar, Adonijah thinks he is the obvious successor to King David and apparently nobody has ever told him otherwise. I don't know about you, but I sometimes try to avoid a row by not discussing with someone what I know he won't like. Perhaps not always advisable!

April 4th

I Kings 1 vv 11-14

It is clear from the biblical story that David's son by Bath-sheba is David's intended successor. The child conceived in adultery had died, but then Bath-sheba conceived again and Solomon was born. Part of the problem is the disorder in David's household following his adultery. Wrongdoing does have consequences, not only for the perpetrators, but for other people as well. That is why wrongdoing is wrong. If we break the commandments we start a chain of suffering and sin for other people as well as ourselves. The wise man or woman is the man or woman who fears God and keeps His commandments. It is the fool who believes that there is no God or that God's Law can be disregarded with impunity.

April 5th

I Kings 1 vv 15-21

David had been a hero, a celebrity. As a young man, he was good-looking, an accomplished musician, brave, a skilled warrior, capable of inspiring loyalty in men, attractive to women, a great leader. A lot of people would like to be like David. In the end, however, as an old man, he is frail and confused. Did David write Psalm 71? *Cast me not away in the time of age: forsake me not when my strength faileth me.* It doesn't matter who wrote it. We need God at every stage of our lives, right up to the end. God loves us right up to the end whatever happens to us, however physically or mentally frail we become. We too, like God, should continue to care for people however old they are and treat them with respect no matter what. That is true for care home staff, doctors, nurses and other professionals, and it is true for families and friends – to treat people with respect right up to the end. It is also true that the Church should continue to provide for people's spiritual needs, perhaps with home Communion or with prayer meetings in the houses of those no longer able to get out. When I take the funeral of someone who has lived a long life and has perhaps been unwell for his or her last years I always think it is important to remember not just those last years but the whole of their lives, their childhood and youth, the work they did, their care for their families when growing up, everything they accomplished through good times and bad. Sometimes there is no one left who knew them as a young person, but none of their life should be forgotten.

April 6th

I Kings 1 vv 22-27

There is another division here, related to but apart from the divisions in David's family. When Joshua led the children after Moses died across the Jordan and into the Promised Land, the Israelites did not take the city of Jerusalem. Apparently Jerusalem was ruled by priest kings such as Melchizedek in Abraham's time, Adonizedek in Joshua's time and maybe Zadok in David's time. (ZDK is Hebrew for righteousness. Melchi means king and adoni means lord.) The tradition of the priest king is all there in Psalm 110 which the New Testament interprets as being fulfilled in Jesus Who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, our great High Priest. Anyway for about 400 years from the time of Joshua to the time of David, the Israelites mainly lived in the countryside of Canaan and the Jebusites lived in Jerusalem. It was David who captured Jerusalem and made it the capital of Israel, bringing the Ark of the Covenant into the holy city and preparing for the temple to be built there. In the struggle to see who will succeed David, by and large, Adonijah's supporters are the old guard, the people who were with David before he became king in Jerusalem. Solomon's supporters are the Jerusalem party. They are the future. Adonijah's supporters are the past.

Divisions can last for hundreds of years – protestants and Catholics in Ireland, Sunni and Shiite Moslems. It may appear that a new order has been established in which everybody lives in peace and all citizens are equal, and then something happens which puts pressure on communities, and they may very quickly break apart along racial or religious fault lines or invoking memories of past history, whose family was on whose side during the Civil War or the General Strike, for example. I must confess to a very real dilemma. Like so many people in modern Britain I personally find it difficult to respect our politicians, no matter to which party they belong, or those great national institutions which have been caught with their fingers in the till or telling lies to cover up their mistakes. But, if we do not respect authority and our national institutions, if we do not feel loyalty to the society to which we belong, the risk is criminality, anarchy and civil war, as in this Old Testament story and as in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, South Sudan, Israel itself & so many countries in the world today.

April 7th

I Kings 1 vv 28-31

Perhaps David still had a particular soft spot for Bath-sheba, more so than for his other wives. Possibly she had an influence at an emotional level while Nathan had appealed more to the king's intellect.

I am quite curious about the relationship between family loyalty and a person's commitment to business or politics or even religion. In the past, it was assumed that husband and wife were one flesh. The husband was the head of the household and all the members of that household – wife, children, servants even – took their lead from him, at least in theory. In theory there could be no conflict of interest between king and queen, the chairman of the board and his wife, the general and his wife, etc., because they were one flesh and family loyalty required that a wife support her husband and that children support their father and, indeed, that servants support their master. The rector's wife had a very definite role. Nowadays this is less true even in theory. Husbands and wives are much more independent of one another. They may both have their own equally important careers. There are several husband and wife teams and pairs of brothers or sisters in parliament at the moment. It is possible for there to be a conflict between their professional roles and their family loyalty. Cherie Blair was a lawyer whose firm sometimes represented clients who were in dispute with the government which her husband led as prime minister. There is currently a dispute about whether the French President's partner (he is not married to her) should continue to be considered first lady even though he now has another mistress. Why should a president's wife or mistress have a particular role as first lady if men and women are independent individuals? If, however, husband and wife are one flesh, how can it make sense for them both to have careers which may make conflicting demands or give rise to suspicions of corruption? What if the vicar's wife is offered a job managing a payday loan company? What if the defence minister's wife owns a company which is tendering for defence contracts? As a human being I would hope that people would put their families' interests before those of their career, but as a citizen or a customer I am bothered by the notion that politicians or businessmen might put their duty to their family before their duty to me.

April 8th

I Kings 1 vv 32&33

Solomon was to ride the king's mule. This signified that he was taking the king's role. What is important to us as Christians is that Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It is often said that kings rode horses and that therefore Jesus rode a donkey in order to demonstrate His humility. While Jesus was humble, that is not the real point of the story. Kings rode horses into battle. Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem because He came in peace. Jesus came to reign in peace. He is King of Righteousness and King of Peace.

April 9th

I Kings 1 vv 34-37

There is no mention of a coronation. Solomon is conveyed by the king's mule to sit on the king's throne. He takes the king's place. The key part of the ceremony is the anointing. Messiah = Christ = the Anointed One. Kings and priests were both anointed in Israel. Anointing signifies consecration, setting apart for God. The person anointed is consecrated to God. In the New Testament, anointing signifies the gift of the Holy Spirit. We talk about Jesus being anointed at His Baptism when the Holy Spirit came on Him in the form of a dove. Christians are anointed with the Holy Spirit. In Christ we are a royal priesthood.

April 10th

I Kings 1 38-40

The Cherethites and Pelethites were mercenary soldiers loyal to David. Their presence would have made sure that there was no interference from anyone loyal to the old guard who favoured Adonijah's candidacy. Anyway, the people acclaimed Solomon and he was accepted as king. That too is important. Solomon did not become king because he was the oldest son. In fact he wasn't the oldest son. He did not become king just because elite units of the army supported him, although they did. The support of Zadok the priest might not have been enough. Abiathar the priest supported Adonijah and that didn't save him. David's support for Solomon must have counted for a lot. Nevertheless it was important that Solomon was accepted as king by the people. If he had not been, either they would have refused to obey him or else he could only have governed by cruelly suppressing opposition. Authority is a complex blend of tradition, legality, power, personality and popular consent.

April 11th

I Kings 1 vv 41-53

Adonijah and his supporters now knew that the game was up. There was no alternative but to disperse. They had failed in their bid for the kingdom.

A few days ago, we were thinking about the consequences when people cease to respect authority – a divided community, criminality, anarchy, even civil war. It is important that we respect authority even when we don't like it. There are times when Christians have to disobey governments – such as when they are forbidden to worship or evangelise, or if soldiers are ordered to commit atrocities, or public servants are instructed to lie in order to cover up corruption – but normally it is our duty to uphold the law and always to pray for those in authority over us whoever they may be. Once Solomon was confirmed, it was the duty of every Israelite to be loyal to him, even those who would have preferred Adonijah and maybe a return to the “good old days”. In our democracy, we are free to think and to say that the government is wrong. We may well have voted for the opposition. We may well campaign against government policy and canvass support for a different party at election time, so long as we do so within the law. We must, however, respect the government we've got and obey the law of the land in which we live unless we are pushed beyond the limits of conscience by a Hitler or a Stalin.

The concept of sanctuary goes back a long way, the idea that the secular state shouldn't be able to touch you in the House of God. It depends on the very sound belief that there is a higher power than that of the state. Human rulers derive their authority from God and they are responsible to Him. Human rulers have no right to execute people they just don't like or to pass laws forcing their subjects to submit to their whims. Kings, presidents and parliaments are morally bound to act justly. They do not define justice. Justice defines the scope of their power. Sanctuary is a mechanism for protecting people from an unjust state. It is an abuse of sanctuary, however, if it is used to protect someone who really has done something wrong from receiving the punishment he deserves.

April 12th

I Kings 2 vv 1-4

These first four verses of David's last charge to Solomon are beautiful. David says *I go the way of all the earth*. He is dying. When Solomon's older brother, conceived in adultery, died while still a baby, David acknowledged, *I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me*. David is honest in the face of death. There is not a short cut to *the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life*. It is not that death is insignificant, but that Christ has conquered death by His own dying on the Cross. The new king will do well if he walks with God. God has revealed His Law through Moses. A wise king will live by that law. He will reign by that law. It is his responsibility to see that his subjects live by that law. King Alfred placed the Ten Commandments at the head of the laws of England. Where other than from God could our country discover the basic principles of law for today? God has promised that David's descendants will be kings, but it will not go smoothly unless they walk with God.

