

The Gospel According to St Mark (continued)

April-June 2019

50p



March 31st (completed with apologies)

In order to understand this, you have to think of King David singing or saying these words. You also have to understand that the LORD is the holy Name in the Hebrew, but *my lord* is just the ordinary word for Lord – Adonai. So the person David is addressing is David's lord. He calls Him *my lord*. He cannot therefore be David's son, but is one much greater than David. So Jesus is telling the scribes in a roundabout way that the OT itself predicts that it will be a much greater than David, one much more than one of David's descendants in whom all the prophecies are fulfilled.

April 1st

Mark 12 vv 38-40

I thought we should finish Mark's Gospel, the first part of which we did last quarter, hopefully avoiding the dating and printing problems we had last time, for which I apologise.

Today is April Fool's Day. In the Bible, the fool is the one who says in his heart, "There is no God." Folly is the opposite of wisdom and the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the LORD. But how foolish would you be if you gave the appearance of being religious, even of being a religious leader like these scribes with their long robes, prominent seats in church and ostentatious prayers in public, and yet had no love, no love for the poor and the widow and the outcast?

GRANT, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that the words, which we have heard this day with our outward ears, may through thy grace be so grafted inwardly in our hearts, that they may bring forth in us the fruit of good living, to the honour and praise of thy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

April 2nd

Mark 12 vv 41-44

It is a vexed question how much we should give to God. This poor widow gave all her living. Maybe that was foolish. But everything she had had come from God. As Christians, we offer our whole lives to Him and surely that must include our money. In fact, the money we offer in the Church collection is symbolic of the offering of our whole selves and of everything that we have to God. **All things come from you, and of your own do we give you.** Of course, what we give to the Church is not the sum total of what we give to God. We might also give to missions and charities. It is honouring to God that we take care of our families and dependents. It is our duty to God to take good care of ourselves so that we are fit to serve Him. Perhaps everything we do with our money should be seen as an offering to God. Indeed, whatever we do with our lives, if we are Christians, should be seen as an offering to God. **We offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice.** Nevertheless, our commitment to the Church is essential to our commitment to Christ Whose Body the Church is and what we offer to the Church of our time, our talents and our money, ought not to be just what we have left over when we have taken care of everything else.

April 3rd

Mark 13 vv 1&2

There are some impressive sights in the world. We may well enjoy seeing great buildings when we go on holiday. If they are religious buildings, they may mean even more to us as Christians. When I visited one of the two mosques which now stand where the Jerusalem Temple once stood, I was impressed with the beauty and scale of the mosque and much more moved by the thought of what had gone on on that site over the millennia. Jesus Himself worshipped there, taught the crowds, threw out the money changers. Solomon built the first Temple on this site revealed to King David and for which David had gathered the materials. It is in the account of this in I Chronicles 29¹⁴ that we first encounter the words *for all things come of thee and of thine own have we given thee*. It is believed to be the place where Abraham so nearly sacrificed his son Isaac and God Himself promised to provide the sacrifice which He did near this same spot in His Son Jesus. But even so, all these buildings crumble away with the passage of time. Impressive and inspiring landscapes - mountains, forests, oceans - are more enduring, but they too will perish. Heaven and earth will pass away, but God's Word is for ever.

April 4th

Mark 13 vv 3&4

Wouldn't we like to know the future? Or would we? It would satisfy our curiosity. It would be useful to be able to plan. On the other hand, the challenges that await us could be very daunting. We ought to have faith that God will not tempt us beyond what we can bear, that He will never forsake us, but, I must admit, I'd rather not know about anything terrible which I'm not going to be able to avoid, even though I know that I can rely upon God to bring me through it. We might also like to know God's plans for His Church. I've been reading Halling parish magazines from over 100 years ago. The important things are of course the same, that we seek to live faithful Christian lives, nourished by the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Communion, the Word of God, prayer and Christian fellowship and that we care for one another, especially the poor, in all our needs. The context is, however, very different and therefore the way they go about achieving the same objects is different. I'm particularly struck by how hard they worked to obtain things for the building which were removed by later generations as ideas changed.

April 5th

Mark 13 vv 5-8

So, when is the time Jesus is talking about here? Some people read this as applying to the Jewish revolt against Rome about forty years after He says these words. There was a terrible war and the temple was destroyed. Some people think that Jesus is talking here about the end of the world, which is yet to come when He returns again in glory to judge the living and the dead. Over the centuries, people have applied these prophecies of the "end times" to their own age. When terrible things happen on a global scale, we may very well think that the end is at hand. But notice that Jesus warns how easy it is to be deceived by false prophets and false messiahs.

The way I look at this chapter is to apply it to all three. It does refer to the Jewish War. It is completely fulfilled at the end of the world. It is also relevant to all the troubles we may go through between then and the future apocalypse. Terrible things have happened, do happen and will happen, but God is always with us. He will not suffer us to be tempted beyond what we are able to bear and He will bring us through.

Psalm 23:

1 The Lord is my shepherd : therefore can I lack nothing.

2 He shall feed me in a green pasture : and lead me forth beside the waters of comfort.

3 He shall convert my soul : and bring me forth in the paths of righteousness, for his Name's sake.

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil : for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me.

5 Thou shalt prepare a table before me against them that trouble me : thou hast anointed my head with oil, and my cup shall be full.

6 Surely thy loving-kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life : and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son :

and to the Holy Ghost;

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be:

world without end. **Amen.**

April 6th

Mark 13 vv 9-11

Jesus doesn't pretend that life will be easy for His followers. Those to whom He was then speaking would endure persecution and martyrdom. So would many of His followers down through the ages and in the world today. I don't think we realise how much persecution of Christians goes on – mostly in fundamentalist Muslim countries or communist or formerly communist countries. North Korea is probably the worst. In recent years, the churches of the Middle East, have suffered a great deal as a result of the wars in Iraq and Iran, Syria and elsewhere. We should remember Paul's words in I Corinthians 12 ²⁶ *And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.* As Christians, we are members one of another because we are all members of Christ. It follows that at the very least we should pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters.

April 7th (Passion Sunday)

Mark 13 vv 12&13

I was introduced to these verses as a young child. I never questioned them. This is what you have to. You have to remain faithful to Jesus whatever your family think about it. Thankfully, my family never objected to my being a Christian. Most of them were believers too. So I never considered the cost for some people of taking literally what Jesus says here. That was until I met someone who had been a missionary in a country where people would very likely be denounced and even killed if they converted to Christianity. Ought the missionary to seek converts in such cases, bearing in mind what might happen to them? Or ought he to concentrate on supporting those who had already become Christians. This is Passion Sunday when the year turns towards the Cross. Jesus did lay down His life for us. He told us to take up our cross and follow Him. II Corinthians 5¹⁴ *For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: ¹⁵ And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.* For Paul, it follows from Christ's offering of His life for us that our whole lives should be offered as a living sacrifice to Him, not stopping short of martyrdom. So what do you and I think about the missionary's dilemma? (He opted for nurturing existing believers.)

April 8th

Mark 13 vv 14-23

We'll have two days on this as referring to the Jewish War and to the End of the World. Most religions have shrines or temples. What was exceptional about the Jerusalem Temple was that it did not have an image of God. Pagan temples contained idols, images, representations of the gods they worshipped. How can you worship something you have made yourself rather than worshipping the One Who made you? If you worship false gods, you become like them, false. If you worship the one true God in Jesus Christ, you become like Him. No image can truly represent God and therefore every image is a lie. The devil is the Father of lies. So you cannot worship a lie. There was, therefore, no idol in the Temple of Jerusalem, a source of wonder to the pagans, who preferred a religion they could comprehend to God Who requires our total devotion as He is totally devoted to us. The dwelling place of God was represented by the Holy of Holies which nobody entered except the high priest once a year on the Day of Atonement and only then with the appropriate sacrifices. Various pagan generals who conquered Jerusalem sought to see inside the Holy of Holies or even to erect an image of their gods or even of themselves there. This would be the abomination of desolation. Daniel speaks of such things as he foretells how various pagan empires will rampage through the Middle East putting extreme pressure on the people of God. God is with His people. He will remain faithful, but so must we at whatever cost to ourselves. The profanation of the Temple by the introduction of pagan imagery or perhaps just pagans themselves is often taken to be the abomination of desolation which is the sign of the need to flee before the Romans destroy the city. Interestingly, however, Henry Alford (author *Come Ye Thankful People Come*) believes that the abomination was a massacre carried out by Jewish terrorists. The people of God themselves defiled their temple when they shed blood. Personally, I'm growing ever more aware of the way it is required of those who seek to worship the thrice holy God to be holy in their conduct towards their fellow men & women.

WE beseech thee, Almighty God, mercifully to look upon thy people; that by thy great goodness they may be governed and preserved evermore, both in body and soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

April 9th

Mark 13 vv 14-23

Another way of looking at this (both may be correct) is to think of this as a prophecy of the End of the World. The world had a beginning. Time and space are created entities. Matter and energy are created entities. Jesus, God the Son, created everything that is with the Father and the Holy Spirit. *Through him all things were made.* Some people have even suggested that God says *Let us create* because He is plural, He is three in one and one in three. The world will have an end. Time and space will cease to be. Matter and energy will no longer exist. God will always be – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus will be there at the end. *He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.* Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells (II Peter 3¹³). He will make all things new. Before that, there will be great tribulation. What is required of us is that we remain faithful. God is faithful. Faith is His gift to us by grace.

April 10th

Mark 13 vv 24-27

Sun and moon shall darkened be,
stars shall fall, the heavens shall flee;
Christ will then like lightning shine,
all will see his glorious sign;
all will then the trumpet hear,
all will see the Judge appear;
thou by all wilt be confessed,
God in man made manifest.

