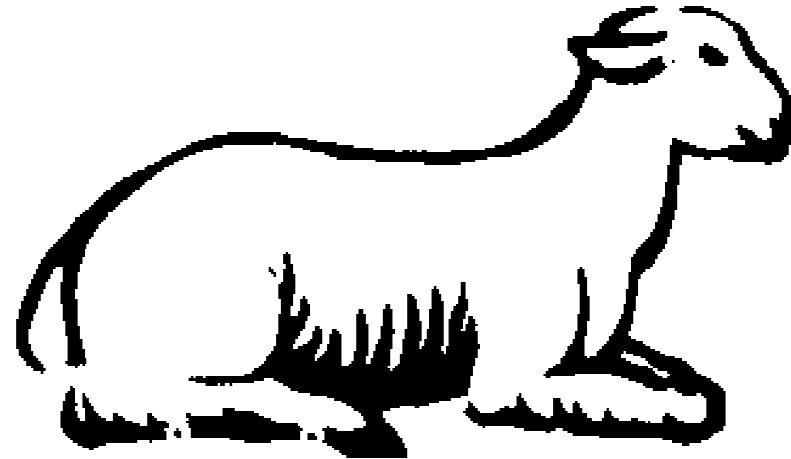


The Fifth Gospel



LAMB
(The Pasch)

Studies in Isaiah
April-June 2018

April 1st Easter Day

Acts 8 vv 26-40

Easter Triumph, Easter Joy!

What a wonderful day this is. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. I hope our hearts are filled with joy today and always. This is a joy to share and sharing the Good News is what He told us to do. S Philip is engaged in just this in Acts 8. He had been preaching the Gospel to the Samaritans. Now the Spirit sent him to wait by the desert road. A chariot came along, bearing the treasurer of the Queen of Ethiopia and he was reading from the prophet Isaiah about a lamb led to the slaughter. Who could this be? Why Jesus, of course. The Old testament, like the New, bears witness to Jesus. That is why we read it. Isaiah is so full of the Good News that his book has been called the fifth gospel. We'll read Isaiah this quarter. We'll try to interpret it in the light of Christ, as Philip did. We'll share our Easter joy. The Ethiopian responds to Isaiah's message by being baptised. He offers his life to Christ as Christ gave his life for him. With Christ, he is buried to sin. With Christ, he rises to eternal life.

April 2nd

Isaiah 1 vv 1-4

Isaiah of Jerusalem was a prophet for a long time in the period when the Assyrian Empire was expanding and conquering the little kingdoms of the Middle East. Uzziah, Jotham and Hezekiah were generally good kings. Ahaz wasn't. It was in this period that Northern Israel fell to the Assyrians, many of its inhabitants were deported and people from other parts of the Assyrian Empire settled in their land. It is traditionally believed that it was from this hotchpotch of peoples and religious beliefs that the Samaritans were descended.

God speaks through the prophet to lament the fact that, although He has given Israel everything, Israel has forgotten Him and turned to the worship of idols. Everything we have comes from God. As people of faith, we ought to know that we can trust Him to care for us. We don't have to rely on our own strength or cleverness. We don't have to rely on money or power. We don't need to trust people who are morally dubious. We don't have to live by the principles of the world in order to survive, We trust in God and He never lets us down.

April 3rd

Isaiah 1 vv 5-9

It's not only that we don't have to adopt the morally dubious practices of the world in order to survive. If we try to live by anything less than the standard which Jesus sets us by His example and teaching, we are on the road to ruin. You only have to look at the world around us. Only repentance and faith can save us. To repent is to return to the LORD. The salvation even of a remnant depends on God alone.

April 4th

Isaiah 1 v10

I've heard the goings on on the London club scene described as being like Sodom and Gomorrah. When we think of those two cities, perhaps we think of sexual immorality. What little we're told in the Bible about them also includes abuse of hospitality to strangers and violence. What about our own streets? We hear all kinds of terrible things on the news. In fact the contents of the newspapers are sometimes so sickening that not a few people have apparently given up reading them. Yet every single human being – man, youth, woman, child – caught up in vice, addiction, violence, whatever, is a child of God, made in His image, for whom Christ died. It isn't for us to condemn. It is for us to bring the Good News of the Gospel, to care for people whatever their troubles and whatever the causes of those troubles. The people in charge have the greatest responsibility. Do they encourage or allow bad behaviour? Do they do enough to prevent it or to deal with the results of wrong-doing? The people in charge are answerable to God and answerable to us and deserve our support, including our prayers.

April 5th

Isaiah 1 vv 11-14

People are naturally religious or even superstitious. Millions of people believe in astrology. They concoct rituals for important life events. Non-believers don't just bury or cremate their dead. They hold a humanist funeral service. There are also naming ceremonies for people who don't want their babies christened and weddings grow ever more elaborate as more and more of them are celebrated outside a church context. People find comfort in ritual. People find comfort in the thought that we are in the hands of some sort of higher power. "Empty ritual" is, however, meaningless. What God requires from us is faith and repentance.

April 6th

Acts 17 vv 16-34

From Isaiah several centuries BC to Paul at the beginning of the Christian era. Athens was full of temples and religious statues. The Athenians were always performing rituals, joining cults and debating beliefs. Paul calls them too superstitious, too religious even. There are all sorts of beliefs which people hold today. They look up their star signs. They avoid walking under ladders. They ascribe spiritual value to diet or exercise regimes. They meditate. People are naturally religious or superstitious. Paul tells us that we should be reasonable. Any god made up by us would be valueless. Any religion or superstition invented by human beings would be at best futile and at worst damaging. Be reasonable. Look at what the Creator has made and worship Him alone. Know the God Who gives you life and glorify Him. Relate to the God Who is closer to you than your hands and feet, in Whom you live. Love Him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. It is this God to Whom you will answer for your life. He will judge you in righteousness by Jesus Christ Whom He raised from the dead.

April 7th

Psalms 50

The people enjoyed their religious festivals. There was plenty to eat and drink, good music, company. They believed that they were fulfilling their duty to God by sacrificing their flocks and herds for the prescribed feasts. They thought that following the rituals guaranteed that they would be blessed. In the psalm, God mocks the idea that we could earn His favour by making offerings to Him and by carrying out religious services. God doesn't need anything from us.

What God requires of us is that we keep His commandments, that we are honest, just and generous, that we refrain from violence and vice, that we build one another up, rather than knocking one another down, that we are loyal and trustworthy, that we perform our duties to God and to one another.

If you read on in Psalm 50, you will see how religious rites are a delight to God and a blessing on those who perform them when they are a response to repentance and faith, not meaningless, empty rituals.

April 8th (Easter 1 / Easter 2)

Isaiah 1 vv 15-17

What kinds of things were expected of God's people in ancient Israel? V15 starts by condemning those with blood on their hands – murderers, muggers, people too quick to use their fists or worse in disputes with others. In other places, there is condemnation for those in business who cheat their customers, as there is for people in authority who accept bribes or otherwise pervert the course of justice. There is condemnation for those who oppress or cheat the foreigner living in or travelling through the Holy Land. There is mention hear of our duty to care for the oppressed, for the poor. Orphans and widows are especially singled out as needing to be looked after. They would have been particularly vulnerable when families depended on fathers and husbands to provide for them and to protect them.

The context has changed, but the principles remain the same. If we honestly love God, we love our neighbours as ourselves. What ought we to be doing in Britain today to sustain one another? How should we treat individuals? How can we help other people by supporting charities and missions? What ought we to be doing as a society through the statutory agencies of local and national government? As citizens of a democracy we have the privilege and the responsibility of helping to frame the structures of our society.

April 9th

Isaiah 1 vv 18-20

Human faithlessness, divine faithfulness. God doesn't give up on us, though we deserve that He should. Look at the mess we've made of the world. Look at the mess other people make of their own lives. And now look at the mess we make of our own lives. And yet God does not give up on us. What He demands is that we repent. To repent is to turn or to return. It is to turn from evil and to turn to God. If we do that we find that the sacrifice which Jesus made of Himself on the Cross is the propitiation for all our sins.

Oh, perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,
To every believer the promise of God;
The vilest offender who truly believes,
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

April 10th

Isaiah 1 vv 21-24

So how did the faithful city become a harlot? What does it mean for a city to become a harlot? When you marry, you marry for life. You promise to love one another unconditionally. God honours what you have freely and absolutely committed yourself to and the two become one flesh. *What God hath joined together let no man put asunder.* Adultery is a sin. Divorce is failure. Human beings do sin and do fail and God forgives sin and failure and gives us grace to repent and to start again, but it's not how it is meant to be. When marriages break down, sometimes people make new and unsatisfactory alliances, desperately seeking emotional or even financial support. In a society in which there are few honourable ways for a woman on her own to earn a living a divorced wife might be forced into harlotry. We can still turn to God even if things have turned out as badly as this and Christian people ought to be there to support rather than to condemn – hard as it is to work with people who have been hardened by life's experiences and to support people who have made bad decisions without either showing them disrespect, on the one hand, or seeming to condone their mistakes, on the other. When we enter into a relationship with God, we commit ourselves to love Him unconditionally. We forsake all other gods. We promise to love Him for ever. When we are baptised, we become one with Him. To be unfaithful to God is to commit adultery against Him. To turn away from God with the intention of never going back is like divorcing Him. Promiscuously to take up with false gods – graven images, wealth, power, the ways of the world – is harlotry. God is never unfaithful to us. He is always ready to forgive sin and failure. He can save us from the worst messes that we can make of our lives. We are, however, required to repent. But how can a faithful city become a

harlot? How can a once faithful people turn away from God? Three possibilities come to mind. We come to take it as a matter of course that all our needs are met – food, shelter, clothing, etc.. We stop being thankful. We come to think we don't need God. Secondly, we might recognise that we face big trouble, but we have lost faith and don't believe that God is the answer. [The Israelites were afraid of the Assyrians and tried to form dubious alliances with other nations rather than trusting in God.] Thirdly, we can fail to teach the next generation about what we have found to be true of God.