April 13th (Palm Sunday)

I Kings 2 vv 5&6

Now it gets more difficult. Joab had been one of David's most loyal supporters right from the beginning. In fact he was a relation. David owed his position to Joab and, at least in human terms, probably could not have reigned without him. However Joab was utterly ruthless and at least twice he had killed in cold blood men to whom David had promised safe conduct. David had felt powerless to stand up to Joab, still less to punish him. Now, when he is dying, he tells Solomon to see that Joab receives the punishment he deserves. What do you think? Should David have dispensed with Joab's services from the very beginning? Maybe God would have given him the throne through more peaceable means. Or maybe it would have been better not to have become king than to become king as a result of bloodshed. But what if David had held aloof from the blood stained politics of BC Palestine? Wouldn't it be likely than someone far worse than David would become king, perhaps Joab himself? And now at the end of his life? Should David have let bygones be bygones and left the murderer of Abner and Amasa to go unpunished? What about justice for Abner and Amasa's families? We're still asking the same questions about letting off IRA murderers in the interests of peace in Northern Ireland?

April 14th

I Kings 2 v7

When Absalom rebelled against David, David had to leave Jerusalem with his loyal supporters. Barzillai was one of those who provided David and the people with him with food and accommodation. When Absalom was dead and his supporters had been defeated David returned to Jerusalem and offered to reward people like Barzillai who had helped him with a place at court. Barzillai didn't want to go. He said he was 80 years old. He wouldn't be able to taste the king's fine food or to hear his minstrels. He just wanted to die at home in peace. He asked David to look after his protégé Chimham instead. Here David is telling Solomon to honour this promise.

April 15th

I Kings 2 vv 8&9

Now it gets really sticky. If you remember, David of Judah replaced Saul of Benjamin as king. It would appear that some of the Benjamites remained loyal to Saul's memory and hated David. When Absalom rebelled against David, they thought that David was getting what he deserved. Maybe they even hoped that someone from Saul's family would replace David as king. Despite appearances, David's prosperous and successful reign had not healed all the divisions in Israelite society.

Shimei was a Benjamite and he mocked and cursed David when he had to flee from Absalom. When Absalom was defeated, however, Shimei begged David's pardon and David granted it and promised Shimei that he would live. Now it seems that David is going back on his word. David wasn't perfect. Only Jesus is perfect.

April 16th

I Kings 2 vv 10&11

I don't like the thought of a man dying with a death sentence on his lips. We shall all give account to God for our lives and it would be better to go into His presence in the middle of a good deed rather than a bad one. As we might die at any time...

Historical note. When Saul was killed in battle with the Philistines, the men of Judah made David king and he reigned over Judah in Hebron. Saul's heroic son Jonathan died with his father and his useless son Ishbosheth ruled over Israel apart from Judah. When Ishbosheth was assassinated they made David king of the whole country.

April 17th (Maundy Thursday)

I Kings 2 vv 12-25

Abishag was David's concubine. To take the king's concubine would be construed as a bid for the kingdom. Adonijah was either very naïf in thinking that he could have Abishag and retire from public life or he was plotting very foolishly to displace Solomon and become king. Solomon responds ruthlessly by ordering his execution. In the terms of the culture in which they lived Adonijah had forfeited the promise made to him when he claimed sanctuary by committing a treasonous act. Again, what do you think? Was Solomon right to put down any challenger ruthlessly? What if the alternative was a bloody civil war in which thousands might die? Some countries still practise the death penalty. We don't do that, but we impose frightful penalties on people who commit frightful crimes. We still kill people in wars, often in horrible ways, because we believe that the cause is just and cannot be allowed to go by default. As a Christian I think of Jesus washing His disciples' feet and giving them a new commandment to love one another. How can a Christian be a soldier or an executioner, or a politician or a judge instructing them to kill others or to imprison them for a term of many decades? And yet would it be Christian to stand by, to leave criminals unpunished, to allow criminal regimes to oppress their own people and their neighbours? Wouldn't it be both moral cowardice and dangerous if Christians held back from serving as politicians, policemen, prison officers and judges, or soldiers, sailors and airmen, and left the awful business of punishing vice and prosecuting war to people who did not share our moral scruples?

April 18th (Good Friday)

I Kings 2 vv 26&27

Years before, when David was an outlaw hiding from King Saul, Abiathar's father Ahimelech was priest at Nob. He helped David by feeding his men and giving him a weapon. Jesus refers to this incident in Mark 2²⁵⁻²⁷. Saul's men massacred Ahimelech and his fellow priests except for Abiathar who escaped and became David's priest. When David became king and made Jerusalem his capital, Zadok became the principal priest. So Abiathar was one of the old guard who had favoured Adonijah over Solomon and so Solomon sacked him from the priesthood. Priests mediated between man and God, offering sacrifices, praying on behalf of people, pronouncing blessings and curses.

Obviously they were human like us and subject to human frailty. Today we mark the day that our great High Priest offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. He too was fully human and shared all our temptations. However He was the perfect human being Who submitted to everything that can happen to a human being and remained faithful to God in everything – without sin. His sacrifice was without blemish. He thus opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. He intercedes on our behalf and pours out upon us God's blessing of the Holy Ghost. In Christ, we too are kings and priests. He is our only mediator and advocate so that all of us, all the people of God, may come into God's Presence in prayer and mediate His blessings to the world.

April 19th (Holy Saturday)

I Kings 2 vv 28-35

When David was King only of Judah in Hebron and Ishbosheth was King of the rest of Israel, Abner was the latter's right hand man as Joab was David's. Abner recognised that Ishbosheth had no future as king and called on David to arrange a coup in David's favour. Joab, presumably concerned for his own position, murdered Abner. Much later on, when Absalom was exiled for murdering his half brother Amnon after the rape of Tamar, Joab was instrumental in bringing Absalom back to court. When, however, Absalom revolted against David, Joab commanded the forces loyal to David. David gave orders that Absalom should not be killed, which Absalom disobeyed. When the rebellion was over, therefore, David attempted to replace Joab as captain of the host with Amasa. Joab murdered him too. Joab had been too powerful for David to deal with. Now Solomon punishes him for his undoubted crimes and at the same time gets rid of a potential troublemaker. Joab had sided with Adonijah against Solomon. Solomon is able to confirm his own men in office – the Jerusalem party, rather than the old guard. Notice that sanctuary does not protect a murderer. All this might have been a political or military necessity. Strong personal feelings also came into it. But can't Christians do better? All this violence is indeed the wages of sin, but don't we have the remedy for sin? We were baptized into Christ's Death. We are crucified with Him. We are dead to sin. Our sinful self is buried with Christ. Thus we are set free from sin to live His Risen life – a life in which expediency doesn't trump morality.

April 20th (Easter Day)

The Easter Anthems

CHRIST our passover is sacrificed for us : therefore let us keep the feast; Not with the old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness : but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. 1 Cor. v. 7

Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more : death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once : but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin : but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Rom. vi. 9

Christ is risen from the dead : and become the first-fruits of them that slept. For since by man came death : by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die : even so in Christ shall all be made alive. 1 Cor. xv. 20.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son : and to the Holy Ghost; As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be : world without end. Amen.

I couldn't face another story of horrible deeds and terrible punishments on Easter Day. So I've turned to the *Easter Anthems*, a selection of texts from St Paul's letters, said or sung on Easter Day in the place where the Venite (Psalm 95) usually comes at Morning Prayer (in the 1662 prayer book or more often if we like in Common Worship). Christ has overcome the power of sin, the world and the devil. He has set us free. He has defeated death. If we believe in Him and repent of our sins and are baptized in His Name, all this is true for us too, by His merits and His merits alone. We have overcome sin, the world and the devil. We are free. We live! Let go and let God and let yourself enjoy eternal life here on earth as a foretaste of what God has prepared for you in Heaven. Happy Easter.

April 21st

I Kings 2 vv 36-46

David's original promise to Shimei to spare his life would have been honoured by Solomon on the condition that Shimei stayed in Jerusalem. Two of his servants ran off and went to the Philistines and Shimei went after them. A reason or an excuse for killing him? You judge. And what do you think? Ought Shimei to have been spared or would he always have been a threat to the stability of the kingdom?

April 22nd

I Kings 3 vv 1-4

As we all know, in the past alliances between nations were often cemented with royal marriages. This may have been good for diplomacy and therefore for peaceful relations between nations, but it may not always have been so good for young people (sometimes children in Mediaeval Europe) to be forced into marrying people whom they did not love? Once again it raises the question where our duty lies: to ourselves as individuals, to our families or to the wider community? Where does our duty to God lie? We always hope and possibly pray that we will never be called on to choose between those to whom we would wish to be loyal - family, friends, country, God – but evidently there are times when what they require of us may not coincide. And what about being true to yourself? I don't think you can be true to yourself if you are untrue to God, because God made you the person you are. What about being true to yourself in the face of the demands your family may make upon you? Or your friends? Or your country? Would you sacrifice a promising career for your children or in order to care for a sick relative? Would you lend money to a profligate friend who might well gamble it away and then ask for more? Would you fight in a war which you believed to be wrong?