Grant us grace to see thee, Lord,
mirrored in thy holy Word;
may we imitate thee now,
and be pure, as pure art thou;
that we like to thee may be
at thy great Epiphany;
and may praise thee, ever blest,
God in man made manifest.

So we sing in one of our great Epiphany hymns based on these verses. The world will end. Our world will end. How can we be ready to meet Him when the time comes? We can only be ready through His grace. By His grace, we can know Him. To know Him is to become like Him. To become like Him is to know Him in all eternity. We really ought not to neglect the means of grace: the Sacraments, the Bible, prayer, Christian fellowship, etc., etc. You can add as many etc.s as you like because there is no limit to the ways in which God graciously makes Himself known to us and leads us home to Himself.

April 11th

Mark 13 vv 28-31

There is always hope – faith, hope and love. In the worst of our troubles, there is always hope. God is with us. God will not let us down. God is leading us to our final home which is at His side for ever. In the worst of our tribulations there is the promise of God. Whatever happens, He is totally to be relied upon.

April 12th

Mark 13 vv 32&33

People will try to calculate the date of the end, but this verse should be a warning not to do so. Even Jesus, whilst on earth, didn't know the date of the end. The point is that we should always live as ready to meet Jesus, whether at His Second Coming, at our death, in Holy Communion, in the pages of the Bible, when we pray, in the faces of other people – especially those in most need, in nature, in our daily lives. Jesus is always with us and our calling to be a holy people is a lifelong vocation, not a last minute conversion. We don't want to be like W C Fields who is supposed, after a not particularly religious life, to have been found on his death bed reading the Bible. He explained that he was looking for get out clauses. Not the attitude, but the only get out clause is faith and repentance! And, yes, it is in the Bible.

April 13th

Mark 13 vv 34-37

We are servants of Jesus, slaves even. We were bought with a price – His own Blood. We are set free from slavery to sin. We are servants of God Whose service is perfect freedom. Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? Romans 6¹⁶. It's one thing or the other. You are either a Christian or you are not. If you are a Christian, you belong to Jesus – your whole life, time, money, talents, opportunities. One day we shall be called to account. We don't know when that will be, but there is no need to fear if we live as always ready to receive Him. Tomorrow is the start of Holy Week. Mr Crawford, in his vicar's letter in the old Halling magazines I told you about laid great emphasis on how we should use this time of year to remember how much Jesus suffered for us and what we owe Him. Mr Crawford was right, of course and the services and readings in church this week help us to do so.

April 14th Palm Sunday

Mark 14 vv 1&2

Today we mark the occasion when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, hailed by the crowds as the Messiah. They were singing the Passover psalm (118) and, no doubt, the multitudes were on their way to keep Passover with millions of others in Jerusalem that week.

20. This is the gate of the Lord : the righteous shall enter into it.

21. I will thank thee, for thou hast heard me : and art become my salvation.

22. The same stone which the builders refused : is become the head-stone in the corner.

23. This is the Lord's doing : and it is marvellous in our eyes.

24. This is the day which the Lord hath made : we will rejoice and be glad in it.

25. Help me now, O Lord : O Lord, send us now prosperity.

26. Blessed be he that cometh in the Name of the Lord : we have wished you good luck , ye that are of the house of the Lord.

27. God is the Lord who hath shewed us light : bind the sacrifice with cords, yea, even unto the horns of the altar.

28. Thou art my God, and I will thank thee : thou art my God, and I will praise thee.

29. O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is gracious : and his mercy endureth for ever.

The crowds were excited. Passover commemorates that God has redeemed His people. He has set us free, delivering us from bondage, delivering us from death. There was all the excitement of seeing the Holy City and partaking of the sacrifice and the sacrificial meal. And this year, as they journeyed to Jerusalem, there was Jesus. Did they but know it, He would fulfil the Passover, setting free not only Israel, but all the peoples of the world. Through His Blood, people of faith of every race and language, every nation and kindred, would be admitted to God's covenant with His people. A wonderful celebration, remembered and re-enacted every Lord's Day at the celebration of the Eucharist.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who, of thy tender love towards mankind, hast sent thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh, and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility; Mercifully grant, that we may both follow the example of his patience, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

April 15th (Monday in Holy Week)

Mark 14 vv 3-9

We make extravagant gestures to those we love. We don't offer them just what we calculate they need. We give the best we can to the people we love simply because we love them. It does us as much good to give as it does to them to receive. Indeed Jesus says that it is more blessed to give than to receive. If we truly love someone to the uttermost, we give that person our whole lives. It was mean-spirited to claim that this ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor and, probably hypocritical. The disciples most likely had funds which they could have given to the poor at any time. We have the resources, I am sure, to give to the poor as well as to make extravagant gestures towards the ones we love including Jesus and His Church. The woman anoints His Body for burial. She gives Him a very valuable gift. He gives us the infinitely valuable gift of life laid down on the Cross for our salvation.

April 16th (Tuesday in Holy Week)

Mark 14 vv 10&11

So why did Judas betray Jesus? Presumably it wasn't just for the money. There must be some other reason why he turned against Him. Some people think that Judas was disappointed that, after the reception on Palm Sunday, Jesus didn't declare Himself king and lead an army against Rome and maybe the out of touch Jewish elite. Some people even think that he might have betrayed Jesus in order force Him to take some decisive action. We can't really know. The question we have to consider is whether we betray Jesus when we don't live up to our calling to be His servants and His friends?

April 17th (Wednesday in Holy Week)

Mark 14 vv 12-15

We're hoping to keep Passover in the parish again this year. There's quite a lot of preparation to do so that have the right food and resources to enact the ritual. Jewish people, of course, take it very much more seriously and part of the preparation is to search the home for any scrap of leaven (yeast) and to remove it. Passover is also the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The leaven stands for sin. There must be no sin in our hearts when we come to the Passover meal. We must repent of everything which makes us unworthy to stand in the Presence of the Lord. He alone can make us clean. See next page.

YE that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways; Draw near with faith, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort; and make your humble confession to Almighty God, meekly kneeling upon your knees.

April 18th (Maundy Thursday)

Mark 14 vv 16-21

The introduction to confession above is used at the (1662) Communion Service. But, of course, we ought to have examined ourselves and repented of our sins before we even come to Church. We are coming into the Presence of the Thrice Holy God. We can only do so without being consumed because Jesus makes it possible for us. We confess our sins. We are forgiven because His Blood was shed for us on the Cross. What we're seeking from Him is transformation into His likeness, not falling back into sin after we've been forgiven. We do do that are we are forgiven again, but it is not what we are seeking. We are seeking grace to live all our lives as God's holy people.

Hebrews 10^{19 et seq} Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And *having* an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of *our* faith without wavering; (for he *is* faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some *is*; but exhorting *one another*. and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching

April 19th (Good Friday)

Mark 14 vv 22-25

We don't celebrate Holy Communion on Good Friday or on Holy Saturday. In one way, that seems strange. Holy Communion proclaims the Death of Jesus until He comes again. Why not celebrate it on the day on which He died? I think the answer lies in that word *celebrate*. We celebrate on Easter Day. Today, we are solemn and sober, contemplating the mystery and the extent of His love for us. Thinking about our Lord's words today not in the context of a Communion service reminds us of what His Death accomplished for us – our salvation.

April 20th (Holy Saturday)

Mark 14 vv 26&27

Today used to be a very popular day for weddings – though not always popular with the clergy. Springtime is good for weddings. There were tax advantages in getting married in April, I think. The Bank Holiday gave you and your guests an extra holiday. On the other hand, the Church wants us to focus today on Christ in the tomb, solemn, sober and serious. For the same reason, we clergy try to resist having Easter Egg hunts in Holy Week or today, just as we try to save the Christmas decorations till 25th December.

Ecclesiastes 3^{1 et seq} To every *thing there* is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up *that which* is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace. What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth? I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it. He hath made every *thing* beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end. I know that *there is* no good in them, but for *a man* to rejoice, and to do good in his life. And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God. I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth *it*, that *men* should fear before him.

Life has many aspects. We can't live in all the time in a bubble of frivolity. Some things have to be taken seriously and soberly and even solemnly. We have to be real.

April 21st (Easter Day)

Mark 14 v28

Jesus came to die. It was His purpose. It was God's purpose in all eternity. He knew that He would die when His hour came. He knew that He would rise again and that He would be shown to be the Resurrection and the Life of all who believe in Him. Because His Death is the final victory over the grave, the resurrection to eternal life is sure.

April 22nd (Easter Monday)

Mark 14 vv 29-31

Time and time again, the apostles fail to see Who Jesus is and what His mission entails. They are like us fallible. They get hold of the wrong end of the stick. They make mistakes. They let Jesus down. Even after the Resurrection, they are still confused as well as full of joy. They are much more confident after the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost but they remain human beings capable of making mistakes. We can take some comfort in the fact that even they were fallible. Jesus still loved them dearly. Jesus was still with them, working with them, allowing for their inadequacies, forgiving their wrong-doing. So it is with us. We make plenty of mistakes. We often fail. But He is with us. There are many reasons to rejoice in the Risen Lord. *The joy of the LORD is your strength*. He is with us and within us. He is working with us as we seek to do His Will and to live the Christian life. In the end, whatever our weakness, like Peter, we are on the winning side in the battle between good and evil, because God is working with us and, dare I say, through His grace, we with Him.

April 23rd (S George?)

Mark 14 vv 32-35

If this were not the Tuesday in Easter Week, we should be celebrating St George today. Many people probably will anyway. What George is best known for is slaying the dragon, which is a metaphor for the victory of virtue over vice, good over evil, Christ as His saints over the devil. In biblical terms, all Christians are saints. We share His victory because we are in Him and He is in us. Our commission is to complete His work by proclaiming the Gospel to the ends of the earth, baptising those who accept Him in faith and teaching the world to obey His commandments.