April 11th

Isaiah 1 vv 25-31

Ores are purified by smelting. The dross is burnt off or materials with different melting points separate off at different temperatures. Smelting is a drastic and, to some extent, a destructive process. Likewise, the judgment of God. The tin has to be separated from the impurities, the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats. Judgment and mercy are inextricable. God is infinitely merciful. He is infinitely faithful. His loving-kindness is unending. *His mercy endureth for ever*. Knowing these things, however, is not an invitation to complacency. We're not to suppose that, because God is always ready to forgive, it doesn't matter how bad we are. Sin hurts people. Think about the consequences of disregarding the Ten Commandments, both for yourself and for other people. Because God is love, God is just. There is judgment. Evil is condemned. There is a price to pay for sin. Jesus has paid that price, but, if we are to avail ourselves of the benefits of what He has done, we must repent of our sins, of our failure to love God with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves.

April 12th

Isaiah 2 vv 1-5

Do you read Isaiah as Christian Scripture? That might seem a strange question, but it's worth asking. Many scholars treat the books of the bible in the same way as they would treat any other ancient literature. They would discount the miraculous and the supernatural. For them, these verses are what Isaiah hoped for and expected to happen in what was for him the near future, but, for us, the distant past. In other words, this prophecy has already been fulfilled (or not) a long way away from here and long, long ago. The only relevance they would then have to us is as an example of hope in the darkness. For Jewish people, the fulfilment must be in terms of God's plans for Israel. Many ordinary Christians treat the Old Testament as relatively unimportant, as something replaced by the New Testament and not really relevant to us today. Jesus and the writers of the New Testament, however, treat the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. The books of the OT bear witness to Jesus. This is the right way to read Isaiah! Yes, the prophecy was for his own time and for the people of Israel, but the complete fulfilment of these wonderful words is in Jesus, Who died on the Cross in Jerusalem and sent out His apostles from there with the Gospel.

April 13th

Isaiah 2 vv 6-9

It's a human failing to want to be like everybody else. You have to try to teach children not to go along with the crowd if the crowd is doing stupid or wrong things. We want to belong. So we do what other people do. We want to be accepted. Moreover, if we lack self confidence, we look to other people to tell us or to show us what to do. It's easier (and often safer) to be one of the herd. But the people of God are different. We have different values, a different end. Our confidence is in God, not in other people. Yet we are always prone to blur the distinction, to compromise with sin, the world and the devil. It feels safer, but in the end it renders us unable to serve the world as God wants us to and makes our continued existence as the Church pointless. Light has to be different from darkness. Yeast has to be different from flour. If the salt has lost its savour, it might as well be thrown out.

April 14th

Isaiah 2 vv 10-18

God is more powerful than mighty men, but which mighty men is the prophet talking about here? Is it the Assyrian king and his armies? They were pretty mighty, rampaging throughout the Middle East, conquering and cruelly destroying all the weaker nations in their path. The LORD is mightier than any enemy we face. Whatever we are afraid of, we should pray and trust God. Sometimes, it's hard to pray when we feel overwhelmed. I find this prayer from the Litany very helpful.

O GOD, , merciful Father, that despisest not the sighing of a contrite heart, nor the desire of such as be sorrowful; Mercifully assist our prayers which we make before thee in all our troubles and adversities, whensoever they oppress us; and graciously hear us, that those evils which the craft and subtilty of the devil or man worketh be brought to nought; and by the providence of thy goodness they may be dispersed; that we thy servants, being hurt by no persecutions, may evermore give thanks unto thee in thy holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

O Lord, arise, help us, and deliver us for thy Name's sake.

In this context, I also like this suffrage.

That it may please thee to strengthen such as do stand; and to comfort and help the weak-hearted; and to raise up those who fall; and finally to beat down Satan under our feet;

We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.

April 15th (Easter 2 / Easter 3)

Isaiah 2 vv 10-18

But I think the prophet is not talking so much about the mighty men of Assyria here as the mighty men of Israel and Judah. They had a high opinion of themselves. The ordinary people deferred to them. They were sure that they were the best-qualified to deal with the threats to their nation posed by the Assyrians. They didn't see the need to listen to God as He had made Himself known in the Law and by the Prophets. They needed practical solutions to their problems, not religious ones. They were worldly problems and they could only be solved by worldly methods. You couldn't rely on prayer. Ethical considerations would just have to be set aside if they got in the way of international treaties or the way you conducted the war. Religion was something which could be set aside while you dealt with what really mattered. Then you could afford the time and resources for worship and prayer. Only when you were safe and secure could you afford to worry about moral standards. The priority was to win at no matter what cost to the nation's integrity.

ALL my hope on God is founded;
He doth still my trust renew,
Me through change and chance He guideth, Only good and only true.
God unknown, He alone
Calls my heart to be His own.

Pride of man and earthly glory,
Sword and crown betray his trust;
What with care and toil he buildeth, Tower and temple, fall to dust.
But God's power, Hour by hour,
Is my temple and my tower.

God's great goodness aye endureth,
Deep His wisdom, passing thought:
Splendour, light, and life attend Him, Beauty springeth out of naught.

Evermore, from His store
New born worlds rise and adore.

Daily doth the almighty Giver
Bounteous gifts on us bestow;
His desire our soul delighteth; Pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand at His hand;
Joy doth wait on His command.

Still from man to God eternal
Sacrifice of praise be done,
High above all praises praising for the gift of Christ His Son.
Christ doth call one and all:
Ye who follow shall not fall.

April 16th

Isaiah 2 vv 19-22

Idols will be useless when disaster strikes. It's no good putting your trust in the things you have made whether we're talking about graven images or any of the other things people put their trust in. Ultimately, it is only on God that we can rely and we can depend on Him to the uttermost. *I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.* Those are God's words to Joshua and to all His people – which we are, by His grace. So, in our daily lives, not only does God come first, everything else we do or think or say, we do in the light of eternity.

Isaiah may have been speaking here of the coming Assyrian invasion. As the eternal Word of God, these words are, however, relevant in every generation. They may indeed be understood as referring to the end of time when Jesus shall come again to judge the living and the dead.

April 17th

Matthew 25 vv 31-46

When I was curate at Orpington, we had an annual service for a charity which cared for old people. They always had this reading, which troubled me to some extent. I don't like the thought that people who hardly ever come to church are only ever exposed to a few favourite readings. The whole of the Word of God is His gift to us both to challenge us and to reassure us. It's for us to study and for us to share.

I wonder what it was about this reading which so appealed to the organisers of that service? It certainly comforts us to think that whatever is done to us is done to Jesus. He experiences what we experience. He completely understands what it is to be you or me. We pray in that knowledge. It also challenges us. There is a terrible judgment awaiting us if we don't treat other people as Jesus deserves to be treated. And there is an ineffable blessing, if, by His grace, we become more like Him and do what He would do.

April 18th

Isaiah 3 vv 1-26

In our prayers for the world in church, we very often remember nations which are at war and countries with oppressive regimes and also states in which there is no effective government, where anarchy and chaos rule. States such as these may well be worse to live in than states which at least have the common purpose of defence or an effective, though excessively punitive, system of government and law enforcement.

A minority of Christians have always been pacifists, believing that it is never right to fight and kill. Most Christians take the view that there is such a thing as a just war, when it is right to fight in order to establish justice. Christians have, however, always been much more reserved about supporting a just revolution. The revolutionaries may well have right on their side but the chaos and anarchy of civil war followed by uncertainty as to who is in charge is almost always worse than continuing with the existing government. What follows a successful revolution is very often a worse tyranny than what went before. The New Testament urges Christians to pray for rulers – even pagans – and to obey the law of the land, except in a very few cases where what the law requires is quite clearly contrary to what God requires.

April 19th

Isaiah 4 vv 1-6

The first verse probably belongs with the thought of the previous chapter. The people in charge in Israel and Judah had ceased to look to God as their King. The role of the king in ancient Israel was to maintain justice, to be a shepherd of the people and to protect them from their enemies. Only God is truly King. Earthly kings are His viceroys, reigning on His behalf. The kings and princes of Judah and Israel and the ruling class in general had set their allegiance to God aside and were relying on their own wisdom to govern. The result was that they panicked in the face of the Assyrian threat and chaos ensued, which was then exacerbated by what follows from war – terror, bloodshed, destruction of property, famine as crops are destroyed and cities besieged, plague as large numbers

of people move around and sanitary precautions are neglected. By turning away from God, the world brings all this on itself, but God remains faithful and His Kingdom will come. What is required of us is that we repent; we put our faith only in Him.

April 20th

Revelation 21 vv 10-27

The Bible begins with God bringing light out of darkness and order out of chaos. Darkness and chaos return because creation rebels against its Creator. God is love, however. God remains faithful. He is forever re-creating, sorting out the messes we make. Absolutely, He does this in Jesus. *I tried to set it out in Halling View.*

Lots of people would say that the Easter story is foolishness. If God wanted to defeat the powers of wickedness and death, surely the way to do it would have been with an almighty demonstration of miraculous power. God could have performed tremendous signs and wonders which would have compelled people to believe. He could just strike down all the wicked people in the world. He could easily outsmart us, given His infinite wisdom. Wouldn't we do something like that if we were God? Meet force with force, cunning with cunning. Yet God didn't do that. He overcame evil with good. Jesus willingly offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. It might look like foolishness to the people of the world, but, in fact, Jesus is the wisdom and power of God. Evil can't be defeated by evil. Evil can only be beaten by good. Death isn't overcome by killing others, but by Christ dying on our behalf. You don't destroy the devil and all his works by becoming even more devilish than Satan. You overwhelm hatred and indifference to others' needs only by self-sacrificial love.