April 23rd (S George transferred to 28th because this is Easter Monday)

I Kings 3 vv 1-4

Some time ago there was a TV programme which tried to shock us with archaeological evidence that the early Hebrews did not worship the LORD in Jerusalem exclusively. I referred to this in the last quarter's notes. In fact the Israelites worshipped a whole range of false gods and they worshipped the LORD in false ways. The Bible tells us that much. Human beings are naturally religious and most human beings are religious or superstitious or (more fashionably) "have their own spirituality". But religion is not necessarily a good thing. Terrible things have been done in the name of religion. Terrible things still are done in the name of God. Religion is one of the most potent forces in the world. Like fire, water and nuclear power, we cannot live without it (trust me), with it we can do tremendous good, but its misuse or abuse is Satanic. Two sources of error in ancient Israel were worshipping in high places and shrines other than Jerusalem (where away from a properly trained priesthood people did just as they liked and error went uncorrected) and marrying pagans who would then lead their husbands astray. Solomon would be led astray by his pagan wives and concubines. He is worshipping here at the high place because the temple is not yet built.

April 24th

I Kings 3 vv 5-15

I don't know about you, but when I'm reading through the Bible I like to come across passages like this which I know well. I would have said "passages which everybody knows well", but that is no longer true. We have failed in the task of educating the nation in the Word of God. As you and I know, God asks Solomon what he would like and Solomon asks for the gift of wisdom. God commends Solomon's choice. Wisdom is what we need. It is not just for kings. Everybody needs wisdom to live. Christ is the power and wisdom of God. Christ is the Word of God. It is a serious matter that we are failing to educate the nation in the Word of God.

April 25th

(St Mark is transferred to 29th because this is Easter Week)

I Kings 3 vv 16-28

This is another very well known story. The point is that the real mother would rather give up the living child than have it cut in half. So there is no danger of a child actually being killed here. Only I suppose the mother had to believe that the child might be killed in order to react the way she did. It reminds me of the argument for nuclear deterrence. My own opinion is that nuclear weapons are so terrible that it would always be wrong to use them no matter what the enemy did or threatened to do. However, the argument went, that the threat, the fact that the enemy believed we would use nuclear weapons against him, deterred him from attacking us. Work out the morality of that. The threat that we would do something too dreadful to contemplate doing may have prevented a terrible war in which millions might have died.

An unrelated thought on this story. A proposed venue for civil marriages had an oil painting of the Judgment of Solomon. The council made them take it down because nothing "religious" could be permitted at a venue for civil marriages. Bureaucratic stupidity? Possibly, but the Church too has campaigned to maintain a real distinction between church ceremonies and civil ceremonies. We do not want to encourage the sort of religious sentimentality which takes from religion what it wants, but does not recognise that true religion demands that we act wisely – i.e. in accordance with God's commandments. [I did, however, like the story of the couple who were not allowed by some officious official to make religious vows at their civil marriage and they did it anyway at the reception. It would still have been better to marry in church.]

April 26th

I Kings 4 v1-6

So we see how those loyal to Solomon were trusted with positions at court. The one to whom I wish to draw attention is Adoniram who was over the tribute. In the past, the Israelites had mainly lived in the countryside as nomadic farmers. God was their King. Judges provided such leadership as the twelve tribes required. This vision of a people free under God is very appealing and in part inspired the American dream thousands of years later. In the time of Samuel, however, for various reasons the people decided that they wanted to be like the nations and to have a king. The people of God are not supposed to be like the nations. Jews are not gentiles. The Church is not the world. Samuel was very angry and hurt. God told Samuel that the people were rejecting Him, not the prophet. Samuel was instructed to warn the people what it would mean to have a king, to be like the nations. Their sons would be drafted to fight the king's wars. Their daughters would become servants in his palaces. The people would be taxed in order to pay for all the things the king wanted to do. [When I told this story to some junior school children, they said it looked like nothing much had changed since those days!] Solomon was a great builder, but it all had to be paid for and much of what he spent would have to come from the taxes or tribute paid by the people. So he needed a chief tax-collector, Adoniram. This would lead to trouble in the next reign. The people stoned the chief tax-collector, who I think was the same guy still, and the kingdom was split into two.

April 27th

I Kings 4 vv 7-19

It's all right. There won't be a test on all these names and what they did, but we can see the pattern. Instead of being the free people of God, who came together for worship (probably) and voluntarily acted together on occasion as the need arose, the Israelites are now subjects of an increasingly ordered kingdom, with officers answerable to the king to oversee them, to make sure they behave and to take their taxes from them. The people are no longer trusted. Which is better? Freedom or order? We still haven't found the perfect balance. Would you rather live in a society where everything you do is regulated and you are kept under surveillance to make sure you behave and the state takes a large proportion of your income in tax to pay for infrastructure, health, police, welfare, education, etc.? Or would you rather be free and independent and make your own decisions and hang onto your own money and run the risk of becoming the victim of crime or terrorism or having to face unemployment or illness with no one to help you?

April 28th (St George)

I Kings 4 vv 20-28

Solomon brought peace and prosperity to Israel. He had good relations with neighbouring powers and some of them became vassal states, sending Solomon tribute money and gifts. Peace and prosperity do tend to go together. War impoverishes, especially civil war. Anarchy and chaos are incompatible with efficient agriculture and industry. On the other hand, order has to be imposed and paid for. The desire for order can lead to tyranny. Consider the rise of Hitler. Solomon seems to have got it right mainly. He was a wise man. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. This balance between freedom and order would not, however, survive the end of his reign.

April 29th (St Mark)

I Kings 4 vv 29-34

So far we have concentrated on Solomon's wisdom in terms of his ability to rule over Israel – to dispense justice and organise the administration. The Bible teaches us, however, that Solomon's wisdom extended beyond matters intrinsic to monarchy. He knew about life. He knew a great deal about the natural world. People came from other lands to hear the wisdom of Solomon. The Bible speaks of the sheer number of facts that Solomon knew. That is the first step, to observe the world. The next step is to organise all those facts, to put things in categories, to find connections. Then we look for explanations. We can use our minds to study the world using our human reason because the world as it is the creation of a rational mind, analogous to but infinitely greater than ours. The patterns we find in nature, the laws of science, are no less the laws of God than the Ten Commandments. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.* Science has its roots in faith.

April 30th

I Kings 5 vv 1-6

Tyre is in modern Lebanon, still famous for its cedar trees. Hiram had already supplied wood for David to build his own palace. David was not to build the temple because there was blood on his hands. Solomon built the temple because he was a man of peace. But David had prepared the site and much of the materials that Solomon would need. Solomon arranges supplies of cedar wood from Lebanon, which Hiram is pleased to supply as he respected David and he respects Solomon. Pray for good relations between Lebanon and Israel today.

May 1st (St Philip & St James)

I Kings 5 vv 7-18

It is an interesting detail that the wood would be brought down by sea. The people of Tyre and Sidon were related to the Philistines and the people of Carthage in North Africa, Phoenicians. There were sea people, great sailors and traders all across the Mediterranean. By and large the Israelites were not sea people. They feared the sea and relied on the Phoenicians to trade for them. All this wood cost a lot, which Solomon paid in kind. 30,000 Israelites were sent 10,000 at a time to work with the skilled men of Tyre. Then there were the stones for the temple building and all the precious metals and jewels. It was a tremendous undertaking for primitive people. The indications are that much of what was given was given willingly, perhaps all, but it was an enormous investment of time, labour and wealth. So were our parish churches and cathedrals. It is all a question of where our priorities lie. If you tell me that it would be better to spend £1,000 on charitable giving than on repairing or improving the church building, I might agree with you. If, however, you told me that £1,000 was fair enough to spend on a holiday, but £5 was more than enough to spend on the Church, I don't think I could agree.

May 2nd

I Kings 6 v1 – 7 v51?

I'll leave it up to you how much of the detail of the construction of the temple you read. It was obviously magnificent and costly. It was built with the finest of materials to the highest standards of craftsmanship. It was carefully built in a particular way because it was to be holy. The point is that the temple was modelled on the tabernacle in which the Ark of the Covenant was placed during the forty years in the wilderness and all those years from the time of Joshua to the time of Solomon. The tabernacle itself modelled the vision which God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai. The temple reflects the glory of the tabernacle and the tabernacle reflects the glory of heaven. To worship in the tabernacle or the temple was to participate in the worship of heaven. It was to come into the Presence of God and to worship with the cherubim and seraphim. Christian worship is no less heavenly. *Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven.* The paradigm shift is that we no longer think of God as dwelling in a temple made with human hands, but in Christ, and that the heavenly worship is conducted in the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is the blessed company of all believers.