Wrestling in prayer. Prayer is among the most powerful means of grace. We find in prayer forgiveness, strength to resist temptation, guidance and wisdom, the resources we need to live our lives and to do our work. I always say that prayer is as natural as breathing, which it is. We're the children of God and it is perfectly natural to talk to our Father. It isn't always easy, however. We may have all kinds of tumultuous emotions when we pray, questions we can't answer, much that we don't understand. But we relate to God in Christ in prayer.

April 24th

Mark 14 vv 35&36

Wrestling in prayer. Jesus prays on the eve of the greatest and most painful challenge of His life. Prayer is a resource whatever happens to us. We should never feel that we cannot pray. Neither should we allow life to distract us from prayer – whether the good things of life we enjoy or the terrible things we might have to face. S Paul says (I Thessalonians 5^{16 et seq}) Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. Quench not the Spirit. Pray without ceasing – no matter what.

And notice this. Jesus prays for what any human being would naturally want – deliverance from pain and death. He prays in the knowledge that God can do anything. If God can do anything, it is natural to ask, why doesn't He save us from pain and death? Jesus is absolutely honest with God. We too can be absolutely honest with God and we might well ask the same question of Him. Yet Jesus finishes His prayer, *nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt*. He has so much faith in God, so much. In that too, He is our example.

April 25th (S Mark?)

Mark 14 vv 37-42

If this were not the Thursday in Easter Week, it would be St Mark's Day. I mention that because Mark might have been there. Some people think that he could have been the young man who flees naked in v52. Whoever was there, they were Jesus' friends, as I hope we are. They were too overcome (with grief, tiredness, maybe fear) to obey Jesus' instruction to pray. The effect on Him was that they let Him down by not providing Him with their prayer support. They harmed themselves because they didn't ask God for the grace they needed in Gethsemane. The spirit was willing, but the flesh weak. Well, you and I know what to do – support others in prayer, seek grace for ourselves in prayer. Pray without ceasing.

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

Mark 14 vv 43-45

The reason why holy days like S George and S Mark are transferred out of Holy Week and Easter Week is so that we shall not be distracted from what we are supposed to be thinking about around the Crucifixion and Resurrection of our Lord. The Church invites her children to daily services in which the Eucharist is celebrated (except for Good Friday & Holy Saturday) and the bible readings focus on the mystery of Christ's Death and His rising from the tomb, what this great truth says about God's infinite love for us, the loving response from us which God's love both invites and mandates, the fact that we too are passed from death into life because, through faith, we are in Him and He in us, crucified with Christ that *that we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection* (Romans 6⁵). To say that these matters are of the very highest importance is to understate them. That is why we don't deviate from these daily commemorations this fortnight even for other holy days. Much more then does it follow that we ought not to let these things depart from our consciousness because of our concerns for the things of this world. Our faith is the light by which we find our way in the world.

Judas had gone astray and Jesus suffered the bitterness of being betrayed by somebody He thought was a friend. When bad things happen to us, He understands. He has shared the sufferings of human life. When we do bad things to others (or neglect to do them good) we let down Jesus who said, *Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me* and, *Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me*. We seek to be Jesus' faithful friends which means treating other people as His friends and brothers and therefore as our friends and brothers. This must mean keeping close to Him and valuing Him above all things. We don't want to be like Judas and let Him down.

April 27th

Mark 14 vv 46&47

I usually provide a service of Holy Communion at Cuxton at 9.30 am on the Saturday in Easter Week. We also hold our annual meeting on the last Saturday in April each year at 10.00 am alternating between Halling and Cuxton. The last time the last Saturday in April was also the Saturday of Easter Week, I took the service at Cuxton and, by the time I had walked with Max to Halling, much of the meeting was over. Those of you who know how much I enjoy meetings will understand that I was not disappointed. I'm thinking this year that maybe I should celebrate Communion for Easter Saturday at Halling at 9.30 with the meeting following. I cannot rely on having a congregation at St Michael's and one feels that it would be right to consecrate ourselves for the annual meeting in the service which Jesus gave us. My problem is that I am not sure that the way we (and I include myself in this) conduct ourselves at meetings is compatible with our true nature as people who meet together to participate in the Body and Blood of the Lord. One of the disciples thought that he was doing the right thing in attacking the high priest's servant with a sword. He believed that he was doing what Jesus would want him to do, but he was using the wrong means to achieve the desired aim. He had adopted the world's way of doing things instead of the Lord's. Luke tells us that Jesus healed the man's ear, John that his name was Malchus and Matthew that He told the disciple to put up his sword, warning that those who live by the sword die by the sword. When Peter says that Jesus mustn't be crucified (Matthew 17²³), Jesus says, *thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men*. Even when we are doing God's work, especially when we are doing God's work, it is imperative that we do so in a godly manner, i.e. *in love and charity with our neighbours, in honour preferring one another*, and, if I get really upset, to remember that *the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God*.

April 28th (Easter 1 or Easter 2)

Mark 14 vv 46-52

Another quirk of the calendar is that we have started counting Sundays OF Easter, of which the first is, of course Easter Day, whereas traditionally we have counted Sundays after Easter. The theme of the collect today is the transformation of our nature in Christ. Ordinary human nature (the flesh) cannot know God because of original sin. But Christ's Death and Resurrection by grace through faith transforms our nature so that we may know Him, so that knowing Him we have eternal life, so that knowing Him we are made like Him.

ALMIGHTY Father, who has given thine only Son to die for our sins, and to rise again for our justification; Grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, that we may alway serve thee in pureness of living and truth; through the merits of the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

April 29th

Mark 14 vv 53&54

My first experience of Jerusalem was that it was surprisingly cold. We were on a coach in the early hours of the morning from Tel Aviv, which was very hot, to a kibbutz in the Jordan Valley, which was also quite warm, but, when we were stopped by security on the Jerusalem ring road and the coach doors were opened, there was frost. (Admittedly it was very much hotter in Jerusalem when we returned some days later). So it isn't surprising that they'd made a fire and that Peter was warming himself at it. So what do you think of Peter? Loyal and brave enough to follow, albeit at a distance, or cowardly to hang back and to deny Christ when challenged? How closely do we follow? How brave would we be in Peter's shoes? I do a very challenging situation. I find that ordinary people often face very bad experiences with great fortitude. Others crumble. It isn't always possible to know who is likely to stand fast and who is likely to collapse. We are, however, told to bear one another's burdens and not to judge, but that does of course mean being members of the fellowship so that we know who can help us and whom we can help.

April 30th

Mark 14 vv 55-59

Did the Jews need a temple? Obviously not, because they didn't always have one. I get the impression that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob worshipped outdoors. After all, they were tent dwellers. There also seem to have been stone altars and pillars in the open air. They worshipped in groves of trees and there were shrines in the land. Jacob's uncle even had images. A lot of this would come to be seen as illegitimate, tipping too easily into paganism or at least allowing false doctrines concerning the one true God to be promulgated. After the exodus from Egypt, Moses was granted a vision on Mt Sinai of heaven which was the pattern for the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle (or tent). Worship was now to be conducted in the Tabernacle and in accordance with what God revealed to Moses. When, hundreds of years later, David wanted to build a temple, God wouldn't allow him to but promised that God would build up the House of David. David's son Solomon built the Temple on the same plan as the Tabernacle. The worship in the Temple was splendid but only a reflection of the worship of heaven. God doesn't dwell in buildings built by human beings. Even heaven cannot contain Him. He does, however, dwell in Jesus, great David's greater Son. Jesus is the dwelling place of God. So the stone temple is not necessary. Even in David and Solomon's time, there were reservations about it. Solomon's Temple was demolished by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar and it was very important to the Jews to rebuild it after the Exile. However, Herod the so-called Great (the one who killed the babies in Bethlehem) substantially rebuilt it and the priesthood could no longer plausibly claim descent from Moses' brother Aaron, as it ought to be able to. So, even people who valued the temple highly may have had doubts about the validity of what was going on in the Jerusalem Temple at the time of Jesus, whether Herod's temple and the current priesthood were legitimate expressions of the worship God had prescribed in OT times. Many, as we have seen, on the other hand were amazed at the magnificence of the building and what they imagined would be its permanence. Jesus says the Temple, the dwelling place of God, will be destroyed, which it was by the Romans, but he also meant His Body, which He said would be raised in three days. The priesthood were angry and nervous and inadvertently fulfilled the high priest's prophecy that it is expedient that one man should die for the people. As a result, God dwells in the hearts of believers as He dwells in Christ.

May 1st (S Philip & S James)

Mark 14 vv 60-62

That's the point. Who is Jesus? He is the Christ, the Son of the Blessed. He is indeed the I am Who revealed Himself at the burning bush to Moses. And He is the Son of Mary, one of us. If we can grasp that...

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 stedfastly walk in the way that leadeth to eternal life; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

May 2nd (S Athanasius)

Mark 14 vv 63-65

When you read the Passion story, don't you ever think that it would be dreadful to treat any human being the way human beings treated Jesus? Even if it were true that He was a criminal, to treat Him in that way was to degrade themselves. You and I wouldn't treat an animal like that and nobody should. Jesus was fully human and suffered just as we should suffer if you or I were subjected to similar treatment. Yet this man was also God's Son, the second person of the Trinity. This is what they (we) did to God. It doesn't bear thinking about. Far from alienating us from God, however, this is the means by which God redeems us. The Passion of Christ effects our atonement with God. We are one with Him and one with God in Him because He has endured everything that we could do to Him and overcome all our wickedness by pure love. Athanasius taught, "God became man that man might become God". I'm not quite comfortable with that, but I think the reason is the fact that human language is so limited. I do believe that what Athanasius says is substantially true. He became like us so that we might become like Him. S Peter (II Peter 1⁴) speaks of great & precious promises given to us: that by these we might be partakers of the divine nature.