In the Book of Revelation, there is a great deal of horror – the chaos and darkness that follow from our cosmic rebellion against the Source of all light and life. Throughout, however, runs the thread that Christ claims the victory and the people of God, whatever they may suffer as a consequence of living in this wicked world, share in His triumph over sin, the world and the devil, to reign with Him for ever as priests and kings in His holy city.

April 21st

Isaiah 5 vv 1-7

God sent His Son into the world to show us what He is like and what we ought to be like. He sent His Son into the world to die for us and to rise again that we might, through faith in Him, receive eternal life. He entrusted His Church with the task of proclaiming this Good News to the whole of creation and poured out His Holy Spirit, supplying the gifts that each individual Christian would need in order to fulfil his or her individual vocation. Centuries past and Pope Gregory sent Augustine and his missionaries to Kent. In the year 597, thousands were baptised in the River Stour on Christmas Day. It cannot be long after that that churches were established in Cuxton and Halling. Ever since then, God has blessed men and women in these communities with the opportunity to serve Him. We may know a little of the written history, but we can only imagine the lives of most of those Christian people down through the centuries who have received and shared the love of God here in these two places. When we come to think about recent decades, we may know more, people whom we remember who have now gone to their eternal rest. We can think of what God has done in our lives and for the people we know in our churches in our generation. What kind of fruit is God expecting of us?

April 22nd (Easter 3 / Easter 4)

Isaiah 5 vv 8-30

I was going to leave out these verses and go straight to chapter 6 (which I love) but I don't think I can. Vv 8-10 seem to me to sound a warning about growing inequalities in our society. Very rich people (especially in London) own several houses and rarely or never live in them, whereas poorer people can't afford houses at all. What is true of houses is true of all the necessities of life. It cannot be sustainable for the very rich to have far more than they need while ordinary people go without.

We know about the dangers of drink and drugs. I can't help thinking about the high rate of cocaine use among city traders.

I'm very troubled by business models by which big companies can act unethically without breaking any laws and go ahead and do so. I'm thinking for example of energy companies and insurance companies who grossly overcharge naive customers who don't understand how the market works.

Then there is the whole matter of rejecting traditional Christian morality in our personal and public life. It could be that, in a world very different from the biblical world, the old rules are no longer appropriate, even that the Holy Spirit is leading us in new directions, but I don't think we should be too quick to abandon the old ways. It's somewhat arrogant to think that the C21 West is right and that most other human cultures are, therefore, wrong about things such as gender and sexuality, marriage and the upbringing of children.

ALMIGHTY God, who shewest to them that be in error the light of thy truth, to the intent that they may return into the way of righteousness; Grant unto all them that are admitted into the fellowship of Christ's Religion, that they may eschew those things that are contrary to their profession, and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

April 23rd (S George)

Isaiah 6 vv 1-8

One of the best ways of reading these accounts of visions of the worship of heaven is simply to join in the heavenly worship. God is awesome. We are unworthy. He makes us worthy. We worship Him.

George was a soldier who was ordered by the Roman emperor to worship the false gods of Rome. Instead, he resigned he sold his slaves and gave his goods to the poor. The story is that the emperor tried to persuade him to change his mind and even offered him gifts if he would do so. George was obedient to the first commandment, however, and for that he was executed. The red cross on a white background represents his Christian blood spilt on a Roman pavement. His overcoming the dragon is the same idea as the Archangel Michael overcoming Satan in Revelation 12. The power of evil is overcome by the Blood of the Lamb.

April 24th

Isaiah 6 vv 9-13

The verses following Isaiah's commission are puzzling, all the more so because Jesus quotes them to explain why the people of His generation couldn't understand Him and the parables He told them (Mark 4 vv 11&12). What we are grappling with here is the tension between God's Providence and human responsibility. I can't explain it any more than I can explain the Trinity or the Incarnation or a good deal that science (especially modern physics) believes must be the case. Sometimes you just have to hold seemingly mutually contradictory ideas in your head. If they both are true, they both must be true even if you

don't understand how they both can be true. What Isaiah and Jesus are dealing with are the facts that God is in control. His Will is done. Yet we make choices and we are answerable for those choices. This certainly ought to make us careful about saying that the parables of Jesus are meant to make it easy to understand Him. What we can do about what both Isaiah and Jesus say is to resolve to seek God's grace to be open to what God is saying to us.

April 25th (S Mark)

Isaiah 7 vv 1-16

The Northern Israelites and the Syrians wanted to conquer Judah and replace King Ahaz with their own candidate who would then ally Judah with Israel and Syria to fight the Assyrians. This was a foolish policy and Ahaz (guided by Isaiah) was trying to resist it. Isaiah assured him that what he feared would come to nothing and offered him a sign. What follows is one of the best known OT readings we have at Christmas. *A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.* The original Hebrew word just means young woman, not necessarily a virgin. Modern translations of the bible render it thus and scholars interpret Isaiah's words to mean that a young wife (probably Isaiah's wife) would have a child and, in the time it took to wean the child – about three years in those days with no commercial baby foods – the threat posed by Syria and Ephraim (Northern Israel) would have evaporated. This whole incident is just another episode in yet another Middle-eastern war. Why worry about it now? There's enough trouble in the Middle East today for us to worry about.

Scholars who treat the bible just like any other ancient literature miss the point of it and obscure its relevance for every generation.

They may well be right about the passage's original significance for Isaiah's own generation, but the New Testament makes it quite clear that his words about the birth of Immanuel have an infinitely greater importance than that. The young woman was a virgin, as both the Greek OT and the NT render it. She is Mary. The child she conceives is the Son of God. Jesus is Immanuel – God with us. This reading is absolutely right for our Christmas services. Personally, I think that would come over more clearly if we read from a translation which says "virgin", rather than simply "young woman". The bible is God's eternal Word for every generation, not merely a source for the ancient history of a part of the world thousands of miles away from us.

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

April 26th

Isaiah 8 vv 19-22

I've left out quite a lot, though of course you may want to read it. Basically, it's the first interpretation of yesterday's reading that the confederacy between Ephraim and Syria would collapse before in the time it would take for a child to learn to talk and that military resistance to the Assyrians is pointless. What is happening is under God and man cannot change it. So the people of Judah and their leaders don't know what to do. They even consult mediums and magicians, who obviously can't help them. There's a lot of uncertainty in our national life nowadays, To whom can we turn for advice? Should we be listening to the political pundits on TV and radio or in the press? Do we trust economists? Are politicians trustworthy leaders? Should we be listening to senior military forges regarding provision for the armed forces? Ought we to be paying attention to council leaders and the local government association or to the government regarding the effects of austerity on local services? It's all very confusing. Where should we, as a nation, be looking for guidance? All of the above have something to say and are worth listening to (better than mediums and magicians anyway), but none of them is totally dependable. Only God is totally dependable and it is to Him that we ought to be looking, manifest in the Virgin's Son.

April 27th

Isaiah 9 vv 1-7

This is another much loved Christmas reading. Again, its first interpretation was to do with the middle-eastern wars in the time of Isaiah – seven centuries before Christ. Yet this prophecy is taken up and shown to be speaking of Jesus in the New Testament. The Word of God is true in every generation. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh.

There is an oddity in v3. The King James Bible says, *Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy*. Other translations have, *You have multiplied the nation and increased his joy*. The reason is that the Hebrew words for “not” and for “his” sound the same and it isn’t clear which is correct. The second version is easier to understand, but there is a view that where there are two possible correct texts, we should choose the more difficult on the grounds that a scribe is less likely to change an easy reading for a difficult one. But maybe somebody just misheard.

April 28th

Isaiah 10 vv 1-4

There’s a great deal of discussion online and on TV and radio about right and wrong. People get very indignant about what they perceive to be wrong. Some people insist that such and such a thing is right because it is the law. *Of course rape within marriage is wrong; the law says so*. But the law didn’t say so thirty odd years ago. Until then the law said that, once a woman had consented to marriage, she had consented to whatever her husband wanted. People who thought this was wrong campaigned to have the law changed. We have also heard lately of a number of cases where miscarriages of justice have only been averted at the last minute when mistakes by the police or the Crown Prosecution Service have come to light. There is such a thing as justice and it exists irrespective of what human beings think about it. God is just and justice is a quality of God. Our task as human beings is to see that our laws, as closely as possible, conform to the justice of God, that our laws are, as far as possible, just in the absolute sense and also that they are administered justly. We have to everything possible to avoid miscarriages of justice. The freedom of energy companies to exploit the naivety of their vulnerable customers is just one example, I think, of our laws failing to reflect the demands of justice. You can think of others.

April 29th (Easter 4 / Easter 5)

Isaiah 10 vv 5-19

This is difficult, and not only because of all the hard names. The Assyrians are proud of their victories. They have conquered all those places mentioned (incidentally showing that their gods couldn’t save them). Now they believe that they are going to conquer Jerusalem. From their point of view, these victories are something to boast about. From the point of view of a war crimes tribunal (if one had existed in those days), these are atrocities for which their leaders should be punished. Either way – something to boast about or something to be ashamed of – the Assyrians are responsible for their actions. And so they are, but the Bible introduces another dimension. Everything that the Assyrians have done falls within the providence of God. God is in charge. God is in control. That is why the prophet says that it is pointless to attempt to form a military alliance against them. They are instruments of God’s judgment against a people who have embraced injustice. And yet, because God is in charge, the prophet can also promise that there will ultimately be deliverance for the people of God (undeserving though we are) and judgment will fall on the wicked Assyrians. (Read Jonah for the possibility of the Assyrians repenting and being saved). The same tension is found in today’s collect.