May 3rd

I Kings 8 vv 1-8

So we come to the dedication of the temple. It was to be the House of God. The Ark of the Covenant symbolised the presence of the LORD in the midst of His people. All the time they were wandering in the wilderness and when they first settled in the Promised Land, the Ark of the Covenant travelled with them. God was with His people. At one time it abode at the shrine at Shiloh. Then it was captured by the Philistines – to their discomfiture. The tabernacle or tent was the proper place for the ark until the temple was built. Then the ark was moved into the temple and the temple could be thought of as the dwelling-place of God. The dedication was evidently an awe-inspiring occasion and there were all these sacrifices and music and ritual and splendidly vested ministers. The meat of the sacrifices would have been shared between all the thousands of worshippers, many of whom would have been poor people, who wouldn't often have eaten well. It would have been a grand occasion. Imagine actually being there. Jesus is our Immanuel – God with us. God dwells in our hearts, the hearts of all believers. The Holy Spirit fills the Church of God, the blessed company of all faithful people. Isn't this even more awe-inspiring than what went on that day in Jerusalem all those thousands of years ago? It is my belief that if we wish to attract people into Church we don't need to play down what it means to be a Christian, but to play it up, to demonstrate to people that to be a Christian is the most wonderful thing they could be. Whatever the externals of our worship – casual clothes or vestments, organs or guitars – when we *worship in spirit and in truth* what we experience transcends all other human experience. Indeed it is worship which gives meaning to all human experience.

May 4th

I Kings 8 v9

The layout of the Jerusalem temple was not unlike the layout of the temples of other religions. This is not altogether surprising. There is only one God. The temples of other religions would, however, have had an idol in the holy of holies – a false representation of God for their worship. God revealed Himself uniquely to the Israelites and He showed them that He is beyond any human imagining. Any image is false and to worship what is false is to be false. This great truth would be revealed to the whole world in Jesus Christ, *the express image of his person*.

May 5th

I Kings 8 vv 10&11

In my youth, we kept quiet when we came into church. We didn't chat to our neighbours. We closed our eyes for the prayers. Unless we were physically unfit, we knelt to pray. The only words we spoke were the words of the service and the hymns. We didn't talk till the candles were extinguished and we left the building. That was our way of expressing our sense of the awesomeness of God's Presence. When I was a small child I think I actually thought I might see God if I dared to open my eyes during the prayers. Even when we were in church for some other reason than a service we spoke with hushed voices. Much of that has gone now and I have a question. Is it that we now express our sense of the awesomeness of God's presence in new ways - less formal, more obviously friendly, perhaps less demanding physically? Or is it that we no longer have a sense of the awesomeness of God's Presence? If it is the former, great. We must express the eternal truth of Christian faith fresh in every generation. Or is it that we have lost our sense of the awesomeness of God's Presence? If the latter, I think we are in trouble.

May 6th

I Kings 8 vv 12&13

The LORD said that he would dwell in the thick darkness.

What does this mean? At a banal level, the holy of holies in the temple had no windows. It was dark. Some churches (including St Michael's?) were built deliberately gloomy. Some people feel more of a sense of God in the half light, though personally I prefer the brightness of the sun. I relate more readily to Jesus as the Light of the World than to *the LORD Who said that he would dwell in thick darkness*. But light and dark are both aspects of the divine. They are authentic realities – light and darkness. They are both scriptural. The darkness speaks of the mystery of God. It speaks of our awe in His Presence, our fear, our terror even. *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. God is a mystery which we fear but cannot leave alone. Some people's spiritual experience is *the dark night of the soul*. There is more to God than meets the eye. There is more to God than we can possibly know. Eating by candlelight is more meaningful than eating the same meal under fluorescent strip lighting. We do walk in the Light of Christ, but if we think we have seen all that there is to see of God, we are extremely impoverished and, dare I say, wilfully so?

May 7th

I Kings 8 vv 14-21

The king blessed the people of Israel. He blessed God. He thanked God. It is the same word in Hebrew. He blessed God because God had fulfilled all His Promises. They are standing in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant, the covenant which God had made with His people, that they would be His people and that He would be their God. The very fact that David's son Solomon is standing there as king having completed building the temple is proof that God's promises to David are being fulfilled. God is faithful. His Word is truth. We can believe. All His promises are fulfilled in Jesus. All His promises are fulfilled in us who believe in Him. We are the people of God. Jesus is our Immanuel. He is the Son of David Who will reign forever, King of Kings and High Priest after the order of Melchizedek. We are the Temple of the Holy Spirit. These are the promises of God and they are being fulfilled in us. We ought to exult just like Solomon exulted in God's promises. Thank God for what He has done for us. Bless God for what He has made us. Bless God's people because that is what He has made us for.

May 8th

I Kings 8 vv 22-26

This is just awesome reading. God is unique. There is no other. Nothing is like God, not the imaginary gods of false religions. Nothing that human beings have invented is in any way like God. Even the universe itself is nothing like God. He is unique. God is and there is no other. They say *Your God is too small*. How could our ideas of God be anything but too small? His greatness is past finding out.

May 9th

I Kings 8 v27

How dare we talk about our churches as houses of God? How dare we speak of the Jerusalem temple as God's house? How dare we say that God dwells in us and we in Him? How dare we describe the Bible as His Word or speak of consecrated Bread and Wine as His Body and Blood? God is so much greater, so infinitely much greater. He holds the whole world in His hands. How could any part of the world contain Him? And yet. Yet He does dwell in our churches and in our fellowships. He does dwell in our hearts. He does speak to us through the Bible. He is really present in the consecrated Bread and Wine. This is a truth beyond our imagination but it is truth for all that.

May 10th

I Kings 8 v28

Isn't it astonishing that God hears our prayers? We cannot imagine the extent of the physical universe or the wonderful ways in which it works, yet the Creator of heaven and earth hears our prayers. There are millions of human beings all of whom need His attention, but He listens to you and me. It is marvellous that we can pray at all and that He hears us. Every day, several times a day, I say *Our Father, which art in heaven*. (I'm afraid I do use the traditional form when I'm left to my own devices, but of course it's equally true in the modern form and in every language of the world). What a wonderful thought! The One Who is in Heaven is my Father and He is our Father. He loves me. He loves you. And we are a family – the family of God, all those millions of Christians, all those people who accept Him in faith, potentially the whole human race of people made in His image for whom Christ died, brothers and sisters with one heavenly Father Who pays close attention to our every need.

May 11th

I Kings 8 vv 28-30

Noli Me Tangere

That is the Latin translation of Christ's words to Mary Magdalene when she meets Him risen from the dead and she mistakes Him for the gardener. He calls her name, *Mary*. Mary responds, *Rabboni* (Master) and perhaps she reaches out to hug Him or maybe merely to feel Him, because He says, *Touch me not (Noli Me Tangere in Latin, the title of many a work of art); for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go unto my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father, and to my God, and your God*. Some modern translations prefer *Do not hold onto me to Do not touch me, Noli Me Tangere*, but I think there is a sense of the mysterious here. God is intangible. He does not dwell in temples made with human hands. He transcends everything physical. He is beyond our imagining. He is beyond our grasp. Maybe, if we were truly spiritual, we wouldn't need the physical to encounter God. Surely we don't need to be like Thomas and touch His wounds with our own hands. We don't need a temple to pray in (or a church?). Do we need bread and wine to communicate with God? Do we need His Word written down for us in the Bible? Maybe some people don't, but most of us do. We are physical and we encounter God in the physical.

May 12th

I Kings 8 vv 31&32

How do you know if people are telling the truth? It is so easy to tell a lie and sometimes it seems to make life much easier for us if we do lie. From the child who thinks Mummy won't find out who broke her favourite vase to the policeman who claims to have witnessed a crime which he didn't see committed to the council chief executive who denies that her officers broke the law, a lie can seem to be the easiest way to get ourselves off the hook. Since we know how easy it is to lie, however, why should we trust other people? We know how easy it is to tell a lie. How can we know that other people are not lying? If we don't trust people, however, civilised life becomes impossible. There is a malaise in C21 Britain caused in part by the fact that so many of us no longer believe politicians or official spokesmen. Substantial sections of the community distrust the police. And if you can't trust your family and friends... One way of guaranteeing the truth (or attempting to do so) is to offer or to demand an oath. If you swear by something important, people are more likely to believe you. The idea behind the seriousness of an oath is the thought that you will somehow be punished if you swear falsely. *On my mother's life*. My mother might die if I'm lying. *I swear by Almighty God*. God might strike me dead if I'm lying or send me to hell when the time comes. Lying on oath is perjury and the law punishes perjury more severely than ordinary lying. So an oath is supposed to guarantee truth. Jesus, however, teaches us that we ought never to swear oaths. We ought not to need to swear oaths because we ought always to speak the truth. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. The devil is the father of lies. God's people ought not to need to swear. They ought to be truthful whether in their private life or in business or in politics or public service.

May 13th

I Kings 8 vv 33&34

The basic message of the Old Testament is that when we walk with God things go well. When we don't walk with God, things go badly. So when we go astray and depart from the paths of righteousness and get ourselves into trouble, the answer is to return to the LORD and to pray for forgiveness. Interestingly, Solomon is thinking of the Israelites carried into captivity from their own land because of their wickedness. He asks that when they return to the LORD, God will cause them to return to their own land. It is the same Hebrew word for return in both cases. שׁוּב.