May 3rd

Mark 14 vv 66-72

I have to admit that I enjoy thinking about such things as we considered yesterday at an intellectual level. I'm using my brain, my mind. That's fine because God gave us our brains and our minds to be used to His glory. It's fine so long as we don't become conceited about our intellectual attainments or enjoy arguing about our faith rather than practising it in love with other Christians of other opinions and with different gifts. Sometimes thinking about these things (Theology) and receiving some light of understanding moves me to awe and awe to worship. Nevertheless, the heart also is vital to our relationship with God. He commands us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. It's the emotion of this story which affects us. Peter's love for Jesus, his fear of confessing Him with the possibility of joining Him on a cross, his guilt at denying Him. Our relationship with God involves our whole being, our emotions as well as our beliefs. There is in our hearts a passion for Christ which one would expect to override love for the world and the things of this world.

May 4th

Mark 15 vv 1-5

It is possible (likely?) that by the time you read these notes we shall know where we stand on Brexit. As I write, it is possible that we shall be: facing disaster, that we shall be basking in new opportunities, that the whole thing has been postponed or even that we are reconsidering and might not leave the EU after all. Only time will tell and I think those in power or aspiring to be in power will need our prayers whatever happens, in Europe as well as in the UK. What is striking at the moment is the way people on all sides seem to be trying to evade responsibility. Anything bad which happens, they convince themselves, is someone else's fault. They don't have to feel guilty themselves. They can blame other people in public, directing any anger for what has gone wrong to the other side. Something similar is going on between the high priesthood and Pontius Pilate. Both are manoeuvring to put the blame on the other, to shift responsibility. They anticipate trouble with the crowds if they put Jesus to death. The priests want him gone, however. Pilate can't find an easy way to deny them what they want. He knows that Jesus is an innocent man and has a feeling that there is much more to Him than meets the eye. Maybe the chief priests know that He hasn't broken any laws. They want rid of this nuisance, but He doesn't deserve to die. Pilate and the priests are going to kill Him and each is trying to deny responsibility. The lesson is obvious. We must take responsibility for what we ourselves do, not try to slither out of blame for doing what is wrong by blaming other people.

May 5th (Easter 2 / Easter 3)

Mark 15 vv 6-14

I've mentioned before that the name Barabbas means *son of the father*. Human beings were created to be sons and daughters of the heavenly Father. Like the prodigal son, however, we have left home and wasted the good gifts the Father gave us and have brought upon ourselves ruin and death. Jesus, Son of the Father infinitely more wonderfully than any other human being, takes our place and dies instead of us so that we may live in Him. As today's collect puts it, He is both our example and the atoning sacrifice.

ALMIGHTY God, who has given thine only Son to be unto us both a sacrifice for sin, and also an ensample of godly life; Give us grace that we may always most thankfully receive that his inestimable benefit, and also daily endeavour ourselves to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

May 6th

Mark 15 vv 15-20

Why should they call Jesus the King of the Jews. He is the Messiah, the anointed One. In the OT, kings and high priests are anointed. The anointing oil is a sign of the gift of God's Spirit. In the OT, the kings who sat on David's throne were sometimes called sons of God. God would protect them. Their calling was to reign on God's behalf, protecting God's people and enforcing God's Law, which they themselves had to live by. At the time of Jesus, several men claimed to be messiahs, with the implication that they were God's anointed Kings of the Jews and that, therefore, God would bless any attempt they and their followers made to get rid of the Romans and to restore Israel as an independent kingdom. Something similar had happened a couple of hundred years earlier when the Maccabees successfully revolted against the Greek rule of Alexander the Great's successors. You can read about it in the Books of Maccabees in the Apocrypha. So maybe, those who mocked Jesus thought that He was setting Himself up as one of these false messiahs and intended a revolt similar to what had happened before. He had after all ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey, symbol of kingly power, hailed by His followers and the people in general as the son of David – Israel's greatest king.

But there are very important differences between Jesus and these false messiahs and between Him and the historical kings of Israel and Judah. In the OT, the King of Israel is God. Human rulers are only ever His viceroys. The kings of Judah & Israel were metaphorically sons of God. Jesus is in the most literal sense possible the Son of God. God and, therefore Jesus, is King not only of Israel. He is King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the King of the Universe. There is no limit to His power and there is no possibility that His purposes will be thwarted. On the other hand, He is the Prince of Peace and His final victory is accomplished by the giving of Himself in a self-sacrifice of love, not by leading a rabble army to probable rout against the might of Rome. Jesus is the

wisdom and power of God. He is the *Lamb standing as it had been slain*. Revelation 5^{11 et seq} And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.

And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.

And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever.

May 7th

Mark 15 v21

Cyrene is in Africa – Libya. Preachers sometimes suggest that Simon was the first black man to follow Jesus. I doubt it. He was, however, almost certainly the first African, but, judging by the name and where he was at Passover, Simon was most likely a Jew. The Jews had dispersed and lived in various places throughout and beyond the Roman Empire. It makes the point, however, that Jesus is for people of every race and language, Jew and gentile, bond and free. He took on the form of a servant or slave to set us free from sin and death so that we might serve Him Whose service is perfect freedom, whoever we are. Going by the names of his sons, Simon might have been a Hellenised Jew – one who was more open to Greek and Roman culture than the most strict Jews. Only Mark tells us the names of Simon's sons. Maybe he knew them personally or they were known in the Christian community for whom this Gospel was first written.

May 8th

Mark 15 vv 22-24

What happens now is in accordance with the prophecies in Psalms 22 and 69. The Crucifixion of Jesus is God's eternal plan for the salvation of His Creation, especially His human Creation. I once tried to persuade a Jew by birth, an atheist by conviction of the truth of the Gospel by pointing out how Jesus fulfils what we call the Old Testament and what for Jewish people is the bible. I wasn't successful then, though we don't know how the seeds we sow might remain dormant and only grow much later on. But clever arguments can only remove some of the obstacles to faith. What is also needed is the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart, maybe sometimes helped by our love.

May 9th

Mark 15 vv 26-28

Again the Scriptures are fulfilled – in this case Isaiah 53¹². I can't say often enough that Christians who give up on the OT cannot understand the NT. The NT writers understand Jesus in the light of what God had already revealed of His eternal purposes in the OT. I think one of the weaknesses of the modern Church is that Christians don't know the full Bible as we have mistakenly tried to make it easier for them by cutting out the hard parts. You can't be a top mathematician if you won't engage in calculus. You can't be a first class physicist if you refuse to tackle relativity. You'd be a useless doctor or nurse if you couldn't stand the sight of blood. You won't be much of a pianist if you refuse to practise scales. In the same way, you are unnecessarily limiting yourself as a Christian if you don't read the whole of the Bible.

May 10th

Mark 15 vv 29-33

He saved others; himself he cannot save.

Jesus could have saved Himself. He could have prayed to the Father to send legions of angels to deliver Him, but He had come for this very purpose and He would do know such thing.

I am conscious, however, of the danger for those of us who have a good reputation as Christians. Maybe we have been able to help other people in their troubles. Our faith has sustained them when their faith has been weak and they have felt confused and depressed. But what about when we face troubles of our

own? Through Christ's grace, we have saved others. Are we ready to trust Him to save us by the same grace when we prominent Christians feel overwhelmed by the challenges we face in the world? S Paul says, *But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway* (I Corinthians 9²⁷).

May 11th

Mark 15 v34

This is, of course, the first verse of Psalm 22. Jesus prays the psalms, worth remembering when we find it hard to do the same. Jesus turns to Scripture in the depths of His pain and despair. Scripture is one of the resources God has provided for His people. You haven't given up on God when you are still talking to Him & He never gives up on you.

May 12th (Easter 3 / Easter 4)

Mark 15 vv 34-36

As so often people mishear Jesus, misunderstand Him and make the wrong response. They think he is calling on the prophet Elijah to save Him. Maybe they have at the backs of their minds the prophecy that Elijah would return at the end in order to usher in the Kingdom of God. John the Baptist at least partly fulfilled this prophecy as he came *in the spirit and power of Elijah*. The more heartless want to withhold even the comfort of sour wine, presumably mocking His desolation on the Cross. It should be incredible that human beings would mock anyone going through what Jesus went through even if the law of their day said that he deserved it. Or maybe they really were waiting to see if He would be saved at the last minute by a miraculous intervention as the heroes in films so often seem to be. The collect prays that we shall listen carefully to Jesus, understand what He says and act on His Words.

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.*

May 13th

Mark 15 vv 37&38

I think we all know this. The veil of the temple metaphorically excludes us from the Presence of God. The Death of Jesus lets us in.

Lonely Golgotha, two thousand years ago

The giver of all life gave up His human soul

All the earth would tremble, deep thunder clouds would form

And in the centre of the temple the holy veil was torn

And on that day

Was made a passage way

Into the very presence of the Lord

And I walked within the veil

And saw the glory of God the Father beheld

And felt the touch of Him who knew me so well

Then I fell on my knees and worshiped within the veil

May 14th

Mark 15 v39

The centurion caught at least a glimpse of Who Jesus truly is and therefore of how things really are. If we see this world in the light of eternity, indeed only if we see this world in the light of Jesus do we see things as they really are – ourselves, other people, the whole universe.

Within the veil there's a consuming fire
That purifies my thoughts and changes my desires
Offerings of confession with every word I speak
But His forgiveness gives me strength when
Temptation has me weak
And I return each day, to that holy place
Where His arms are opened wide to welcome me...
To welcome me.