O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men; Grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

April 30th

Isaiah 11 vv 1-9

Veganism and vegetarianism have been very much in the news lately. Why do people choose to give up meat or fish or dairy? Some people believe that it is better for their own health. For some people, it is a matter of animal welfare. Either way, it takes some planning to stay healthy and eat only plant foods. Most of us probably eat more meat than is good for us and there are grounds for concern about the way animals are farmed and slaughtered. Even if human beings gave up eating animals, other animals would still kill and eat their prey. So it is a mixed picture on the earth as it now is. There are grounds, however, for thinking that there will be no slaughter in the Kingdom of God.

May 1st (S Philip & S James)

Isaiah 11 vv 10-16

The theme is return. Return to God. Repent. Return to God and dwell with Him in your midst. Return to the Holy Land. Under Moses and Joshua, freed by God from slavery in Egypt, the people of Israel returned to the Holy Land. Those held captive by the Assyrians will similarly return home. Likewise, in the next generation, those exiled to Babylon will return to the Holy Land. Jesse was David's father. The root of Jesse is the King of Israel. The root of Jesse, as revealed in the NT, is Jesus. Isaiah says that the Gentiles too will seek Him. Jesus is the Way. He is the truth. He is the life. Thank God that we know this in our hearts by His grace. Remember that this is a treasure which we are entrusted to share.

O Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us perfectly to know thy Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life; that, following the steps of thy holy Apostles, Saint Philip and Saint James, we may steadfastly walk in the way that leadeth to eternal life; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

May 2nd (S Athanasius)

Isaiah 12 vv 1-6

Today is S Athanasius' Day. Athanasius was blessed with a deep understanding and it was he who assisted the Council of Nicaea in 325AD to include the words *of one being with the Father* or *of one substance with the Father* (depending on how you translate the Greek) in the Creed in order to proclaim Who Jesus really is – the incarnate Son of God, not merely a teacher, a miracle worker, a good man, or even an archangel, not even the greatest being ever created. Jesus is truly God as He is truly man, *begotten not created*. After the Council, however, the Church and the empire went wrong. They tried to compromise the faith and Athanasius (who by this time was Bishop of Alexandria) found himself in exile and threatened with death if he were caught by the emperor's soldiers. *Athanasius contra mundum*, Athanasius against the world. He remained faithful to God, however, and the Church eventually realised that what he stood for is the Truth. I don't think it is fanciful to imagine Athanasius in his exile praying these words of Isaiah, which of course were known to him.

May 3rd

Isaiah 25 vv 1-8

I've missed out a lot about the judgment on various nations and on Israel and Judah partly because it is hard to know what to say about them in a daily meditation for people in C21 Britain, though of course you can read them all and it would be good to do so. *All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness*. The theme is that God rules all the nations. He is supreme and He is just. Judgment therefore falls on the unjust. God is merciful and there is always mercy for those who turn to Him. It is the obstinacy of human hearts in rejecting God that brings all these calamities upon us. I've also missed out a lot because I want to make sure not to miss out certain chapters because we run out of days in the quarter – as we did last time we studied Isaiah.

Today's passage speaks of the supremacy of God Who deals with all the threats which confront us. We can trust Him to meet all our needs, to look after us individually and as a nation. What He requires of us is faith and repentance. Vv 6-8, however, have been taken to mean more than that He looks after us in this life. God's goodness overcomes all the power of evil, even the power of death. Death has no more dominion over us.

May 4th

Isaiah 26 vv 1-4

Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee.

A few weeks ago I was sent a group email which referred to the stresses and strains people in our group might experience. I had not long before read Isaiah 26 in my daily readings and I felt moved to share this verse. It would be worth learning by heart. Whatever stresses and strains you experience in daily life, keep your mind stayed on Him and He will keep you in perfect peace.

May 5th

Isaiah 26 vv 12-14

What other lords beside the LORD had had dominion over Israel? Presumably this means the gods of the pagans, the nations. These gods have been useless. They are dead. What might we put our trust in other than the LORD? Whatever it is, without God it cannot come to anything.

May 6th (Easter 5 / Easter 6)

Isaiah 28 vv 1-8

Why do we drink alcohol? In moderation, it makes our hearts glad. In excess, it makes us behave irresponsibly and eventually makes us ill. Some people like to lose their inhibitions and behave irresponsibly. Some people drink to escape the reality of the way they feel or the rotten conditions in which they live. And some people have believed that alcoholic intoxication opens up to us spiritual perceptions. What I have just said about alcohol is true also of a number of other drugs, many of them illegal. You certainly don't need drugs or alcohol in order to enjoy spiritual experiences. There are much better ways to deal with unhappiness than drink: prayer, seeking out good company, the fellowship of the Church, the resources a familiarity with the Scriptures gives you. In order to be fulfilled in our lives, we need to know the love of God. Almost all of us need the love of other human beings. So look for love (the love of God, the love of other people) rather than oblivion and try to love people who are turning to alcohol or other drugs to make up for what is lacking in their lives. It goes without saying that we should avoid drinking enough to make us behave in a way we would be ashamed of if we were sober or so much that it makes us ill. O LORD, from whom all good things do come; Grant to us thy humble servants, that by thy holy inspiration we may think those things that be good, and by thy merciful guiding may perform the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

May 7th

Isaiah 28 vv 14-22

The people and especially their leaders think they are safe. What is this covenant with death? Perhaps they are trusting in their false gods. Maybe false prophets are telling them that the LORD will protect them from the Assyrians when in fact the coming calamity is actually the LORD's judgment on their corrupt society. Perhaps they are trusting to alliances with other nations. Maybe they have buried their heads in the sand, thinking that something is bound to come up. Whatever, none of these things will save them or us. What will save us is the foundation stone laid in Zion, the cornerstone. The New Testament makes plain Who this is.

May 8th

Matthew 21 vv 33-44

The people of God are the vineyard of the LORD of Hosts. He has planted, protected and nourished His people. He requires fruits from them, in other words that we should live in accordance with His commandments, lives of love for God and for one another. He sends His servants the prophets. He sends His Son. A perverse humanity rejects His Word and beats up His messengers. At last, we kill the Word. Yet this Word proves to be the cornerstone and foundation stone on which the whole Temple depends. We are built into His Temple as the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit or we are destroyed by our rejection of the redemption He has come to bring.

Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and cornerstone,
chosen of the Lord, and precious, binding all the church in one,
Holy Zion's help for ever, and her confidence alone.

May 9th

Isaiah 30 vv 1-8

They take counsel but not by me.

Confronted by the Assyrian army, the Israelites think that the best thing to do is to make an alliance with the Egyptians. Egypt was a powerful country. Surely the Egyptian army could protect Israel. Not so, however. At that time, the Assyrians were more powerful than the Egyptians. For Israel to ally itself with Egypt, it would have to compromise with Egypt's pagan ways. In any case, the Assyrian threat is God's judgment on Israel for her turning her back on the ways of the LORD. What they should have done was to repent of their sins and put their faith in the LORD.

So where do we seek counsel when we're uncertain what to do for the best? There's lots of good advice out there. We can go to the doctor's if we're sick, a lawyer if we're in that kind of trouble, financial advisers to deal with our money and numerous friends and family to advise in all kinds of situations. Their advice may be good or bad and we have to use our common sense to weigh it up for ourselves. What we certainly must do, however, is to assess the advice we are offered in the light of our relationship with God. What would please Him?

May 10th (Ascension Day)

Isaiah 30 vv 15-18

In returning and rest ye shall be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength.

That's just as true for us as it was for the ancient Israelites. Yet, instead of accepting these wise words, they panicked and, by panicking, brought upon themselves just what they feared. The point for us as Christians is to live in the light of eternity. The ascended Christ offers our prayers and His prayers for us at the Throne of Grace. He pours out upon us His Holy Spirit. We are citizens of heaven and it is in living as citizens of heaven that we can most effectively live our lives on earth.

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

May 11th

Isaiah 30 vv 18-26

A wonderful prophecy of how things will be when God saves His people. *This is the way, walk ye in it.* God guides His people in the paths of righteousness. We have the Ten Commandments originally on stone tablets. There are all the written words in the Bible. We can read them for ourselves and seek God's grace to walk in them. But there is so much more. God gives us His Spirit in our hearts to guide us in the right way.

May 12th

Isaiah 34 vv 1-17

Some of these verses may be familiar as they are quite often quoted. They anticipate the Book of Revelation at the end of the New Testament and echo the situation in Genesis just before the Flood. Love demands justice. There is judgment. There is ultimate judgment. Justice is very terrible for the wicked. There is no saying that wickedness doesn't matter and can be ignored or go unpunished if we care about justice. God would not be a loving God if He were not just. But because He is a loving God, God is merciful. It is on His mercy that we depend in the knowledge that Jesus satisfies God's justice on the Cross.

May 13th (Sunday after Ascension / Easter 7)

Isaiah 35 vv 1-10

Some of these verses are also very well known and are much more comfortable. You can't have Easter, however, without Good Friday. We come to the joy of redemption because the death of Jesus is the ransom which sets us free from slavery to sin. The Hebrews were slaves in Egypt and God brought them to the Promised Land through the Wilderness. Centuries later, God brought home to Jerusalem the Jewish exiles in Babylon through the desert. He guided them. He prepared their way. He nourished and protected them on their journey. He led them home. Our home, our promised land, the new Jerusalem is in heaven. God calls us. He redeems us. He sets us free. He leads us through the Wilderness of this world, preparing our way through the desert, nourishing us and protecting us, to bring us safely home.