May 14th

I Kings 8 vv 35&36

It is easy to see why a broken society in which the poor were oppressed, honest people were fleeced and there was no justice in the courts might be susceptible to invasion. If there is no sense of community between rich and poor, between the native born and immigrants, if people have no confidence in those in authority, it is not difficult to see that such a society might be ripe for civil war or conquest. You don't need to look for a supernatural explanation for why a nation which did not obey the Ten Commandments might be conquered by a more cohesive society. [A society whose coherence depended on forging bonds only with a particular racial, religious or political group, and oppressing "outsiders" might be strong enough to experience initial success, but would contain the seeds of its own downfall. Nazi Germany would be one example, ancient Assyria another.] It is much harder to see why human sin should lead to drought, unless perhaps you believe climate change to be a result of our greedy and selfish burning of fossil fuels. So you would need a supernatural explanation for drought as a consequence of sin. You would not only need to believe in God, but you would have to believe in an interventionist God Who is involved in every shower, downpour and monsoon (rather than a Deist God Who merely makes the scientific laws by which nature works itself out) and you would have to believe that such an interventionist God gives or withholds rain according to what people deserve (according to our deserts?!). That last view was once commonly held. Now very few people hold it. It is certainly a problematic view and there is a great deal in the Bible which warns us not to rush to judgment. Disaster does not necessarily happen only to the wicked. I don't think, however, we can believe that anything happens outside of God's providence. Neither can I believe that He is unjust. Therefore I would pray for rain in a drought or for relief in a flood.

May 15th

I Kings 8 vv 37-40

Plague may be spread by war. Crops may be deliberately destroyed by armies in an effort to starve the enemy. Crops may become diseased if greedy farmers grow them over intensively. So wrong-doing may lead to human, animal and plant disease, but there is no natural explanation or direct correlation in many such cases. So yesterday's notes apply!

May 16th

I Kings 8 vv 41-43

One view is that the Israelites thought of the LORD as their God. The nations (gentiles), on this view, had their own gods. These other gods might be imagined as inferior to the LORD, but nevertheless real. They might be thought of as demonic. These other gods might be thought of as false or non-existent. There was also a certain amount of confusion as to whether supposedly different gods might be different names for, or different manifestations of the one true God. [We, for example, believe that Jesus is the same God as the LORD worshipped by Jews. Many of us think that the Moslem Allah is the same God we worship – only that the Koran has gone wrong where it differs from the Bible and the Jews are missing out on what is only revealed in Christ. Some Christians believe that the gods of Hinduism and other religions are in fact manifestations of or partial misunderstandings of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.] Today's reading certainly shows that the Old Testament envisaged non-Jews turning to the LORD. The LORD is the Maker of Heaven and Earth. He holds the destinies of all the nations in his Hands. He is the one, true God. Those who sincerely seek God from whatever race or culture will ultimately discover that He is the God made manifest in Jesus Christ.

May 17th

I Kings 8 vv 44-53

The LORD is not territorial. People have imagined that God is in a particular location. You can only worship the God of Israel on Israelite soil. These verses make clear that this is not so. You can worship God from a place of exile. God hears in heaven. You don't have to be in the temple in Jerusalem to speak to God. Have you ever looked up at the moon and thought about the fact that it is the same moon shining on family members in another country? It is even more so with God. He is looking after us wherever we are on earth or in heaven (or even in hell according to Psalm 139!) We are one in His love, one with one another, wherever we and our families and friends may be located, anywhere in this world and the next. Whatever happens to God's people, whatever troubles and tribulations, even when we have bought those troubles on ourselves by walking away from the One Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, God remains faithful to His people, in the OT to those He redeemed through Moses, in the NT to those redeemed in Christ.

May 18th

I Kings 8 vv 54-61

The LORD our God be with us, as he was with our fathers: let him not leave us nor forsake us: That he may incline our hearts unto him, to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, and statutes, and his judgments which he commanded our fathers.

It all depends on God. We only fulfil our human potential if we walk with God. We cannot live without Him in any meaningful sense of the word *live*. Life without God is merely existence, existence terminated by death. We live only if we walk with God. We can only walk with God by His grace. We receive His grace when we pray. We pray by His grace. We thus live in a virtuous circle in which everything good comes to us from God and is returned to Him in thanks and praise.

May 19th

I Kings 8 vv 62-66

A couple of weeks ago we thought about the way we used to express our sense of the awesomeness of God's presence with silence or hushed voices, kneeling, refraining from general conversation, etc., and I wondered whether we might have lost something of our sense of God when we became much more casual and informal in church. Maybe we have, but the old ways always ran the risk of giving the impression that religion wasn't much fun. If Christians were experiencing abundant joy, it was not always evident. Yet worship in the Bible is joyful. It is accompanied with feasting and music. *Joy in the LORD shall be your strength.* We are being very biblical when our services segue into Harvest Suppers, Epiphany Brunches, and receptions after Confirmations. I do think we need both – awe in the presence of the LORD, joy in His presence.

May 20th

I Kings 9 vv 1-9

God promises David that his son will be established as king forever. David's son will build the temple of God. God will not depart from the house of David. This begins to be fulfilled in Solomon. But if David's descendants and the people of Israel do not walk with God, all this will become unravelled. The temple will be destroyed. David's descendant will be removed from the throne and exiled from the Holy land together with all the leading citizens. All that happens and yet the promises are all fulfilled and far more wonderfully in Christ – temple, king, people.

May 21st

I Kings 9 vv 10-14

Solomon builds a temple for God and a palace for himself. In the Hebrew the same word is used “house” or beth בית as in Bethlehem. God is the King of Israel. The king is His viceroy – as indeed are all earthly authorities, which we do well to remember. After all the sublimity, we are now back in the world of what St Paul might call the flesh, ordinary human nature. Solomon rewards the King of Tyre for all his help with twenty cities, but Hiram doesn’t like them and resents Solomon. We don’t often read this chapter. It certainly isn’t included in the lectionary we use at our services. But the Bible is realistic. It describes the world the way it is. But it sees the world in the light of eternity. So the Bible is our guide to the world we live in.

May 22nd

I Kings 9 vv 15-23

This passage is a bit awkward because what it is describing is somewhat embarrassing. All Solomon’s magnificent buildings had to be paid for. Someone had to do all the work – thousands of people, many of them engaged in back-breaking labour. Pharaoh conquered a Canaanite city and gave it to Solomon as a dowry. The various gentiles not wiped out by the Israelites became forced labourers. It says that the Israelites got all the plumb jobs. People were taxed. Weaker nations were made to pay tribute. It’s the way things were, not the way things ought to be. You can quite easily find places in the world today where certain classes, castes or races get all the best positions and other people are doomed to menial work, untouchable, inherently subservient. It isn’t difficult to find the examples of the powerful taking what they want, irrespective of justice. The Bible is realistic about the human condition and it contains the only cure – Christ.

May 23rd

I Kings 9 vv 24-28

The Egyptian princess, Solomon’s wife, had her own magnificent quarters. Solomon worshipped magnificently in the temple. Hiram had obviously not disappeared from the picture whatever he thought of the cities he was given. He joined Solomon in a very prosperous trade, presumably in the Mediterranean which was very much the Phoenicians area of operation and also the Red Sea. Times of great wealth, but I don’t think Christians can forget the underclass who don’t share in it.

May 24th

I Kings 10 vv 1-9

This is all there is in the Bible about Solomon and Sheba except for in II Chronicles 9 which tells the same story almost in the same words. Yet it is a story which has caught the imagination. They even made a film about it. People often assume there was a romance between Solomon and Sheba, though it does not say so here. It is all rather mysterious. We are not even sure where Sheba is. Some people think Yemen or maybe somewhere in north Africa, most probably Arabia. The point of the bible story of Solomon and Sheba is that Solomon’s reputation for wealth and wisdom extended way beyond the borders of Israel. Wealth and wisdom would be expected to go together – prudent investments, no irresponsible borrowing, honest trading, peace rather than war, etc.. On the other hand, the Bible also teaches that wisdom is no guarantee of prosperity. Sometimes the wicked flourish like the green bay tree. (Foolishness and wickedness are close allies because it is *The fool [who] hath said in his heart, there is no God.*) Wisdom would recognise that poverty with integrity was preferable to riches gained by robbery or violence. Nevertheless, in the long run, wisdom and prosperity do go together.

According to Psalm 72, the Kings of Arabia and Saba (BCP, Sheba and Seba KJV) shall bring gifts to the LORD’s anointed i.e. the son of David. I Kings 10 is one way in which this is fulfilled. Ps 72 is often used at Epiphany, however, because it is often thought to prefigure the kings’ bring gold, frankincense and myrrh to the infant Jesus.

May 25th

I Kings 10 vv10-13

Apparently our queen has a vast store full of presents she has been given, some of them very valuable. Giving presents is a sign of love and respect. More cynically we may give presents in the hope of getting something back. Giving lavish presents is also a way of claiming status. If you can give so much away, you are obviously rich. It always strikes me as a bit odd, however, that it is often the people who least need them who receive the most and the most lavish presents. The office cleaner gets a bottle of toilet water. The boss gets diamond encrusted cuff links. Shouldn’t the same principle apply as when Jesus told us not to invite our rich friends for dinner but the poor who might otherwise go hungry?

May 26th

I Kings 10 vv 14-29

These verses summarise what we have said so far. Solomon was extremely wise. His wisdom became famous through all the surrounding countries. Because Solomon was wise, Israel was prosperous under his reign. We learnt John Masefield's poem *Cargoes* at school. The first verse picks up on this passage. The Bible is deeply entwined with English culture and we mustn't allow secularism or multiculturalism to alienate us from our Christian heritage.

Quinquireme of Nineveh from distant Ophir,
Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine,
With a cargo of ivory,
And apes and peacocks,
Sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine.

Stately Spanish galleon coming from the Isthmus,
Dipping through the Tropics by the palm-green shores,
With a cargo of diamonds,
Emeralds, amethysts,
Topazes, and cinnamon, and gold moidores.

Dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smoke stack,
Butting through the Channel in the mad March days,
With a cargo of Tyne coal,
Road-rails, pig-lead,
Firewood, iron-ware, and cheap tin trays.

May 27th

I Kings 11 vv 1-8

They say you should never start a sentence with a conjunction, but the AV is following the Hebrew original when it begins this whole chapter *BUT*, or more literally *AND*. Solomon was a wise man but he had all these foreign wives and concubines. The sheer number was a symbol of his potency. The fact that they came from different countries reflected the various alliances he had made. Solomon made peace with his neighbours, not war. The problem is that the two most important things in anyone's life are our relationship with God and our marriage. If we marry a non-believer, the two most important things in our lives are pulling in opposite directions. This is why St Paul tells Christians *Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers:* (II Corinthians 6¹⁴). All too often, the unbelieving spouse undermines the believer's faith – as happens to Solomon.

May 28th

I Kings 11 vv 9-13

Solomon has been unfaithful to the LORD and there will be consequences. Religion is one of most powerful forces determining human behaviour. Most people are religious. Bad religion leads to human sacrifice, religious wars, inquisitions and burnings at the stake. Bad religion leads to acts of terrorism and suicide bombing. Religious complacency sustains the hypocrite who goes to church every Sunday and lives a selfish life indifferent to the needs of other people. Religious complacency blunts the imperative to repent and provides a cover for sinful respectability. It did really matter that the King of Israel had gone along with all these false religions and there would be consequences. The pattern is a familiar one. The nation is destroyed because of its rejection of God but a remnant is saved because God is faithful to His promises. Make sure you are part of the faithful remnant!

May 29th (Ascension Day)

I Kings 11 vv 14-22

In the Bible, human and divine action run in parallel and are interconnected. On the one hand there is a perfectly human explanation for Hadad making trouble for Solomon. David's ruthless General Joab had attempted genocide on Hadad's people, the Edomites. Hadad had escaped and Pharaoh (probably thinking not to let Solomon get too strong, *divide and rule* being a principle of empire) had supported him. On the other hand, it is God Who *stirred up Hadad* because Solomon had become unfaithful to God. Both explanations are true and are not unrelated.

May 30th

I Kings 11 vv 23-25

The same applies in the case of Rezon. No doubt he had his own motives for attacking Solomon's Israel. He was morally responsible for whatever action he took. Just like the rest of us, he would come under judgment for whatever he decided to do. On the other hand, Rezon's actions were part of God's plan for calling Solomon to account. So it is for all of us human beings. We have free will - to choose God or to reject Him, to obey His commandments or not – and we are accountable for the choices that we make. Nevertheless God is in charge. Human history unfolds in accordance with God's plan. Whatever we decide, whether we are for Him or against Him, He works it out.

May 31st (Visitation of the BVM)

I Kings 11 vv 26-40

Jeroboam is the rebel we shall hear more about. In this case God intervenes directly, sending the prophet Ahijah to promise Jeroboam the lion's share of the kingdom. He provides a powerful visual aid, tearing his new coat into twelve pieces. When we use multimedia to present the Gospel we are following biblical precedent. Only it is more than a visual aid, just as prophecy is more than mere words. The Word of God effects what it proclaims. What God says happens. When we preach authentically the Word of God we are not merely describing what God is doing; we are part of God's work. Jeroboam gets ten tribes. Solomon's son gets one tribe. Possibly the one left over is the tribe of Levi who were the priests and religious ministers, but see note 7th June.

June 1st

I Kings 11 vv 41-43

A forty year reign was a blessed reign. Solomon was buried honourably in the city of David. Despite the foreign wives and apostasy, he is remembered for his wisdom. This is one of a number of allusions in the Bible to other books about its characters which no longer exist. What we have in the Bible is only a small part of the story, the part necessary to our understanding of the religious implications – what God is like, His faithfulness to humanity, how humanity ought to respond to God's faithfulness by being faithful. We might like to know a great deal more, including what was written in those other books, but I am sure that Providence has provided us with all we need.

June 2nd

I Kings 12 vv 1-5

We're used to the idea that the king's oldest son automatically succeeds on his father's death. It hasn't always been so simple even in England. Parliament removed James II and invited William of Orange to take the throne. Certain nobles attempted to make Lady Jane Gray Queen instead of Mary Tudor. There was a civil war when the country was divided over whether Henry I should be succeeded by his daughter Matilda or his nephew Stephen. Parliament has just changed the rules so that a monarch's daughter would succeed before her younger brother. Even monarchy has to be acceptable to the people and/or the nobles and/or parliament and indeed God. The Israelites have had enough of high taxes and forced labour and want guarantees from the heir.

June 3rd

I Kings 12 vv 6-11

Naughtily I sometimes wonder whether the word *servant* reverses its meaning when preceded by the adjective *public*. Normally a servant is someone whom you pay less than you earn, who takes orders from you, and who waits on you. But a public servant is someone paid out of your taxes who probably earns more than you do (and gets a much better pension), who tells you what you may and may not do, and deigns to provide you with such services as he decides you need, provided that this can be done within the budget he has set. OK, I've become cynical about public service. But people in positions of wealth, power and authority, are there to serve the public, from the humble village policeman or schoolmaster to the Queen on her throne. This is what Rehoboam has forgotten and what I fear so many politicians and officials forget.

June 4th

I Kings 12 vv 12-15

The implication is that the old counsellors were wiser than the young councillors. They had more experience of life. They probably had more idea about what a struggle it had been to build a stable monarchy after the death of Saul. They knew what life was like before the temple was built and the palace and all the fine houses. They remembered the days before all the gold flowed into the kingdom. But the young men, Rehoboam's contemporaries were arrogant. They knew it all. Life had been handed to them on a plate. They had no need to listen either to the counsellors of their fathers' generation or to the wisdom of the common people. They were simply contemptuous of those who disagreed with them. Rehoboam and his gang were guilty of arrogance and were responsible for what followed, but it was all also under the Providence of God.

June 5th

I Kings 12 vv 16-20

If you've been reading carefully from I Samuel 16 up to this point, you will have noticed that there was always a sense that Judah did not quite belong with the other ten tribes. David was of the tribe of Judah (as was Jesus) and the Judahites were always a bit special. So it isn't altogether surprising that Israel split on these lines when Rehoboam refused to give the guarantees the people required.

June 6th

I Kings 12 vv21-24

What made the point that Rehoboam's writ didn't run in most of Israel was that the Israelites refused to pay tax and stoned the chief tax-collector, who must have been an old man if he was the same guy Solomon had appointed forty years previously. Rehoboam's obvious next option was to send in the army to subdue the rebellious tribes, but God sent Shemaiah the prophet to stop this. Rehoboam has to accept the status quo. It is God's Will for now that Israel should be split in two and, in any case, they ought not to be fighting their brothers. Sometimes, when we are tempted to respond aggressively because we believe that our rights have been infringed, or to right some wrong, we ought to pause to consider what God wants of us in these circumstances and whether it can ever be right to fight against our brethren (fellow Christians? Fellow human beings?) For example St Paul says that we should rather allow ourselves to be defrauded than to take a brother (Christian) before the secular courts (I Corinthians 7⁷).

June 7th

I Kings 12 v25

Jeroboam made Shechem capital of the northern kingdom, now often called Ephraim (after the dominant tribe) or simply Israel, the southern kingdom now normally being called Judah. The capital is later moved from Shechem to Tirzah and then Samaria. Northern Israel was conquered much later on by the Assyrians who deported many of the existing inhabitants, replacing them with foreigners drafted in from other parts of the Assyrian empire. Roughly speaking it was the descendants of these people who comprised the Samaritans in Jesus' time and the Jews were the successors of the Judahites.

While trying to clear up things about the Tribes of Israel, just a couple of points. Benjamin (Saul's tribe) appears to have gone in with Judah. That would still leave ten northern tribes (including Levi) because Joseph had split into two tribes Manasseh and Ephraim, which was now the most significant of the northern tribes. Sorry if this is a bit complicated, but it is the sort of background we need if we're to understand fully what is going on in other bible stories, even in the New Testament.

June 8th

I Kings 12 vv 26-29

Ahijah had promised Jeroboam that God would bless him as He had blessed David if only Jeroboam behaved like David and walked with God. Jeroboam's problem was that he thought that if the Israelites carried on going to the Jerusalem temple for worship, they would return to Rehoboam, reject Jeroboam as king and kill him. So Jeroboam decided to set up shrines for worship in his own territory. Bethel had actually been a place of religious worship for centuries already. The golden calves are reminiscent of the golden calf which Aaron made when Moses was on Mt Sinai. Jeroboam changed the dates of the ecclesiastical year and appointed his own priests who were not qualified in the official Jerusalem cult. This was probably not an entirely new religion, more likely what you might call Yahwism lite. Probably the worship was quite similar to what went on in the Jerusalem temple but it was now subservient to the needs of the king and his subjects, rather than the king and the people being subject to the demands of God Almighty as was intended in the worship prescribed by the Law of Moses. *Having the form of godliness, but denying the power thereof* (II Timothy 3⁵). It is something to watch out for when we try to adapt our worship to what we find meaningful or to what we think will be attractive to other people whom we'd like to draw in. The aim of worship is to please God. Worshipping thus in spirit and in truth, all our human needs are met. But when we worship to please ourselves we fail to please God and we therefore remain dissatisfied and unfulfilled. *Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee.*

June 9th

I Kings 12 vv 30-33

Which he had devised in his own heart.