And I walk within the veil
And see the glory of God the Father beheld
And feel the touch of Him who knows me so well
Then I fall on my knees and worship...within the veil

May 15th

Mark 15 vv 40-47

They saw that Jesus had died and they buried Him. What they did not yet understand was that by His Death He had conquered death, not only for Himself, but for all who are baptised in His Name.

One final day I'll touch the door of death
My soul will enter heaven with the sound of my last breath
The long and lonely journey will have been worth it all
And I'll stand before my Father in fulfilment of my call
Then I'll see His face...in that holy place

And I walk within the veil
And see the glory of God the Father beheld
And feel the touch of Him who knows me so well
Then I fall on my knees and worship...within the veil
Charles Billingsley.

May 16th

Mark 16 v1

Why do we care about dead bodies? Presumably, if you are a non-believer, the person has gone for ever when he or she dies and the body is just a lump of meat. Whereas, if you are a Christian, you pray to God *with whom the souls of the faithful, after they are delivered from the burden of the flesh, are in joy and felicity*. So why does it matter what happens to the flesh? Yet human beings have always cared – right back to Stone Age times – about the disposal of bodies. It is partly a question of hygiene, but it is more than that. Some people find it very hard to accept that a loved one has died if they have not seen the body.

Many feel the need to see the person at peace before burial or cremation. People talk about the view their loved ones will have from the churchyard and feel close to them when they visit and tend a grave. One piece of evidence that human beings are instinctively religious is that quite young children easily believe that granny is in heaven and yet take her flowers in the cemetery. Some people are very unhappy if tissues or organs are retained for medical research or forensic examination after a funeral or even a post mortem examination. Then there is the question of organ donation which some people see as turning a tragedy into a wonderful opportunity to save a stranger's life but some relatives regard as a violation of a corpse. Conversely, desecrating a grave is an insult to the departed. As a fairly matter of fact Christian with a bit of a medical education and a straightforward belief that the soul goes to heaven or hell, personally I'm not much exercised about what we do with dead bodies. I believe in the resurrection of the body, as the Creed says, but I'm sure God can sort that out whatever we do. I do feel the need to treat bodies with respect, however, because we have to respect our humanity; we have to respect human beings. I know other people feel more strongly and their feelings are to be respected, but there is a line which we mustn't cross between Christian sensibility and downright superstition.

May 17th

Mark 16 v2

And this is why every Sunday is a kind of Easter. Christ rose on this day. From the earliest times, Christians met Saturday night / Sunday morning to celebrate Communion, rising early to attend before work, risking persecution rather than miss out on the Eucharistic fellowship. I shan't put the obvious question into words.

May 18th

Mark 16 v3

I like the fact that they got together the spices they needed and travelled to the sepulchre early in the morning even though they didn't know how they would go about getting the stone moved. There is obviously a time for forward planning. It can save a lot of wasted effort and make what we do for the Lord more effective. Sometimes, however, it is right not to allow ourselves to be discouraged by the difficulties we foresee and to go ahead anyway. Sometimes, as here, God may surprise us by doing far more than we expected. It is only too easy to raise objections and imagine insuperable obstacles when fellow Christians make a proposal regarding what the Church can do. But, in the power of God, when we are acting in accordance with His Will, there is nothing we cannot do.

May 19th (Easter 4 / Easter 5)

Mark 16 vv 4&5

So imagine that you are one of those women. Now what? The stone has already been removed. There's young man sitting inside the tomb. He is wearing a long white garment. Elsewhere, he is called an angel. Awe-inspiring? Terrifying? Perplexing? Overwhelming? You would need to cleave to God in order to find the courage, strength, wisdom, faith, hope, love to come through such an experience. But surely we need to cleave to God and in Him to seek all those virtues in every situation in which we might find ourselves. **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.*

May 20th

Mark 16 v 6

Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth. What a sensible thing to do! But where would we seek the Risen Christ? He is present in the whole of creation if we have eyes to see Him. He is in the faces of our fellow human beings. He is in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. He is in the pages of the Bible. He is before us when we pray, the Host when we meet in Christian fellowship. We prepare for Communion because we shall be encountering God made flesh and we should always be prepared to meet Him whenever & wherever.

May 21st

Mark 16 v7.

Go! Tell! We have our orders. If we know that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, if we know Him Whom to know is to have eternal life, we cannot help but share the Good News. *The love of Christ constraineth us*, as S Paul says.

Ye that know the Lord is gracious,
Ye for whom a cornerstone
Stands, of God elect and precious,
Laid that ye may build thereon,
See that on that sure foundation
Ye a living temple raise,
Towers that may tell forth salvation,
Walls that may re-echo praise.

Living stones, by God appointed
Each to his allotted place,
Kings and priests, by God anointed,
Shall ye not declare his grace?
Ye, a royal generation,
Tell the tidings of your birth,
Tidings of a new creation
To an old and weary earth.

Tell the praise of him who called you
Out of darkness into light,
Broke the fetters that enthralled you,
Gave you freedom, peace and sight:
Tell the tale of sins forgiven,
Strength renewed and hope restored,
Till the earth, in tune with heaven,
Praise and magnify the Lord.

May 22nd

Mark 16 v8

Does Mark finish here in your Bible? It does in the oldest manuscripts. What follows vv 9-20 reads differently from the rest of this Gospel. It is very likely that it didn't come from the hand of the person who wrote the rest. So what happened? For a long time, scholars thought that the last couple of pages of Mark's original Gospel had gone missing. In the Greek, v8 finishes with "for", not a stylish word to end on. A preposition is a bad word to end a sentence with! Anyway, if we leave it at v8, we don't read much about the Resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps someone replaced the lost original ending with vv 9-20, the so called "longer" ending of Mark as we have it in most English bibles. They seem to summarise the endings of the other three Gospels. There is an alternative "shorter" ending of Mark printed in some English bibles. But maybe Mark did intend to finish here. He wasn't concerned about stylish Greek. He had a Gospel to proclaim.

May 23rd

Mark 16 v8

So suppose we stop reading here. Where does Mark 16⁸ leave us? The women are afraid. They are awe-struck. Awe is a theme in Mark's Gospel and rightly so. When we think about God, when we think about Jesus, awe is an authentic response. So it should be. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.*

The first response of the women is to tell no-one. They disobey the angel's command, *Go! Tell!* They are afraid. Is that response close to home? Does this verse contain a warning about buried talents (Matthew 25²⁴⁻³⁰)?

There is mystery. Little is put into human words about the Resurrection. God is mysterious. Jesus is mysterious. He is beyond human words.

Mighty and mysterious
in the highest height,
God from everlasting
very light of light:

in the Father's bosom
with the Spirit blest,
love, in love eternal,
rest, in perfect rest.

Ancient and Modern omits this verse from *At the Name of Jesus*. Does that tell us something about possibly down-playing the mystery?

V8 leaves the Gospel open ended. What will happen now? Only God knows. The potential is unlimited. Isn't that always true as we live the life of the Risen Lord? Life is open ended. Anything can happen in God's Providence.

May 24th

Mark 16 vv 9-11

Be that as it may, that Mark may have intended to finish at v8, the remaining verses are part of the Bible the Church has received as Holy Scripture. With a degree of caution, therefore, they are the Word of God to us. John gives us a much fuller account of Mary mistaking Jesus for the gardener and being told not to cling to Him as He will ascend to the One Who is His Father and our Father, His God and our God. In a way, Mary is the first apostle. An apostle is someone who is sent by God. Actually, Jesus is the very first of all apostles and we constitute the apostolic Church because He sends us into the world as witnesses to His Resurrection, Mary being the first of all to do this.

May 25th

Mark 16 vv 12&13

This presumably is the incident described in Luke 24 – Cleopas and his unnamed companion unwittingly meeting with the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. He explains how the Scriptures (the OT) foretell and foreshadow the work of Jesus. When they arrive at Emmaus, they realise in Whose Presence they have been when He shares bread and wine with them. Then they no longer see Him, but their hearts are filled with joy and the imperative to spread the Good News. *The love of Christ constraineth us.* Like them, we encounter Christ in Christian fellowship, in the Scriptures and in the Eucharist.

My God, and is thy table spread,
and doth thy cup with love o'erflow?
Thither be all thy children led,
and let them thy sweetness know.

Was not for them the Victim slain?
Are they forbid the children's bread?

O let thy table honoured be,
and furnished well with joyful guests;
and may each soul salvation see
that here its sacred pledges tastes.

Drawn by thy quickening grace, O Lord,
in countless numbers let them come
and gather from their Father's board
the Bread that lives beyond the tomb.

Nor let thy spreading Gospel rest
till through the world thy truth has run,
till with this Bread shall all be blessed
who see the light or feel the sun.

To Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
The God whom heaven and earth adore,
From men and from Angel-host
Be praise and glory evermore.

Hail, sacred feast, which Jesus makes,
rich banquet of his Flesh and Blood!
Thrice happy he who here partakes
that sacred stream, that heavenly food.

Why are its bounties all in vain
before unwilling hearts displayed?

May 26th (Easter 5 / Easter 6)

Mark 16 v14

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 27th

Mark 16 v15

I thought that yesterday's verse fitted very well with the collect. Jesus upbraided the eleven for their unbelief. We pray God's inspiration (the breathing in of His Holy Spirit) so that we may think those things that be good. If we think good things, by the same Holy Spirit, we seek to perform them. To believe in the Risen Christ and to proclaim the Gospel to the world.