O God the King of glory, who hast exalted thine only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph unto thy kingdom in heaven: We beseech thee, leave us not comfortless; but send to us thine Holy Ghost to comfort us, and exalt us unto the same place whither our Saviour Christ is gone before, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

May 14th

Isaiah 36 vv 1-22

The Assyrians had ravaged the towns and villages around Jerusalem. They sent one of their chief officers to tell the people of Jerusalem that they might as well give up because their case was hopeless. The Jewish officers were so concerned about the effect on morale that they asked the Rabshakeh not to speak in Hebrew, but to use the language of diplomacy (Aramaic at that time) so that the people wouldn't understand. (Personally I agree with Rabshakeh on that; the people did have the right to know.) Rabshakeh's case is that the Egyptians can't help them. The Assyrians have easily conquered other nations. Their gods didn't help them. Why suffer the horrors of a siege and eventual defeat when they could just surrender and get it all over with. The Rabshakeh promises they will be well-treated if they surrender. All very plausible. Are we ever tempted to give in because the odds against us seem overwhelming and that our case is hopeless? We need to remember Romans 8³¹: *If God be for us, who can be against us?*

May 15th

Isaiah 37 vv 1-20

Hezekiah did what we all ought to do when we feel overwhelmed. He prayed. The Word of the LORD given by Isaiah was not to be afraid. Again, this is God's Word to us. Trust in the Lord. Don't be afraid. Rabshakeh returns to the Assyrian camp to find that they now have to contend with a threat from Ethiopia. The Assyrian king, Sennacherib, sends a message, *I'll be back*, pointing out that none of the gods of the nations had saved them. But that was just the point. The gods of the heathen are no gods. There is only one God. We can absolutely trust in Him and there is nothing and nobody else we can finally trust in. So when someone tells you that it impractical to meet life's challenges with Christian values and that you have to be realistic and live in this world by the world's standards, he or she is talking rubbish. We are citizens of heaven. We walk in the light of eternity. By definition, the things of this world of time and space will pass away.

May 16th

Isaiah 37 vv 21-38

The Word of the LORD then is that those who defy Him have chosen the path of destruction, but He will save His own people. The principles are the same then, today and in every age. So the Assyrian army perishes. Sennacherib is deposed by his sons. What in the world's eyes was one of the greatest empires of the age declined and effectively ceased to exist, whereas God's Kingdom endures for ever.

So be it, Lord; Thy throne shall never, Like earth's proud empires, pass away:
Thy kingdom stands, and grows forever, Till all Thy creatures own Thy sway.

May 17th

Isaiah 38 vv 1-8

Very few people want to die. Some might for whom life has become an intolerable burden. We might feel that for some people death would come as a happy release. Suicide bombers are bonkers and have no idea what God really requires of them. Most people, however, even if they are confident that there is a better hereafter, are in no hurry to die, though some people may be brave enough to risk or lay their lives in a good cause. However you feel about facing death, Hezekiah did the right thing in praying about it and God heard His prayer, which He always does, whether it's time to take us home or to give us a little longer here on earth.

May 18th

Isaiah 38 vv 9-22

Hezekiah's prayer is very frank and so should our prayers be. It's no use pretending with God. So talk to Him honestly and tell you how you feel. If you listen as well as talk, prayer will help you to come to a better frame of mind. Hezekiah resents being in pain. He resents what he sees as the possibility of an untimely death. He doesn't think it's fair because he's always done his best. Maybe he doesn't think his work on earth (saving Jerusalem from the Assyrians) is over yet. He doesn't seem to have known that there is a more wonderful life awaiting us beyond the grave. God hears his prayer and he recovers. Note that he doesn't reject the medical remedy of the plaster of figs in the way that some people foolishly reject medicine because they think that prayer makes it unnecessary. Talking to God about fears does help us through them and to overcome them. And we know, if we have faith, that we shall live forever to praise Him (v19).

May 19th

Isaiah 39 vv 1-8

Out of the frying pan into the fire. The Assyrian empire declines and falls, only to be replaced by the rise of Babylon, which will turn out to be an even worse threat. Hezekiah made the mistake of showing off to them, never a wise thing to do.

May 20th (Whitsun / Pentecost)

Isaiah 40 vv 1 & 2

Comfort ye, Comfort ye my people, saith your God.

Today we especially celebrate the sending of the Holy Spirit and our receiving Him. The Holy Spirit is often called the Comforter. You might also say Advocate, Intercessor, Mediator, One Who encourages, Paraclete. They would all be correct. The Holy Spirit is another Jesus (John 14¹⁶). Jesus is described as Paraclete (usually translated Advocate here) in I John 2¹. The Spirit is Emmanuel, God with us. Everything that Jesus is to us, the Spirit is to us. Whatever Jesus and the Spirit are, the Father is – three persons, one God.

God, who as at this time didst teach the hearts of thy faithful people, by the sending to them the light of thy Holy Spirit; Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgement in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.

May 21st

Isaiah 40 vv 3-5

In the New Testament, these words are taken as a prophecy of the mission of St John the Baptist. He was sent to prepare the way of the Lord. He was sent to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus. He heralded the advent of the Kingdom of God. What is required of humanity is that we prepare for the coming of the Lord by repenting of our sins and being baptised. That is the Gospel message which you can share with anyone who is thinking of becoming a Christian. He should give his life to the Lord by repenting (turning from sin, turning to God) and being baptised, the heart believing unto righteousness, the mouth confessing unto salvation (Romans 10¹⁰). In Jesus, the glory of the Lord is revealed.

May 22nd

Isaiah 40 vv 7&8

All flesh is grass.

Quite literally, it is. Cows eat grass to make beef. We eat beef to make us. Metaphorically, it is also true. Just as the grass withers and dies, so eventually do we. In a hot climate, the grass withers when the desert wind blows over it. Wind is spirit in the biblical languages - or breath or air. Breath or its absence is life or death. The Spirit of God both destroys and sustains all things living, the physical life of our flesh and the spiritual life of our soul. In other words, we are all going to die. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's Romans 14⁸). This is the voice of faith and faith is God's gift to us by His Word. The word of our God shall stand for ever. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh.

May 23rd

Isaiah 40 vv 9-11

Good tidings. It's good news that God is bringing His people home from exile.

O come, O come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel

That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

But its much better news that in Jesus He is bringing the whole world to salvation. It is Good News which we've just got to share with all the people we know!

May 24th

Isaiah 40 vv 12-17

These chapters of Isaiah over and over again proclaim the greatest of God. We cannot conceive of just how great God is. We can marvel at the universe and marvel that its Creator is infinitely greater than it is. We can wonder at how we are fearfully and wonderfully made and wonder about Who made us. What we can know about can only point us in the direction of beginning to comprehend the greatness of Him Who made it all. Yet, more than this, Isaiah's thoughts about the greatness of the Creator are the context in which he considers how we are looked after and by Whom.

O worship the King, all glorious above,

O gratefully sing His power and His love;

Our Shield and Defender, the Ancient of Days,

Pavilioned in splendour, and girded with praise.

The earth with its store of wonders untold,

Almighty, Thy power hath founded of old;

Hath 'stablished it fast by a changeless decree,

And round it hath cast, like a mantle, the sea.

O tell of His might, O sing of His grace,

Whose robe is the light, whose canopy space,

His chariots of wrath the deep thunderclouds form,

And dark is His path on the wings of the storm.

Thy bountiful care, what tongue can recite?

It breathes in the air, it shines in the light;

It streams from the hills, it descends to the plain,

And sweetly distils in the dew and the rain.

Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail,
In Thee do we trust, nor find Thee to fail;
Thy mercies how tender, how firm to the end,
Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend.

O measureless might! Ineffable love!
While angels delight to worship Thee above,
The humbler creation, though feeble their lays,
With true adoration shall all sing Thy praise.

May 25th

Isaiah 40 vv 18-27

It's just ridiculous to think that anything could be like God. It's ridiculous to worship anything He has made instead of Him. It is even more ridiculous to worship anything we have made.

May 26th

Isaiah 40 vv 28-31

It's like back in Hezekiah's time. We can feel overwhelmed. We can feel overwhelmed as individuals. We can't cope with the situations of our own lives. The Church can feel overwhelmed. Maybe small struggling churches wonder what they can achieve, whether even they can survive. The whole Church may feel discouraged with declining and aging congregations trying to do God's work with diminishing resources in an increasingly secular society. And we may despair for the world itself or for our country, when we read the terrible things we see in the newspapers. And yet we have God on our side. He doesn't let us down. So long as we are acting in accordance with His Will, we can leave the outcome to Him. And if an individual or a church or a nation isn't acting in accordance with His Will, then it's best if it fails!

May 27th (Trinity Sunday)

Isaiah 6 vv 1-4

Let's backtrack and have another revel in chapter 6. Isaiah had this wonderful vision of Almighty God. At every Eucharist, we join in the heavenly lays, "Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven..." This awesome God, how could we endure to be in His Presence? Yet, *We see Jesus, made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death* and God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.

Almighty and everlasting God, who hast given unto us thy servants grace, by the confession of a true faith to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of the Divine Majesty to worship the Unity: We beseech thee, that thou wouldest keep us stedfast in this faith, and evermore defend us from all adversities, who livest and reignest, one God, world without end. Amen.

Bright the vision that delighted
Once the sight of Judah's seer;
Sweet the countless tongues united
To entrance the prophet's ear.

Heaven is still with glory ringing,
Earth takes up the angels' cry,
"Holy, holy, holy," singing,
"Lord of hosts, the Lord most high."

Round the Lord in glory seated
Cherubim and seraphim
Filled His temple, and repeated
Each to each the alternate hymn:

With His seraph train before him,
With His holy Church below,
Thus conspire we to adore Him,
Bid we thus our anthem flow.

"Lord, Thy glory fills the Heaven;
Earth is with its fullness stored;
Unto Thee be glory given,
Holy, holy, holy Lord."

"Lord, Thy glory fills the Heaven;
Earth is with its fullness stored;
Unto Thee be glory given,
Holy, holy, holy Lord."