The point was that God had prescribed the worship of Israel and now Jeroboam was presuming to substitute what God had revealed to Moses with what *he had devised in his own heart*. Christian worship is much less prescriptive. Jesus gave us no definite instructions for worship except that we should baptise, that we should *do this in remembrance of me*, that we should worship *in spirit and in truth*, and that we should not worship if we are not *in love and charity with our neighbours*. He gave us the Lord's Prayer. He provides an example of preaching on the Word. These are the basics which we cannot dispense with. Whatever else we do – hymns, prayers, preaching, etc., must surely be in the context of what we honestly believe would please Him.

June 10th

I Kings 13 vv 1-10

For the time being, Jeroboam would remain as King of Israel and his new cult would continue as their religion. However, this is not a permanent situation. It is unsatisfactory. It is provisional. Eventually there will be a King of Judah, a descendant of David, Josiah, who will put things right. That time is many years away, but God is Lord of time and eternity. He holds the whole world in His hands. What is provisional will pass. What we are called upon to do is to live this life in time and space in the light of eternity. This is most apparent in our worship, when our worship is joined with that of the angels and archangels, when we sing holy, holy, holy, and the worship of heaven and the worship of earth are one. This weekly (or more frequent) experience then illuminates all the mundane things we do every day with that celestial light.

June 11th

I Kings 13 vv 11-19

This is an extraordinary story. I can't help wondering what was so bad about stopping for a meal before going home from Bethel. Maybe it was the need for haste. Maybe it was a matter of not sharing table fellowship with irreligious people. Perhaps the land of Northern Israel was considered to be unclean, defiled by what Jeroboam had done in creating a false religion there. Would the mission against Jeroboam have been compromised in some way if the prophet from Judah had fellowship with the people he was sent to warn? I'd like to go into this in more detail, though there isn't room here. But if we separate space for worship (e.g. church buildings, places of pilgrimage, etc.) and if we separate time for worship (Sundays and holy days, for example) and if we consecrate such things as mealtimes and family time and family prayers, we may find ourselves excluding those who we feel don't belong, devising rules for how we and other people should behave in these places, or on these occasions, and feel that they can be defiled, for example by someone shouting swear words during a time of silent prayer or talking on a mobile phone during a wedding reception, but if we don't make distinctions between clean and unclean, holy and common, holy days and ordinary days, holy places and everywhere else, special times and times that don't really matter, we may find ourselves not really caring about anything.

June 12th

I Kings 13 vv 11-19

There is another point to draw out from this story. The prophet from Judah knew that the LORD had forbidden him to stop to eat in Northern Israel. Then the old prophet claimed that God had told him that it would after all be OK for the Judahite prophet to eat with him. How was the prophet from Judah supposed to know which was the word of the LORD? It is not uncommon for Christians on different sides of an argument to claim that they are speaking for God. Both sides may well be sincere. It is possible to be sincerely wrong! But how do we recognise when we or other people are sincerely wrong? Women priests is a good example. Some women are convinced that God is calling them to be priests and a significant number of their fellow Christians believe that they recognise that these women have genuine vocations to priesthood. Most bishops in the Church of England are therefore prepared to ordain women. Other people of course, reflecting on the Bible and on what most of the Church throughout the world has mostly believed for 2,000 years, are equally convinced that God does not call women to ordained ministry and that those who believe He does must be mistaken. How do we decide? How do we know what is the authentic Word of God? Personally, I start from the Bible. I think about what it says prayerfully. I judge my interpretation in the light of Christian tradition – what Christians have believed in the past and what they believe in the present. I think that's all we can do, but it doesn't guarantee that we shall all agree. What we do need is to continue to love one another whatever our disagreements, to wait patiently on the Lord as He leads us into all truth and to be open to what the Holy Spirit may be saying to us through Scripture, through speaking to us directly, through the words of other Christians and indeed through the world outside the Church.

June 13th

I Kings 13 vv 20-22

This seems a bit harsh to me. The old prophet who had made up a word from the LORD now receives a genuine revelation and the authentic word from God is condemn the prophet from Judah for allowing himself to be deflected from the right path by the false revelation. We do have to be careful if we claim to have had a vision or a word from the Lord and we have to be careful when other people make such claims.

June 14th

I Kings 13 vv 23-32

The old prophet really honoured the prophet from Judah. That is why he misled him in order to get him to stay with him. The fact that the lion did not attack the donkey and the donkey did not run away demonstrates that what has happened to the prophet from Judah is no ordinary misadventure. Despite disobeying the LORD by staying with the old prophet, the prophet from Judah is still honoured in his burial and the old prophet now affirms that his words will surely come to pass. I think what we learn from this is a proper reverence in seeking to discern what God wants of us and then acting on what we believe Him to want us to do.

June 15th

I Kings 13 vv 33&34

As we've several times observed, bad religion is the root cause of a great deal of the evil in the world. For this reason, the OT is very insistent that worship is conducted by an authorised priesthood in the authorised place, the temple at Jerusalem. To worship the LORD in a way that is less than whole-hearted is to sell yourself short. To worship false gods is to devote your life to a lie. The devil is the father of lies – such as the lie that God wants you burn heretics at the stake or blow up the aircraft of cultures you don't approve of. In the NT, Christ is the great high priest and all believers are priests. We all have access to the Father in Christ and what matters is that our worship is offered in spirit and in truth. All the more important, therefore, to submit our will to God's will and to worship authentically with whole-hearted love for God and loving one another as Christ loves us. *Whosoever would, he consecrated him.* Authentic worship is not what human individuals happen to prefer. It is what God wants.

June 16th

I Kings 14 vv 1-20

Jeroboam's rule is doomed because he has failed to walk in the LORD's ways. God cannot be deceived. So Jeroboam's wife's disguise is pointless. The LORD sees the heart. Jeroboam's failure to live by God's Law will result in his kingdom collapsing in blood. It seems unfair on the young Abijah, but he is the only one who will die in peace, so maybe not. It's tempting not to read all this material which isn't very nice but the Bible deals with the world the way it actually is.

June 17th

I Kings 14 vv 21-31

In Judah too, from the king downwards, people went astray from the paths of righteousness. They worshipped in shrines all over the countryside, bowing down before idols – maybe forbidden representations of the LORD or pagan gods, or maybe they didn't effectively make any distinction. The consequence was that the kingdom didn't prosper. We can hardly be complacent in a supposedly Christian nation in which most people no longer take part regularly in public worship, Christian principles are no longer regarded as indispensable for the underpinning of our laws, and there is a new dominant creed called Secularism or humanism. Under Secularism, traditional religions including Christianity are relegated to the realms of personal choice, the home and minority cultural expression, and all the "important" decisions with respect to politics, justice or economics are taken in a faith free zone. It won't work, given that God is the Maker of everything that is and all human beings are answerable to Him for whatever they do.

June 18th

I Kings 15 vv 1-8

It is worth pointing out that we are usually told the name of the king's mother. Although the monarchy generally passed through the male line, especially in Judah, the king's mother seems to have been a very significant figure in the matter of the succession. (In northern Israel, dynasties were much less stable and unworthy kings would be overthrown and new dynasties established, whereas the house of David continued to reign in Jerusalem until it was destroyed by the Babylonians.) I note this because the Judaeo-Christian tradition is often accused by feminists of denigrating women. This week on the radio I heard how in many Indian villages families rejoice at the birth of a boy and actually mourn at the birth of a daughter. Non-Christian cultures very often treat women a lot worse than we do. The Bible is quite clear that men and women are equally created in the image of God and equally redeemed in Christ. The Bible therefore recognises that women have an equal status with men, which is a considerable advance on the way women may be treated in other countries which have not been formed by the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Unlike what the feminists seem to be saying, the Bible does not make men and women the same.

June 19th

Read Psalm 72

June 20th

I Kings 15 vv 9-15

Most of these Kings of Israel and Judah are failures. They are human beings. They do not love the LORD their God with all their hearts; neither do they love their neighbours as themselves. They are people like us and like the politicians and officials who run our country today. We cannot expect our rulers to be perfect people who know all the answers and themselves live up to the highest standards. What we need is people who are humble enough to admit that they don't know everything, people who are willing to learn, people who are willing to acknowledge their mistakes and to repent of them. We really need leaders who know their own need of God. That being the case, politicians and officials do need our support – our prayers and our willingness to be patient with them and to forgive them their humanity. It is unhelpful always to be nit-picking, to criticise everything and to praise nothing.

June 21st

I Kings 15 vv 12-15

I'm overlapping with yesterday's reading because I want to say a bit more about what went on in the shrines which the good kings tried to suppress. There was certainly idol worship. Either the people were worshipping pagan gods or they were disobeying the second commandment and making images of the LORD. It is very probable that many people thought of Baal and YHWH (the LORD in English bibles) as different names for or aspects of the same God. The AV speaks of sodomites. Other translations refer to prostitutes. These people were males and females who took part in religious rituals of a sexual nature. There would have been feasting and drinking and maybe the use of other drugs. The religion taught would have been lacking in any moral connotations. It was about having a good time in the temple of the god and ensuring your own prosperity. It was not about looking after the poor and the widow and the orphan. It was not even about honesty in business, marital fidelity or abstaining from violence. This perversion of religion was something which could not satisfy the spiritual needs of its worshippers and it had no good effect on society as a whole. False religion needs to be countered even today – though by persuasion not by force.