May 28th

Mark 16 v16

In the 1662 BCP, this reading is the Gospel for Ascension Day. The notion that those who didn't believe would be damned troubled many of us. Common Worship provides a less stark Gospel from Luke. The Greek of Mark 16¹⁶ could perhaps be better translated *condemned*. The sense is of being judged and found guilty and sentenced, but the implication is that the sentence is severe – often death. So there is still a division between those who are saved and those who are not. What are they saved saved from? What happens to those who are not saved? The clear implication is that it is far better to be saved than not. But can a loving God condemn or even damn unbelievers? If He can't or doesn't, then there is no difference in the end between those who believe and those who don't. So why believe and why evangelise? Why risk persecution and death for the Gospel? Is everyone destined to spend eternity in the Presence of God even if he chooses not to? Does God respect our choice to reject Him? If He does and we exercise that choice, then do we condemn or even damn ourselves to an eternity without God – hell? Does everyone come to believe in the end if at the time of dying we see clearly what the only options are – heaven or hell? Does God find a way to bring the whole human race home? Or are, in the end, some lost through their obstinacy? I'm not sure, to be honest. I find it hard to believe that the Will of God Who doesn't desire the death of a sinner can be finally thwarted, but I find it equally hard to believe that all those warnings of judgment in the OT and the NT and on the lips of Jesus Himself are meaningless. It is Jesus Who divides the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the chaff and the Church from the world. What do you think? I'm keen on II Samuel 14¹⁴: *Neither doth God respect any person: yet doth he devise means, that his banished be not expelled from him.*

May 29th

Mark 16 vv 17&18

I believe in miracles sang the Jackson Sisters. Do you? I think some Christians expect too many miracles. They think it will always be like the Book of Acts when, in the decades immediately after the Spirit came at Pentecost, leaders like Peter and Paul were often miraculously healing the sick, casting out demons and even raising the dead. If only we had the same faith, they say, it would be the same today. I'm not convinced. I think God uses miracles on special occasions not as routine. We have no right to demand that God will work a miracle. Some people beg God for a miracle when they or their nearest and dearest are facing serious trouble or sickness which nothing short of a miracle could cure. I sometimes wonder why their prayer is answered as they would hope. Bad things do happen to good people. But miracles are special interventions by God's grace in accordance with His inscrutable Will. We cannot demand miracles. Think how different the world would be if we could, if it were effectively controlled by people like you and me, rather than by God. We couldn't plan in a world in which usually a dropped brick fell to the earth in accordance with God's law of gravity and quite often it didn't when Christians prayed that it shouldn't.

I do think, however, that many Christians in the world today are too closed to the possibility of miracle. We live in a wonderful world. The natural order is amazing in itself. It is astonishing what human beings (made in the image of God) can achieve. God does always answer prayer and sometimes He answers in ways beyond anything that we could expect. Let's never close our minds to the possibilities. We believe in the Resurrection. We believe that the Word was made flesh. Anything is possible.

In some churches, speaking in tongues is normal, though I don't believe that it should ever be regarded as mandatory. There are apparently miraculous healings. I was possibly once involved myself in such an event. In Acts 28, St Paul is bitten by a snake and it doesn't hurt him. However those weird sects in America in which they deliberately play with poisonous snakes in order to demonstrate the truth of this verse are being very foolish. They are disregarding the commandment not to test God. Faith does not test God and it serves them right if they are bitten!

May 30th (Ascension Day)

Mark 16 vv 19&20

The Lord working with them.

As far as I can remember, it is only this passage which puts into so many words the vital biblical principle that the Lord is working with us. What we have to do as Christians would be totally impossible if it depended entirely on us. We should be very lonely in our mission. But the Lord is working with us and that is why I have no doubt that the Gates of Hell will not prevail against His Church, whatever our failures, whatever opposition we may face.

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 31st

Daniel 1 vv 1&2

How Shall We Sing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land?

We are set apart by our faith. We are still in the world. We have not yet joined Him in ascending into heaven, but our hearts and minds are thither ascending. We are still in the world, but not of the world. Essentially, we are the people of God. So how do live in the world when we are in fact the Church? The Jews confronted a similar problem at the time of the Exile. Many of them were compulsorily transferred from their homes in the Holy Land, the land promised to their ancestors, the place where the Temple of God was located, where the daily sacrifices were offered and the great feasts mandated by God were celebrated, where the Law was proclaimed and taught, the land to which God had sent His prophets, and were compelled to live in powerful, wealthy, splendid, but pagan, Babylon. How could they live as the people of God in an alien land?

June 1st

Philippians 3 vv 8-21

My boss at Ramsgate was also rural dean and one Sunday, owing to a shortage of clergy, he had to preach on this passage four times. He used the song line *Show me the way to go home* and was embarrassed to remember on the fourth occasion that it is a drinking song. The drunk wants to go home. But so does the Christian and that's what Paul meant and what Philip meant. We don't belong to this world anymore.

June 2nd (Sunday after Ascension / Easter 7)

Philippians 3 vv 1-7

This passage deserves deeper consideration. The gulf between being a Christian and a citizen of this world is much wider and deeper than the gulf between being a Jew and being a Babylonian. Paul had had all the advantages of being a Jew, tremendous advantages relative to the pagans who didn't have the testimony of Moses and the prophets, but even all that was worthless compared with *knowing Christ, and power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings*. It is in the light of knowing Christ and what it means to know Him that we live as Christians in this world. **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.*

J

June 3rd

Daniel 1 vv 3-7

Adopting a possibly enlightened policy, Nebuchadnezzar wants to assimilate the Jews into his empire. He selects some of their young men to the professional skills which would enable him to employ them in Babylon. Assimilation is always a difficult question. One of the reasons the Jews have been persecuted or at least suspected in countries even like our own is that many of them won't assimilate. They are different. They form a close knit group with us gentiles on the outside. Where do their loyalties truly lie? To their fellow UK citizens or to their fellow Jews and the land of Israel? Back in Exodus 1, Pharaoh enslaves the Hebrews and kills their first born sons because he doesn't trust them to be loyal to Egypt in event of war. The same is suspected of other races and religions and cultures who have immigrated into our own country over the last few decades. Some people say, if they have chosen to live here, they should accept our way of life. If, however, different cultures assimilate, their cultures may be lost altogether. How do we know that we are right? The treasures other cultures bring to us may disappear. Isn't it oppressive to force other people to conform to our way of life? If a particular people such as the Jews have been entrusted with a particular revelation from God, isn't it their duty to be true to it, both for their own sakes and as a witness to the people among whom they live?

June 4th

Daniel 1 vv 8-10

Presumably, we can all agree that Daniel and his friends ought not to worship the Babylonian gods or engage in the terrible acts of cruelty the Babylonians were capable of. To that extent, we can all agree that they should not assimilate. But where should they draw the line? They decide that they will not eat and drink food and wine which might not be kosher. It was God Himself Who gave food laws to the Jews and it is a mark of being a Jew not to eat what is forbidden. To this extent, they would not assimilate, though they were prepared to receive lessons from the Babylonians and later to serve as ministers in the Babylonian government. But was it important enough for these young men not only to risk what Nebuchadnezzar might do to them if they refused his hospitality but also to put at risk their kindly Babylonian guardian Melzar? There are people in modern Britain who say that kosher (for Jews) and halal (for Muslims) slaughter ought to be outlawed and so should male circumcision which is important both to Jews and Muslims. Do we have the right to interfere? How should they respond if we do? We already have laws against "female circumcision" (FGM) which is practised by some African cultures. We are confident enough that we know best to enforce our values on them.

June 5th

Daniel 1 vv 11-16

The four lads are confident that if, they obey the Will of God, God will not let them down and so it proves. This is relevant to us as Christians since we are citizens of heaven in an even more real sense than Daniel and his mates were citizens of the Holy Land. Strangers and pilgrims on earth, how do we avoid assimilating with the world? If we assimilate, we shall be false to Christ and lose our inheritance in Heaven. We shall also cease to be witnesses to the world of the difference that Jesus makes. But if we refuse to assimilate, there may be a price to pay. We may suffer persecution. We might also make it difficult to relate to other people and, if we can't relate to them, we can't be of any benefit to them. Some Christian groups are very closed up, rejecting any compromise with the world. Others are at the opposite extreme, so compromised that it is hard to see what difference their professed faith makes in their lives and why anyone should want to share it.

June 6th

Jeremiah 29 vv 1-14

Jeremiah the prophet writes a letter from Jerusalem to the exiles in Babylon. They aren't coming home for 70 years. They need to settle in Babylon and to work in Babylon. They are to seek the peace of Babylon and to pray for Babylon. We aren't going home to heaven yet. We live and work in the world. It is for our own well-being and for the world's well-being that we work and pray for the peace of the world. English Jews pray for the Queen. Christians in pagan lands are told in the Bible to pray for their rulers just as those of us do who live in supposedly Christian lands. If we are good citizens of the world, the people of the world will be more likely to trust us. We shall be less likely to be persecuted. We may have more opportunities for mission and service. But how far can we compromise with the world and still remain distinctively Christian?

June 7th

Ezra 9 vv 1-4

I don't find the last two chapters of Ezra comfortable reading. God has brought the exiles home from the Babylonian and Persian empires. They are re-building the holy city and the temple and trying to re-build their country on the basis of uncompromising faithfulness to God. But some of them are married to pagan women. This is one of the hardest questions with regard to assimilation. Your relationship with God and your relationship with your wife or husband are the two most important relationships in your life, usually the two most fulfilling. But what if the two great loves in your life are pulling in different directions? What do you do when what your wife wants is different from what God wants? How are you going to bring up your children in the faith if you don't both have that faith? Often, the result of marrying out of the faith is total assimilation to the world. You cease effectively to live as a Christian or a Jew or whatever you are supposed to be. On the other hand, it is cruel and brings little credit on the Church if religion becomes something which separates two people who are deeply in love. Such cases have led to mental illness and even suicide. Yet even Solomon's downfall was his marriages to pagan wives and the compromises he made with regard to his own belief in order to accommodate theirs. I suppose there is a similar dilemma if you are married to someone who is a traitor to your country.