May 28th

Isaiah 41 vv 1-9

One of the questions which puzzles scholars of Isaiah is *Who is the Servant of the LORD?* It puzzled the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 and St Philip explained that it means Jesus. But there is more to it than that. Yes, the prophet Isaiah is a servant of the LORD. He serves God, by proclaiming God's Word in word and deed. Many individuals in the OT and NT are quite clearly servants of God. The people of Israel as a whole are the servant of the LORD. He called them out of Egypt to serve Him. Indeed, He promised Abraham that Israel would be saved from his enemies to serve God without fear. It follows that Christians too, the new Israel are saved from their enemies – sin, the world and the devil – to serve God without fear. The Church is called to serve God collectively. All individual Christians are called to be servants of God. But all things serve God, some wittingly and some unwittingly. The Assyrians served God's purposes in bringing judgment on a corrupted nation. In this latter part of Isaiah, the Persian emperor Cyrus is seen as the servant of God. The peace he brings to the Middle East and the wise policies he pursues make it possible for the exiles to return from Babylon to the Holy Land. Cyrus doesn't know the LORD (at least at first) but the LORD knows him and Cyrus serves the LORD by fulfilling the LORD's purposes. Jesus is the epitome of the Servant of God. He alone is wholly obedient, even to death. He is the example and inspiration of every one of us to serve the Lord. He also serves us and the whole universe by giving himself to death on the Cross for our redemption. He represents the whole people of Israel, called collectively to the serve the Lord. The Church is His Body, commissioned to fulfil the mission the Father gave Jesus. In him all things find their fulfilment, which is to serve God and the world by playing their particular parts in God's plan for everything.

May 29th

Isaiah 41 v10

I have a couple of promise boxes. They contain scripture verses on little scrolls of paper which you can take out each day or when you feel the need. There are dangers in taking scripture out of context and misapplying it, but I'm sure that the promise of Isaiah 41¹⁰ is for all people of faith.

May 30th

Isaiah 41 vv 11-16

Prayer, evangelism, discipleship, engagement, these were the four pillars to which our archdeacon drew our attention at deanery synod. In the face of discouraging numbers etc., the Church may well feel like a worm about to be crushed under the heel of a population which regards religion with indifference or hostility. We don't have to be afraid. "We have Christ's own promise and that cannot fail." Prayer, evangelism, discipleship & engagement are among our principle weapons as Christian soldiers in fighting back against sin, the world and the devil. Take time to pray, even in this very busy world. Share your faith. People really don't know and need to be told. God isn't an embarrassment. Commit your life wholly to Jesus and seek His grace to grow more like Him. There is no room for half-heartedness in being a Christian. You either are one or you aren't. And live out that Christian life in the community, showing love to everyone, especially to those who most need it.

May 31st (Corpus Christi)

Isaiah 41 vv 17-20

This is specifically about the journey through the desert from Babylon to the Holy Land, but it is generally true also. God cares for the poor and needy. As we consider this fact, however, we also remember the wise words of S Theresa of Avila, "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours." Where do we fit in with God's plan?

Corpus Christi is a thanksgiving for the gift of Holy Communion in which the Body of Christ, the Church, is nourished by the Body of Christ in the consecrated Bread.

June 1st

Isaiah 41 vv 21-29

How do you know if a supposed prophet is authentic? One test is that what he or she claims is in accordance with what we already know of God – principally through the Scriptures and our Lord Jesus Christ to Whom they bear witness. Another test is whether or not the prophet's words come true. Idols are nothing. They can do nothing. Those who speak in the name of idols have no authority. There is nothing that can be done outside the Providence of God. Moreover, God is consistent. He is eternal He does not change. The people of God have learnt from past experience that they can always rely on Him. They have also learnt the consequences of going against Him. What was true in the past is true today and it will be true tomorrow. We consider what people have to say, we examine our own thoughts in the light of what God has already shown us and we wait on God to discover what is authentic.

Yesterday, today, forever, Jesus is the same, All may change, but Jesus never! Glory to His name, Glory to His name, Glory to His name;

All may change, but Jesus never! Glory to His name.

June 2nd

Isaiah 42 vv 1-7

The Servant of the LORD will bring Good News to all nations. Gentiles means nations. He will do so gently, not overwhelming those who are struggling. Despite everything, He will not fail or be discouraged. Whoever else may be meant by the Servant of the LORD, this is Jesus. This is His Church. This is you and me.

June 3rd (Trinity 1)

Isaiah 42 vv 8-16

It was in the days leading up to Trinity 1 last year that the Grenfell Tower fire happened. I remember that because the BCP Gospel (the rich man & Lazarus, Luke 16^{19 et seq}) was so apposite. What happened was so contrary to the values of the Kingdom of God, the values by which you and I should live, the values which we ought to be working for so that they permeate the whole of society.

O God, the strength of all them that put their trust in thee, mercifully accept our prayers; and because through the weakness of our mortal nature we can do no good thing without thee, grant us the help of thy grace, that in keeping of thy commandments we may please thee, both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

June 4th

Isaiah 42 vv 17-25

The Servant of the LORD, Israel, is in a mess because of their sins. This is generally true of the human race and not a judgment uniquely on Israel, though they ought to have known better because they had the Law and the Prophets. Much is expected from those who have received much. The Servant of the LORD, Jesus, accepts weakness, vulnerability, pain and even death as He takes on Himself the consequences of human sin. Though fully human and tempted in every way as we are, Jesus was without sin. He therefore was the perfect offering and His Blood availed for all the sins of the world. We therefore, through faith in Him, are spared the punishment we are due.

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain—
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

Amazing love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

'Tis mystery all: th' Immortal dies:
Who can explore His strange design?
In vain the firstborn seraph tries

To sound the depths of love divine.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,
Let angel minds inquire no more.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore;
Let angel minds inquire no more.

He left His Father's throne above
So free, so infinite His grace—
Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race:
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For O my God, it found out me!

'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For O my God, it found out me!

No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine;
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach th' eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.
Bold I approach th' eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

June 5th

Isaiah 43 vv 1-7

It is a constant theme in the Bible that Israel was not chosen because they were an especially great nation or an especially good nation. God did not reward Abraham and his descendants for being good. Very often, they were not good. Abraham was saved by faith, not works. God redeemed Israel because He loved them. The same is true of the Church and for individual Christians. We are not especially great people nor especially good people. God just loves us because He does. We are saved by faith, not by works. Remembering everything that God has done for Israel (because He loved them, not because they deserved it), the Israelites ought to know that they can trust Him to look after them. He has done so much more for us. God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt and it is a remarkable story. He settled them in the Promised Land and delivered them out of the hands of their enemies. But, in order to redeem us from slavery to sin and to deliver us from our enemy, the devil, He gave us His Son. We should never be in any doubt of His care for us.

June 6th

Romans 8 vv 31-39

If you can do it, it would be good to memorise these verses. Then whenever you felt down, whenever you felt overwhelmed, whenever that things were hopeless, you would have the answer. Pray. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: **Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.** Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world. But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle *you*. (I Peter 5⁶⁻¹⁰). Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms. Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. (James 5¹³⁻¹⁶).

June 7th

Isaiah 43 vv 8-13

So what do we make of the gods worshipped by other religions and what do we do about? There's a tension between our adherence to the first of the Ten Commandments, (God spake these words, and said; I am the Lord thy God: Thou shalt have none other gods but me.) and respecting the faith of other cultures in our multi-cultural society. It does matter. You become what you worship. Religion is one of the most powerful forces which motivate people and bad religion can make for some very bad people: inquisitors, persecutors, holy warriors, suicide bombers. The OT is very firm that God's people must not worship the gods of the other cultures with whom they dwell. They are not to mingle with them. They are not to marry them. The NT takes a similar

line. And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you. And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. (II Corinthians 6¹⁶⁻¹⁸).

Sometimes the gods of the heathen are described as demons. When you think of religions such as that of the Aztecs which practised human sacrifice, that seems reasonable. In many parts of the Bible, false gods are written off as non-entities. There is in fact only one God. To worship anything else is to worship nothing. Given that you become what you worship, that's a chilling thought. Another way of looking at it, of course, is that other religions are the result of different attempts to seek God. Human beings are naturally religious. We all have consciences. We all have the evidence of our senses. Much of what other religions say about God is true. There is reason (eg Acts 10) to believe that God rewards those who seek Him. God has, however, most perfectly manifested Himself in Jesus and what is not consistent with what we know of Jesus is not authentically of God. We respect what other people believe. We can learn from what other people believe. We certainly ought not to persecute other people. But neither can we compromise what we know of God in Jesus Christ.

June 8th

Isaiah 43 vv 14-17

I'm going to be controversial (for once). Nearly everybody agrees that we no longer ought to sing the lines: "The rich man in his castle, The poor man at his gate, God made them high and lowly, And ordered their estate." I can see why. They can be taken to mean that the existing social order is God's Will so that the wealthy can afford to be complacent and the poor have just got to put up with it. I don't know what Mrs Alexander meant by these words, but it's not what I mean by them and it would not at all be the way the Bible looks at things. If you are rich, then that is the gift of God and you are responsible for how you use your riches. You are obliged, as a consequence of their being the gift of God, to use them for the benefit of others. In the social order God intends, there would be no possibility of poverty. The poor are always with us because we don't keep God's Commandments. If we did, no-one would be poor.

The question I would ask the person who too glibly dismisses these verses is, then who did make the rich man in his castle and the poor man at his gate? Who did order their estate? If the rich man can attribute his wealth entirely to his own hard work and think that he deserves to be rich or think he's just lucky or just thanks his rich parents for leaving it to him, why should he feel responsible for how he spends his money? It's his to do what he likes with. And if the poor man doesn't think that God has anything to do with his estate in life, what's the point of praying? No point in thanking God for what you have, no point in praying for what you need. It's not God; it's people. It's not God; it's society. It isn't all down to God; it's down to you. This has become quite a popular way of looking at things – an arms length God, Who doesn't get involved in the day to day running of His creation. It saves us having to worry about why God permits injustice and evil in the world. It isn't Him, we say. He's hands off God Who leaves us to get on with it. Yet such a God is not the God of the Bible and such a God would be a pretty useless god. If God isn't involved in what happens to us, why pray or give thanks or seek to do His Will? No, God really has got the whole world in His Hands, and He has you & me, brother, and all the other verses of that much loved chorus. There is nothing outside the love of God.