June 22nd

I Kings 15 vv 16-24

Sadly, the northern and southern kingdoms were often at war. Baasha, King of Israel, built a fortress to control access to Jerusalem. Asa couldn't afford to allow this to stand a paid the Syrians (Aramaeans) to fight against the northern kingdom for him. With Baasha back in his box, Asa was able to demolish the fortress at Ramah. When I read the lessons at Morning Prayer and go home and switch on Radio 4 for the news, it often seems that nothing has changed. Human beings are still at war with one another nearly three thousand years later – and often in the same places that are mentioned in the Bible. It shows what a challenge we face. Human nature doesn't change. Humanity needs the Gospel just as much as it ever needed the Gospel. It is imperative that the Church preach Christ crucified to the whole world.

June 23rd

I Kings 15 vv 25-34

We backtrack a bit here to see how Baasha came to be King of Israel instead of Nadab the surviving son of Jeroboam. Nadab was such a disappointment that Baasha mounted a revolution and overthrew him, but Baasha was no better and the Kingdom of Israel continued on the road to perdition. Revolutions very often lead to situations as bad as or worse than what went before. The French and Russian revolutions are examples. We cannot help ourselves as human beings. The only way is to turn to God.

June 24th (Nativity of St John the Baptist)

I Kings 16 vv 1-14

Because Baasha was no better than Nadab, the prophet Jehu was sent to remove him and his dynasty. Prophets proclaim the Word of God. The Word of God is not mere words. It effects what it proclaims. So Baasha and his son Elah die and are replaced by Zimri, who only lasts a week. Jehu denounces Baasha for his sins. John the Baptist equally denounces sinners and warns of the coming judgment in no uncertain terms. John, however, also preaches repentance. There is hope for us sinners. What we must do is to repent of our sins and to be baptised in the Name of Him is to come after John but was preferred before him. John's message is much better news than Jehu's, but preaching the Good News is very costly. When John preached against Herod, it cost him his head. The Good News is self-sacrifice.

June 25th

I Kings 16 vv 15-22

When Noah came out of the ark, God made a covenant with him never again to destroy the earth in a flood. The seasons of the year would continue till the end of time, each bringing its particular crop of blessings. All life was sacred. Animals were not to be killed lightly. When they were killed for food, the blood must be poured out on the ground – symbolising the return of the life to God. Human blood was not to be shed at all. Then came Jesus the Prince of Peace. In that context and considering His teaching, it is natural for Christians to regard all forms of violence as abhorrent. *But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.* Christians are natural pacifists. However, living in the world which we live in, once Christians ceased to be a small minority and became a significant section of society and ultimately a majority, we had to confront the responsibilities of citizenship. Could Christians fight for their country if it went to war? Could a Christian country go to war? A minority of Christians have always answered both those questions in the negative. They would believe that it is never right for a Christian to use violence. They might believe that, if only enough people could be got to agree with them, the countries of the world would learn to settle their differences without recourse to bloodshed. On the other hand, they might believe that their conscientious objection would have no practical value at all. It might only bring them a martyr's death. Even if that were so, however, even if refusing to fight achieved nothing in this world, they would still refuse to fight on principle. Most Christians, however, have accepted that there is such a thing as a just war. Christians may fight in a just war. Some people might say that it was a Christian's duty to fight in a just war. The parameters of a just war would include: that the cause must be good; that there is a reasonable chance of success; that war is declared and conducted by lawful government; that non-combatants are not attacked; and that the fighting is conducted along proper lines such as the Geneva conventions. Even so, the Church has been much more wary about accepting that there can be a just revolution. However terrible the tyranny, the anarchy and chaos which follow a total breakdown of law and order, when brother takes up arms against brother, almost always exceed in horror what went before under the previous regime.

June 26th

I Kings 16 vv 23-28

Omri was one of the most successful Kings of Northern Israel. It was who established the capital in Samaria. He was a great builder and successful in military terms. Israel was relatively prosperous under Omri. He also managed to establish a dynasty, which his predecessors had signally failed to do.

The Bible, however, is pretty scathing about Omri. Omri was disloyal to the God of Israel. That was what really mattered about Omri. Wealth and power are not what is important. What is important is to love the LORD your God with all your heart and to love your neighbour as yourself. If you don't love, the wealth and power are likely to be abused. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

June 27th

I Kings 16 vv 29-34

Most people are more likely to have heard of Ahab than his father Omri. Apostasy seems to have sunk to a new depth with Ahab. From the time of Jeroboam to that of Omri, it would appear that the northern kingdom followed a distortion of the religion of Israel. Ahab, however, married the Sidonian princess Jezebel. Tyre and Sidon were two linked cities in what we now call Lebanon. They were Phoenicians, sea people, related to the Philistines and the Carthaginians. Just as Solomon's foreign wives led Solomon astray, so Jezebel influenced Ahab to set up places of worship and to establish a cult of Baal, the foreign version of Baal worship popular in Sidon. It is very difficult to be married to a person of a different religion. When we hear of a case of a young couple in love whose families do not want them to marry because of religious differences, we probably automatically side with the couple. Surely, our hearts think, true love is more important than whether you are a Christian or a Jew or a Moslem. Well, think it through. If you truly love Jesus, can you really give your heart to somebody who doesn't? How will any children be brought up? Which matters more? Faith or marriage? It must be very hard for people to have to decide. Couples in that position need our prayers and our love and our support, certainly not our condemnation, but neither ought we to be complacent about it. Ahab probably married Jezebel in an arranged marriage to promote peace with Sidon. Yet another issue to consider as we judge him.

The odd note in v34 fulfils a prophecy from hundreds of years previously when Joshua and the Israelites destroyed the old city of Jericho when they first entered into the Promised Land. The person who rebuilt Jericho wouldn't prosper by it.

June 28th

I Kings 17 vv 1-7

We're back to this idea that God might use the weather to punish people. As I write this, the subject has been in the news because that councillor had expressed his opinion that the floods we are currently enduring were God's punishment on us for legalising gay marriage. Hardly anybody seems to think he might be right and saying what he did got him expelled from UKIP, the party to which he had defected from the Conservatives. Suggesting that natural disasters might be divine punishment is one of those things we are no longer permitted to say and can expect to be ridiculed if we do.

I am getting a bit worried about what is happening to freedom of speech in this country. Freedom of speech includes the freedom to be wrong. It includes the freedom to be foolish. It includes the freedom to offend other people. It includes the freedom to disagree. It includes the freedom to say what the authorities or the mass media regard as unacceptable.

Freedom of speech is important as a basic human right. The alternative is to be prepared to persecute (however mildly) people who say what you think they shouldn't say. Freedom of speech is important because we learn by discussing things. As you and I talk, I may come to see that I am wrong. Far better that I should recognise that I am wrong than that I should continue to believe myself to be right but be prevented from saying so by the threat of punishment or compulsory re-education. Also majorities have been wrong in the past. They laughed at Columbus. They persecuted Galileo. They imprisoned the suffragettes. Popular, majority, powerful opinion has been shown to be wrong in the past. How can we be so sure that people with unpopular views must be wrong and must therefore be shut up? You must make up your own mind about biblical droughts, but whatever you think, you should be free to express your opinion, even if it could be construed as offensive.

June 29th (St Peter & St Paul)

I Kings 17 vv 8-16

Jezebel was a princess of Sidon and it was her influence on King Ahab which had established the cult of Baal in Israel and made it unsafe for Elijah, the prophet of the LORD, to stay there. So it seems ironic that Elijah now found sanctuary in Sidon. The drought obviously extended into Sidon. It was there that Elijah performed this miracle which saved the life of the widow and her son. Jesus referred to this story when the people at Nazareth were complaining that He was not providing them with the miracles they thought they were entitled to. Jesus points out that Elijah didn't provide miraculously for anyone in Israel, the ones who thought they were the people of God. Elijah provided for this Sidonian widow. Miracles are not available to order. Normally the world runs according to the laws of Science, God's laws. Miracles are exceptional and God does them for His own purposes. We don't have the right to expect miracles. If we are whole people we receive whatever He sends with thanksgiving. To give thanks is to bless. To bless is to share. God gives His blessings freely in accordance with His Will, graciously giving in unexpected ways to unexpected people – like this widow of Sarepta. As the people of God, our calling is to do the same.

June 30th

I Kings 17 vv 17-24

It has been pointed out that miracles are much more common in the New Testament than the Old. The Old Testament tends to describe the way things happen in the ordinary course of events. There are certain natural laws. There is justice. It is all of God. If people live in a particular way, consequences follow. It is all part of the natural order of things. Miracles are relatively rare in the Old Testament, the story of the Exodus and the stories of Elijah and Elisha being the main exceptions to this rule. In the New Testament God breaks into His world. The Word becomes flesh. The natural order is transcended. Justice is swallowed up in mercy. Heaven and earth will pass away. There will be new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. The miracles Jesus performs are signs of the Kingdom of God, the overthrowing of the old order, spirit, not flesh. Water becomes wine. The lame walk. The deaf hear. Demons are cast out. The dead rise. God's eternal plan, revealed in the OT, is fulfilled in Christ.