June 8th

II Corinthians 6 vv 14-18

It's not just an OT thing. The same principles apply in the NT. Christians are called to be separate, different, and not to be led astray by relationships with non-believers.

There are in parliament several husband and wife couples, also MPs who are brothers or sisters. So far as I know, these family groups of MPs are all in the same party. But what if they weren't? How would they cope with divided loyalties? Or do you think that it is unlikely that people of different parties would meet and marry because people of different political opinions might not socialise together or might agree to disagree quite quickly if they became friends, say, at work?

When Tony Blair was prime minister, his barrister wife Cherie's legal practice was sometimes involved in legal action against the government. In marriage, a man and his wife become one flesh. Nobody would expect them to have exactly the same ideas about everything, but could they be happy and successful if they disagreed utterly about their most profound beliefs, especially religion?

June 9th (Whitsunday / Pentecost)

Daniel 1 vv 17-21

Daniel and his mates cleaved to God. They settled in Babylon. They worked with the Babylonians. No doubt they prayed for the Babylonians. But there was a line they would not cross. They would not compromise on what truly mattered. They would not forsake their Jewish faith in order to assimilate, in order to keep themselves safe or to advance in the world in which they lived. Under God's providence, they advanced, acquiring the talents and skills they needed both to prosper themselves and to serve the world in which it had pleased God that they should live. Surely, this is the work of the Holy Spirit in us as we seek to live our lives in the world in which has pleased God that we should.

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*

June 10th

Daniel 2 vv 1-13

We've all had the experience Nebuchadnezzar had had. We dream a disturbing dream and then we can't remember it shortly after we've woken up. Note how ruthlessly as well as unreasonably Nebuchadnezzar intends to deal with his wise men if they can't tell him what he wants to know. Atrocities such as these go on in the world today. Human nature is quite capable of such horrors. It matters. We live in a country which for hundreds of years was notionally Christian. We've been guilty of some atrocities in the past, some even in the recent past, but, living in a "Christian" country, it is easy for us to be complacent and to assume that there is no need to make distinctions between the Church and the world, the saved and the unsaved, the flesh and the spirit. British values, we assume, are not so very different from Christian values, but that is at least partly because of our Christian heritage. It does matter that we are Church and that we do not assimilate with the world. We live by Christian values, not the world's values where they diverge from God's law. There is a reason why the baptized are asked to renounce sin, the world and the devil.

June 11th (S Barnabas)

Daniel 2 vv 14-25

Daniel and his three friends were wise to cleave to God. All wisdom comes from God. All good gifts come from Him. Because they chose to stick with God, they have the resources to serve Nebuchadnezzar and to save themselves and, it appears, the Babylonian wise men as well. It might appear that you'd get on better if you lived by the world's values (basically look after number one first), but you don't. God is the source of all wisdom and of every other gift we require to live fulfilled and useful lives.

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

Psalm 1 vv 1-6

Once, when I was a curate, I looked after the vicar's tortoise while he was on a holiday. It went along my row of runner beans, biting through each one in turn. The beans wilted and died and bore no fruit. That is what happens to people who cut themselves off from God.

June 13th

Daniel 2 vv 26-30

Daniel and the other three were students. So should a student reading this think, “I needn’t bother with my studies because all wisdom and all the skills I need come from God”? It’s like the diabetic who prays and then says, “I don’t need to take my insulin” or the holiday maker who says, “I’ve prayed. So I can fly to Mallorca without a ‘plane.” I’ve never heard that last one, but the first two aren’t unknown. What they are missing of course is that education and medicine (and aeroplanes) are resources which ultimately depend on God. They are aspects of the world which He has made in His wisdom. They are His gifts to us. He is working with us and it is when we are working with Him that we are effective. We thank God for our education and for medicine and for aeroplanes. Thanking God for them, we work with Him in order to accomplish His purposes which are what is best for us and for the world. Jesus came because *So God loved the world* and we, His Church, the Body of Christ, serve God when we serve the world by working with Him to achieve His purposes.

June 14th

Daniel 2 vv 31-45

The interpretation of the dream is that great empires will rise and fall. In the context, it probably refers to the Babylonian, Median and Persian empires and then that of Alexander the Great, which was divided up among his generals after his death at a young age. Whatever earthly kingdoms this dream refers to, the same is true of all human kingdoms, no matter how mighty. They wax and wane. Vv 44&45 refer to the Kingdom of God, which is eternal. As Christians, we live in the kingdoms of this world, we pray for them and we work for their well-being, but our allegiance is to the Kingdom of God and we do not compromise our citizenship of heaven on account of our citizenship of this world. Ultimately we live by God’s law and, if this conflicts with human law, our allegiance is to God.

Jesus shall reign where’re the sun does its successive journeys run,
his kingdom stretch from shore to shore, till moons shall wax and
wane no more.

So be it, Lord; thy throne shall never, like earth's proud empires,
pass away;
thy kingdom stands, and grows for ever, till all thy creatures own
thy sway

June 15th

Daniel 2 vv 46-49

Up and out is a phenomenon sometimes observed in tough inner city churches – a source both of joy and frustration to successful pastors. You preach the Gospel to poor people living in dreadful circumstances. Some are converted and they get their lives together. They give up drink and other drugs if they’ve been taking too much. You help them to sort out their debts, maybe help them into education or training. They earn respect in the community which enables them to get decent jobs and nicer accommodation. They become just the sort of lay people whom you need to work with you in the church in this tough area and then they move out to a place where the schools are better, the streets are safer and their children won’t face the pressures and the temptations which brought them down. If you follow the Law of God, walk in His ways, act in accordance with His wisdom, you will be honest and diligent and you may well earn the respect which enables you to get on in this world, to be comfortably off and to enjoy safety and security. If you don’t get respect for being virtuous, that doesn’t mean you should give up being virtuous. If your virtue does bring you respect and a position in society, then the question is what will you do we these to God’s glory and for the benefit of others?

June 16th (Trinity Sunday)

Isaiah 6 vv 1-8

To be holy is to separate, separated to God, separated from the contamination of sin. Isaiah is granted a vision of the thrice holy God and is at once convicted of sin. He is a man of unclean lips and dwells in the midst of a people of unclean lips. He is realistic about his status in the eyes of God. He is a sinner as we all are, except Jesus. He dwells among sinners. When he acknowledges that he is a sinner, God cleanses him and sets him free, free to serve God by conveying God's Word to this people of unclean lips. The prospect is unpromising with this spiritually blind, deaf and hard-hearted (ie typically human) audience), but the Word will bear fruit. It does not return to God void.

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 thy Divine Majesty to worship the Unity; We beseech thee, that thou wouldst keep us steadfast in this faith, and evermore defend us from all adversities, who livest and reignest, one God, world without end. *Amen.*

June 17th

II Kings 5 vv 1-19

Before we carry on with the story of Daniel and his friends, I want to look at what happened to Naaman. Israel and Syria (or Aram) were more or less in a state of war. A little Israelite girl has been captured and made a servant to the wife of the Syrian general. He has leprosy and she has faith that the God of Israel (the only God actually) could cure him by his prophet Elisha. This happens and Naaman is both astonished and extremely grateful. He wants to worship the God of Israel now, but, in his naivety, thinks he needs to take some Israelite soil home with him to Syria to worship on. The naivety isn't so much of a problem. The problem is that he cannot return to serving the King of Syria as a high-ranking officer unless he is prepared to accompany his master in worshipping the idol Rimmon. What should he have done? Given up being general? Stayed in Israel (giving up his wealth and power) as a worshipper of the LORD? Compromised as in fact he said he was going to?

June 18th

Daniel 3 vv 1-18

We need to accept human authority if there is not to be anarchy, but where does human authority come from? Why should we feel bound to obey a particular person or persons? Respect? Fear? The fact that the governor has the consent of the governed? But people may not respect their rulers or fear them. Very few rulers have the willing consent of all their subjects. But regard the king or emperor as ruling with the authority of the nation's god and clearly everybody has the duty to be a good citizen. The nation's religion is a powerful force for social cohesion – “one nation under God” – and gives legitimacy to government. So, in instructing everyone to worship his idol, Nebuchadnezzar is expressing and confirming the unity of his empire and reinforcing his authority. The fact that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refuse to do so is a threat to social cohesion and an act of rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar. No matter how competent and honest they are as administrators, they are seen as a threat to Nebuchadnezzar's rule and to national security. But, faithful as they are in Nebuchadnezzar's service, these three young men have that higher loyalty to the one true God which means that they can neither worship false gods nor given unqualified allegiance to any human ruler.

June 19th

Daniel 3 vv 19-23

Religion then creates a problem for governments. Religious people have a higher loyalty than their allegiance to the state. One way round this is to have a state religion or an established Church. When English Anglicans pledge loyalty to God and the Queen, they tend not to see any essential difference between the two. One problem about this arrangement is that the Church may become too ready to compromise with the world in order not to rock the establishment boat. Moreover, if the Church shares in the wealth and power of the state, is she really following in the footsteps of Jesus Who became poor for our sakes and refused worldly power? If English people are required to be loyal to God and the Queen (God as understood by the Church of England), it is likely that dissenters, Roman Catholics, Jews, followers of other religions, atheists, etc., will be seen as potentially disloyal to the state and be excluded from public office or even

actively persecuted as happened in the past in this country. We Anglicans would face the same suspicion if we lived in countries where the state religion was something other than Anglican Christianity. We do face exclusion and persecution in some Muslim and communist countries.