June 9th

Isaiah 43 vv 18-28

What happens when people aren't bothered about God? I'm not that old, but when I was a child and a young man, most people would have said that England was a Christian country. People nearly all described themselves as C of E or some other Christian denomination on official forms. We even called our first names our Christian names. 50% children in the '50s went to Sunday School. Most people went to church at least sometimes, if only to get hatched, matched or despatched. Religious education in state schools was bible stories. The shops closed on Sundays and other Christian holy days. So what changed? I don't think that many people converted to other religions or suddenly decided that they didn't believe in God any more. They just became less bothered. "You can be a Christian without going to Church." So it's enough to say your prayers at home and try to be a good person. "The better the deed, the better the day,"

justifies treating Sunday like any other day. So the Church is weakened and its influence reduced. Children who don't go to Sunday School or Church don't learn about Jesus. As Christians become a minority, the institutions of the state become more secular. The Holy Family are excluded from the Christmas decorations and religious education in schools ceases to be specifically Christian. Society forgets how to pray. People don't know the Christian story. There are no longer hymns that everybody knows. It's no use lamenting change. We can't turn back the clock. So how do we respond in the present and for the future?

We ourselves have to guard against ceasing to bother about God. It's only too easy to let slip the daily disciplines of prayer and bible study, to forsake the assembling of ourselves together with other Christians. At least we have to try to pass on our faith to our children and grandchildren.

We also have to be aware that if people are seeking God in modern Britain, it isn't perhaps obvious where they can find Him. They won't pick up faith by osmosis from living in a Christian country, absorb it as we might have done. Churches are alien places to them. We have to be bold enough actually to talk about God and to take responsibility for sharing the Gospel.

June 10th (Trinity 2)

Isaiah 44 vv 1-8

Let me try to translate this into *Christian*. Listen, Church. Whatever you think is going on, you are mine. I've known you forever, in all eternity. You are mine. I'm pouring out upon you my Holy Spirit. You will grow and flourish. You will bring forth fruit in righteousness. You might call yourselves by different names, but you are all my people. You know you can trust Me. I am God. You are witnesses of everything that I have done for you. You've no reason to be afraid. Just trust me and I will establish you in My Kingdom.

O Lord, who never failest to help and govern them who thou dost bring up in thy stedfast fear and love: Keep us, we beseech thee, under the protection of thy good providence, and make us to have a perpetual fear and love of thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

June 11th (S Barnabas)

Isaiah 44 vv 9-20

We first meet Barnabas at the end of Acts 4. This is soon after the Holy Spirit has come at Pentecost and the Church is buzzing. They meet daily. They break bread together. They are attentive to the apostles' teaching. There are many miracles. They pool their possessions. Barnabas sells land and brings the money to the apostles. By contrast, in the next chapter, Ananias and Sapphira claim to have offered everything they have made on selling a possession, but in fact they are lying and they suffer a terrible punishment. The issue is what do you trust in? Barnabas trusted in God and was therefore free to offer up all that he had to God. Ananias & Sapphira didn't feel able to trust in God. So they held back some of what they had. Like the makers of idols in our reading, they trusted in silver and gold, rather than in the living God. You become what you worship and they became cold and dead – just like silver and gold. They hastened their fate by their hypocrisy. We don't have to give everything that we have to the Church, but we do have to put all that we have at His disposal and we can if we believe.

O Lord God Almighty, who didst endue thy holy Apostle Barnabas with singular gifts of the Holy Ghost: Leave us not, we beseech thee, destitute of thy manifold gifts, nor yet of grace to use them alway to thy honour and glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

June 12th

Isaiah 44 vv 19-28

God doesn't tell us to seek Him in vain. "Seek and ye shall find," says Jesus. We have a just God and a Saviour. God can save us and He will if we put our faith in Him. Nothing else can save us – not idols, not the works of our hands, or any human works. God's Word has gone forth to the ends of the earth. It will not return void. Every knee will bow to Him, whether in fear or adoration. It is our choice, to choose life through faith in Him Who alone can save us or to choose death.

Not the labour of my hands
Can fulfil Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone,
Thou must save, and thou alone.

At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow,
every tongue confess him King of glory now;
'tis the Father's pleasure we should call him Lord,
who from the beginning was the mighty Word.

June 13th

Isaiah 45 vv 1-4

This is where it is most explicit that the Persian emperor Cyrus (albeit unwittingly at least at first and never whole-heartedly) is acting as God's agent. God has raised him to defeat and bring peace to the warring factions of the Middle-East. God has inspired Cyrus' policy of generally letting people exiled by the Babylonians go home. Specifically, God has mandated Cyrus to allow the Jews to go home and to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. This is all well and good and it is because we expect God to be in control of the world that we pray for what we believe to be right and we give thanks to God for all the good things that happen. But it leaves us with a couple of questions. Given that rulers such as Cyrus unknowingly carry out God's Will, do they have real freedom to make decisions and to take responsibility for their choices? And, if God controls the destiny of nations and the course of human history, why is it that such horrors as the Holocaust or the atom bomb can happen? I don't know the answers. I do know that human beings have free will and that human free will is responsible for most of the atrocities which happen on earth and I also know that God is in control and things work out in accordance with His Will.

June 14th

Isaiah 45 vv 5-19

There's a choice of collects for the Queen in the 1662 Communion service. The one I like less is the second one. I'm not quite comfortable with it, and yet it is fully biblical. It is in tune with this passage, but perhaps more than in tune and with what the New Testament says about even pagan rulers. Cyrus serves God by fulfilling God's purposes in saving God's people even though Cyrus doesn't know God. Our Queen is a Christian and it is far more obvious even to people like me that she would serve God by serving us to the best of her ability than that Cyrus would. Unlike the pagan idols, God is the Creator of heaven and earth and human history unfolds in accordance with His plan for us.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, we are taught by thy holy Word, that the hearts of Kings are in thy rule and governance, and that thou dost dispose and turn them as it seemeth best to thy godly wisdom: We humbly beseech thee so to dispose and govern the heart of ELIZABETH thy servant, our Queen and Governor, that in all her thoughts, words, and works, she may ever seek thy honour and glory, and study to preserve thy people committed to her charge, in wealth, peace and godliness: Grant this, O merciful Father, for thy dear Son's sake, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Maybe the answer to my questions of yesterday and today is rely on the words as it seemeth best to thy godly wisdom. God knows such better than I do. (Read on.)

The first choice is as follows. I suppose it implies the same doctrine of divine Providence directing the behaviour of rulers.

ALMIGHTY God, whose kingdom is ever-lasting, and power infinite: Have mercy upon the whole Church; and so rule the heart of thy chosen servant *ELIZABETH*, our Queen and Governor, that she (knowing whose minister she is) may above all things seek thy honour and glory: and that we and all her subjects (duly considering whose authority she hath) may faithfully serve, honour, and humbly obey her, in thee, and for thee, according to thy blessed Word and ordinance; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth, ever one God, world without end. **Amen.**

June 15th

Isaiah 45 vv 20-25

I suppose, while we're at it, the Prayer for the Queen's Majesty at Mattins & Evensong is also relevant.

O Lord, our heavenly Father, high and mighty, King of kings, Lord of lords, the only Ruler of princes, who dost from thy throne behold all the dwellers upon earth: Most heartily we beseech thee with thy favour to behold our most gracious Sovereign Lady, Queen *ELIZABETH*; and so replenish her with the grace of thy Holy Spirit, that she may alway incline to thy will, and walk in thy way. Endue her plenteously with heavenly gifts; grant her in health and wealth long to live; strengthen her that she may vanquish and overcome all her enemies; and finally after this life she may attain everlasting joy and felicity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.** The words I would pick out from this prayer are who dost from thy throne behold all the dwellers upon earth. God doesn't only care about queens and important people like that. We all live out our lives under the Providence of God. We trust Him to meet our needs. We seek His grace to live in accordance with His Will – to do the good works He has prepared for each one of us to walk in.

June 16th

Isaiah 46 vv 1-13

Imagine you were in ancient Babylon. It would be awe-inspiring enough if you were a Babylonian, but imagine that you were living there as an exile from a defeated minor kingdom. There would have been amazing buildings, wonderful gardens. There must have been teeming markets, great crowds of people and a multitude of goods, ranging from the basic necessities of life to exotic spices and precious metals and jewellery. There would have been a strong military presence, including armaments more powerful and modern probably than anything you had seen at home. Then there were the great processions, enormous images of the Babylonian gods carried through the streets on wagons drawn by oxen, attended by their priests, music and dancing, sacrifices maybe. It would have been an astonishing sight and you might have been filled with awe. And yet you might have reflected that these so-called gods required carts drawn by weary draft animals to convey them from place to place. How different from the one true God! So, in which would you put your faith? Which would you worship?

June 17th (Trinity 3)

Isaiah 47 vv 1-15

At that time, Babylon was one of the greatest civilisations the world had ever known. It would be followed by the Medes and Persians, the Greeks and the Romans in the western world as there would be other great empires in the East. The C18 & C19 saw the rise and world domination of the British and European empires. After two world wars, the USA and the USSR dominated, the latter coming to a sudden and unexpected end, and others are waiting in the wings to take over as top nations. No human empire, however mighty, however technologically advanced, lasts for ever. Only God is eternal and what is truly lasting and truly valuable is found only in Him.

O Lord, we beseech thee mercifully to hear us; and grant that we, to whom thou hast given an hearty desire to pray, may by thy mighty aid be defended and comforted in all dangers and adversities; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

June 18th

Isaiah 48 vv 1-22

Who were the people who “make mention of the God of Israel, but not in truth, nor in righteousness”? Two possibilities. Maybe they were people who claimed to worship the LORD but didn’t keep His commandments to love their neighbours as themselves. Or maybe they were people who worshipped the LORD but worshipped other things as well. God is exclusive. If we love Him, we love Him with our whole hearts. He doesn’t share our hearts with our love for the things of this world. Where we love good things like education or doing a job well or pursuing an interest or having friends or caring for our families, these things are not rivals for our love of God. They are aspects of our love of God. God is all in all. Christ is all in all. If we love God with all hearts, there is no place for evil in our hearts. And if we truly love God whole-heartedly, then it follows that we love our neighbours as ourselves.

June 19th

Isaiah 49 vv 1-12

This is a reading which we have on the feasts of the Conversion of S Paul. Paul was the great apostle to the Gentiles. God’s plan for all eternity is the salvation of all nations in His servant, Jesus Christ.

J

une 20th

Isaiah 49 vv 13-26

This reading is used on the Feast of the Epiphany – the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. The Word of God is good news for all the peoples of the world, good news which the Church cannot help herself but share. The verse I particularly wanted to pick out today, however, is v15. God’s love for us is even greater than a mother’s love for her child. What a comfort in our lives, what a joy to share.

Hark, my soul, it is the Lord!
’Tis thy Saviour, hear His Word;
Jesus speaks, and speaks to thee,
“Say, poor, sinner, lovest thou Me?”

“Mine is an unchanging love,
Higher than the heights above,
Deeper than the depths beneath,
Free and faithful, strong as death.

“I delivered thee when bound,
And, when bleeding, healed thy wound;
Sought thee wandering, set thee right,
Turned thy darkness into light.

“Thou shalt see My glory soon,
When the work of grace is done;
Partner of My throne shalt be:
Say, poor sinner, lovest thou Me?”

“Can a woman’s tender care
Cease toward the child she bare?
Yes, she may forgetful be,
Yet will I remember thee.

Lord, it is my chief complaint
That my love is weak and faint;
Yet I love Thee, and adore:
O for grace to love Thee more!

June 21st

Isaiah 50 vv 1-11

God doesn’t turn His back on His people. He doesn’t divorce us. It is we who are only too often unfaithful to our marriage vows as the Bride of Christ. Maybe we don’t trust Him for our own lives, for His Church or for the nation. We look elsewhere for security – to the things of this world. Maybe we’ve grown indifferent to God as some marriages just seem to drift apart. Maybe we’ve been seduced by success or power or popularity. It is only through faith in God that our lives can be truly fulfilled. Everything else we do has to be in that context. God doesn’t give up on us. He sends us Jesus Who shows us the right way and suffers and dies for us. Trust in the name of the LORD and stay upon God.

June 22nd

Isaiah 51 vv 1-23

On this date in 1980, I was ordained deacon. Deacon means servant. Jesus is the Servant of the LORD. All Christians are the Lord's servant. Those who are ordained as deacons model servanthood. Basing their lives on the servanthood of Jesus, they support the servanthood of all God's people. But we can only do that by the grace of God and there are many challenges in the way of discipleship. We may be discouraged by opposition and apparent failure. We may find that some questions are unanswerable, some difficulties insuperable – or at least for us. We may be confused by changes in the Church or troubled by the way some other Christians think and behave. We ourselves may be over confident in our own strength or too ready to despair at our own weakness. Then is the time to *look unto the rock whence ye are hewn*. What has God meant to us in the past? What has He revealed to us? What have we learnt and how have we benefitted from the fellowship of other Christians – many perhaps now in glory? What does the Bible say? What has the Church always taught? What is the experience of God's people over millennia? We have a firm foundation – Jesus Christ Himself.

June 23rd

Isaiah 52 vv 1-13

We sometimes sing a chorus or hymn based on vv 7 et seq. We have some wonderful hymns. Having preached on one recently, I was asked to preach on others. The best hymns are the ones which are rooted in Scripture.

The Hebrew slaves didn't deserve to be redeemed from slavery in Egypt. God redeemed them just because He loved them. The people Of Israel didn't deserve to be delivered out of the hands of the Assyrians. God delivered them just because He loved them. Redemption from sin, deliverance from the fear of death are the gift of God. We don't deserve to be set free and saved, to be accompanied by God through the wilderness of this world and brought home to Kingdom of God. All this ours because God loves us. It is good news, good news for us to believe, good news for us to share.

June 24th (Nativity of S John the Baptist)

Isaiah 52 v13 – 53 v12

John was a great man. His birth was special. There were prophecies concerning his mission. Presumably, the time he spent in the wilderness was a time of close communion with God. He proclaimed God's Kingdom. His preaching was effective in reaching thousands. He baptised them for the forgiveness of sin, very straightforwardly explaining what the Lord requires of us. It was John who had the amazing privilege of baptising Jesus. For fearlessly speaking out against corruption at court, John died a martyr's death. Yet John knew Jesus as infinitely greater than himself. He knew that he must decrease and Jesus increase. He felt unworthy to baptise Jesus or even to untie Jesus' shoelaces. He knew that only Jesus could baptise with the Holy Spirit and that Jesus is the Judge Whose Judgment brings in God's Kingdom of justice and mercy. Wonderful as John's life was, he was not the Light, but the witness to the Light, the Lamb of God to Whom Isaiah witnesses in today's very familiar reading. Isn't that our calling, to be witnesses to the Light of the world, the Lamb of God, *in that state of life, unto which it shall please God to call us*.

Almighty God, by whose providence thy servant John Baptist was wonderfully born, and sent to prepare the way of thy Son our Saviour, by preaching of repentance: Make us so to follow his doctrine and holy life, that we may truly repent according to his preaching; and after his example constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

June 25th

Isaiah 54 vv 1-17

This is why I don't worry about the future of the Church. It is God's Church, not our Church. The Church depends on God for her existence, not on us. The Church depends on God not on us in order to fulfil God's purposes. What is required of us is that we are found faithful. As God's faithful people, we are wonderfully privileged to participate in His programme for the salvation of everything that is. Now I don't say that the survival of the churches in our two villages or indeed of the Church of England is guaranteed. What is required of us is that we remain faithful. But the Church is God's Church and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.

June 26th

Isaiah 55 vv 1&2

I'm going to savour this chapter, one of my favourites in the Bible. People generally are not satisfied. We're told that young people are more depressed than they have ever been and yet they have more than any previous generation ever did. We go out and buy things to cheer us up. Then we lose interest in them – long before they're worn out – and go and buy something else. People turn to drugs and sex and rock and roll, to exploitative relationships. People obsess about their physical health and fitness, their beauty even, despite knowing that their bodies will inevitably decay and die. People generally are not satisfied. And the reason is that human beings can only ever be satisfied in relationship with their heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Everything else is simply a waste of time, effort, energy and resources. Get right with God and everything else fits into place as you thank Him for all the good things in your life and dedicate them to His service. Ignore, reject or oppose God and you are on a hiding to nothing.

June 27th

Isaiah 55 vv 3&4

How can we get right with God? The answer is Jesus – great David's greater Son. All the promises which God makes to King David are fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In Him the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily. Jesus is the great high priest and the one perfect sacrifice Who takes away the sins of the world. God comes to us in Jesus and we come to God through Jesus. What is required of us is that we have faith, that we repent and are baptised in His Name. He does everything else. Even faith and repentance are His gifts to us. Jesus is the Way. He is the only Way.

June 28th

Isaiah 55 v5

So whom is this good news for? Is it for the Jews? Is it for us Christians? Have we got so used to the Christian faith as our religion that we can't see that this good news is for people of every race and language? Do we think that people presently of other faiths might come to Jesus and find their salvation in Him? The truth is that Jesus is the good news for the whole of creation, good news for us to celebrate, good news for us to share.

June 29th (S Peter {& S Paul})

Isaiah 55 vv 6-11

Seek the Lord while He may be found.

Jesus found Paul on the road to Damascus. We don't know what conflicts there might have been in Paul's mind that drove him to persecute the Church but the Lord found him and made of him a great apostle – preacher, teacher, theologian, pastor, martyr.

Simon Peter's brother Andrew had been a follower of John the Baptist. He was seeking the Kingdom of God. Perhaps Peter was too. Anyway, Andrew found him and brought him to Jesus Who recognised his potential and gave him the name Cephas (= Peter = stone or rock). Later Jesus would find Simon and Andrew and their partners James and John fishing and call them to follow Him, to become fishers of men.

Seek the Lord while He may be found.

Good advice. Might there come a time when it is too late to seek the Lord? How often and how long can a person go on not seeking the Lord? Nobody will ever be fulfilled unless he or she knows the Lord. To know the Lord is to have eternal life. The alternative to life is death. The Lord seeks us as a shepherd seeks the lost sheep or a woman looks for her lost coin or the father seeks the prodigal son. He invites us to seek Him with the promise that we shall find Him if we do. Or are we too taken up with the things of this world to take time for God? Or too afraid? Or too ashamed?

God's Word will accomplish what God intends. We are entrusted with God's Word. God's Word is Jesus.

O Almighty God, who by thy Son Jesus Christ didst give to thy Apostle Saint Peter many excellent gifts, and commandedst him earnestly to feed thy flock: Make, we beseech thee, all Bishops and Pastors diligently to preach thy holy Word, and the people obediently to follow the same, that they may receive the crown of everlasting glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

June 30th

Isaiah 55 vv 12&13

These are appropriate verses to end. My mother chose the chorus based on these two verses for her funeral. So have a number of other people from our Church.

Jesus came so that we should be full of joy. To know Him now, here on earth, is to know joy in all its fulness.

To know Him in all eternity is a greater joy than we are able to express.

Enjoy.