The state might decide to eliminate religion altogether, but it will find itself on a hiding to nothing if it does. Stalin quipped, “How many divisions has the pop?” only eighty years ago. The USSR is long gone, but God’s *Kingdom stands and grows for ever till all thy creatures own thy sway*. What states like the US and most of western Europe do is to try to remain neutral with regard to religion, but effectively to marginalise it. It is tacitly expected that our first loyalty will be to our country and religious affiliation will be an optional extra. That’s fine till the demands of the state conflict with those of faith. Then we’re back to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, hopefully with less violence. What does the state do with the Christian pastor or registrar who refuses to conduct gay marriages, the doctor who won’t perform abortions, the Jew or Muslim who insists on the ritual slaughter of food animals, traditional cultures which force marriage on young women, those who practise FGM or male circumcision, teachers who won’t support pupils in self-identifying as being of a different gender from their body? Does the state insist on imposing its own norms? If so, by what authority?

June 20th (Corpus Christi)

Daniel 3 vv 23-30

Today we especially give thanks for the Institution of Holy Communion. Christ is invisibly present in the consecrated Bread and Wine – to console us, to cleanse us, to nourish us, as a pledge that we belong to Him and that in Him we have our eternal home. Christ is always with us. He is with us when we are discouraged, opposed or persecuted. He is with us when we pass through the fire. Do you know this old chorus? It means a lot. The Blood of Christ brings us through everything.

“Some through the waters, some through the flood,
Some through the fire, but all through the blood;

Some through great sorrow, but God gives a song,
In the night season and all the day long.”

June 21st

Daniel 4 vv 1-18

It was Enoch Powell who said that all political careers end in failure. It was true of his with a vengeance, a very clever man and a Christian, who completely misread the situation with regard to immigration, and is remembered, to a degree unfairly, as a racist. I don’t think he was any more a racist than many people at the time, but he failed to see how communities could integrate, despite their different cultures, and learn to live together in harmony. There are problems of integration, but thank God, they have not led to “rivers of blood” and we are learning how to deal with them with mutual respect even where there is disagreement. Most people do, however, carry on at the top too long, until they are forced off their pedestal by growing opposition or by the frailty of old age. In our prime, we may appear to be very important, powerful, self-sufficient, indispensable even. It is only too easy to become vain. Yet everything we have comes from God. Anything we achieve is by the grace of God. In fact we are what we are solely by the grace of God. Gratitude and humility are the two true indispensables for any leader. As S Paul says (Romans 12³), For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think *of himself* more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.

June 22nd

Daniel 4 vv 19-27

On this date in 1980, I was ordained deacon. Deacon means servant. Jesus is the servant of the LORD. Christian people, baptised into Christ, are called to be the LORD's servants. The ordained ministry of deacon seeks to embody Christ's servanthood and to epitomise the ministry of all the baptised as servants of God. Ordained deacons, with all Christians, receive this calling to servanthood with gratitude and humility. There is nothing any of us can achieve save through the grace of God. Compare and contrast Psalm 127 with Shelley's poem.

1. **EXCEPT** the Lord build the house : their labour is but lost that build it.
2. Except the Lord keep the city : the watchman waketh but in vain.
3. It is but lost labour that ye haste to rise up early, and so late take rest, and eat the bread of carefulness : for so he giveth his beloved sleep.
4. Lo, children and the fruit of the womb : are an heritage and gift that cometh of the Lord.
5. Like as the arrows in the hand of the giant : even so are the young children.
6. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them : they shall not be ashamed when they speak with their enemies in the gate.

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear --
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.'

June 23rd (Trinity 1)

Daniel 4 vv 28-37

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 24th (Nativity of S John the Baptist)

Daniel 5 vv 1-12

Belshazzar seems to have forgotten the lessons his father had learnt, both about personal humility and about the dangers of trifling with the God of Israel – Who is of course the one true God. I suppose that using the temple vessels for his feast might be thought to demonstrate that the LORD is nothing. Either He does not exist or He is weaker than the gods of Babylon and the King of Babylon who worships them and rules by their condescension. He soon finds that he is mistaken on both counts. The miraculous writing on the wall is not something which the people of God would expect to appear on all such occasions, but we know that it is always metaphorically there. God is not mocked. However mighty rulers are in this world, however proud, the LORD is always mightier and our allegiance is to Him no matter what they may do to 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

Daniel 5 vv 13-31

All human authority comes under the judgment of God. Christian rulers ought to know that. Secular and pagan rulers presumably do not know that. Christians are called to pray for and to obey both. But we also have a duty to live in accordance with the Truth of God, to obey His laws, and to bear witness to the Truth (Jesus is the Way, the Truth & the Life.) in the world, both by word and deed. God weighs all the actions of human beings, including those of the rich and powerful. All of us come under His judgment and we all answer to Him. God is just and His judgment is just. So the victims of injustice are never without hope.

Psalm 96: O **SING** unto the Lord a new song : sing unto the Lord, all the whole earth. Sing unto the Lord, and praise his Name : be telling of his salvation from day to day. Declare his honour unto the heathen : and his wonders unto all people. For the Lord is great, and cannot worthily be praised : he is more to be feared than all gods. As for all the gods of the heathen, they are but idols : but it is the Lord that made the heavens. Glory and worship are before him : power and honour are in his sanctuary. Ascribe unto the Lord, O ye kindreds of the people : ascribe unto the Lord worship and power. Ascribe unto the Lord the honour due unto his Name : bring presents, and come into his courts. O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness : let the whole earth stand in awe of him. Tell it out among the heathen that the Lord is King : and that it is he who hath made the round world so fast that it cannot be moved; and how that he shall judge the people righteously. Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad : let the sea make a noise, and all that therein is. Let the field be joyful, and all that is in it : then shall all the trees of the wood rejoice before the Lord. For he cometh, for he cometh to judge the earth : and with righteousness to judge the world, and the people with his truth.

June 26th

Daniel 6 vv 1-9

Usury, lending money at any interest at all, is forbidden in the Old Testament. The Jews interpreted that as a prohibition on lending money at interest to fellow Jews. For centuries, Christians interpreted it as a prohibition on lending money at interest at all. Christians then turned to the Jews when they wanted to borrow money and the more irrational of them sneered at the Jews for taking part in a dirty trade and called them greedy when they expected to be repaid. In Mediaeval Europe, Jews very often lived quietly, not spending their money on conspicuous consumption and worked hard and honestly. They were then resented by profligate Christians especially if the latter were in the formers' debt. This often happens when there are industrious immigrant communities or minority cultures who work harder and therefore prosper more than the majority population. Thus it was for Daniel and his three friends. They were good workers and were promoted to the highest level in the empire. Their rivals resented the fact that these foreigners were promoted above them and so they plotted against them.

It is an attitude to guard against on our part. Most readers of these notes are part of the majority culture and we must resist the temptation to resent people of other races, cultures or religions who are deservedly flourishing because they are working hard and well.

On the other hand, as Christians in an increasingly secular Britain, as *aliens in a strange land*, we have to be ready to be resented because we are different and possibly more successful because we maintain values which the rest of society has given up on – such as humility, thrift, chastity, honesty, etc..

June 27th

Daniel 6 vv 11-17

OK, so Daniel had to keep praying whatever the law of the land said. We all have to keep praying whatever anyone says. But did he have to be so openly defiant, praying three times daily in front of an open window? In such circumstances I think I would have prayed secretly as I did once when I was in a building where all prayer except Muslim prayer was forbidden. When the early Christians risked arrest and martyrdom for meeting together for Holy Communion, couldn't they have just prayed at home? I think Hebrews 10²³⁻²⁵ is warning against this apparently prudent practice in the face of persecution: *Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;)* And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. Where would we draw the line? Would we refuse a job which required us to work unnecessarily on Sundays? Would we tell lies on behalf of our employer? Would we affect not to be Christians as a condition of working for a wealthy Arab potentate? Would we draw the line, if we were teachers, at teaching values contrary to the teaching of the Church? If we are in the world, but not of it (as we are) where do we draw the line? Too exclusive and we can't relate at all the people of the world which God so loved and we may live very restricted lives ourselves. Too lax and we may become indistinguishable from the world – useless as witnesses of God's Truth and in danger of casting away our own salvation.

June 28th

Daniel 6 vv 18-28

These stories are not told and retold in order to teach us that God will always deliver us from the lions' mouth or out of the fiery furnace. They are told to generations of the people of God facing persecution in order to teach us to stand firm. God is with us. He can rescue us from a martyr's death. He generally doesn't, but He is still with us nevertheless. When we have been brought through the ordeal, we shall be with Him forever. Psalm 23: 4. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil : for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me. 5. Thou shalt prepare a table before me against them that trouble me : thou hast anointed my head with oil, and my cup shall be full. 6. But thy loving-kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life : and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

June 29th (S Peter)

Daniel 7 vv 1-14

The early Church soon found itself persecuted. Initially the Jews objected to the challenge to their own interpretation of the Old Testament and the successful Christian mission to the Gentiles. Then Christians incurred the ire of Rome. They were different. People who are different usually come under suspicion. They refused to worship the Roman gods. They wouldn't worship the emperor. Because of that, they were unable to serve in the army or in various other roles which those living in the Empire might be expected to take. Christians were killed for their faith, for refusing to acknowledge the emperor as *dominus et deus noster*, our Lord and our God. Jesus is our Lord and our God, nobody else. Leaders like Paul & Peter had to pursue their own vocation and to guide Christ's flock through those troubled times when an immensely powerful and ruthless empire turned against the Church, many of whose members were the poor, slaves, women - in worldly terms the vulnerable, in the Words of Jesus, the blessed.

O ALMIGHTY God, who by thy Son Jesus Christ didst give to thy Apostle Saint Peter many excellent gifts, and commandest 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

Daniel 7 vv 15-28

The beasts in Daniel's vision represent various powerful and cruel empires, which, each in its turn, would dominate history. Wealthy and powerful, they would persecute the people of God. To many, to themselves even, they would appear invincible. Satan claims that the glory of the kingdoms of the world is given to him and he gives them to whomsoever he will. Certainly, the methods by which many powerful people dominate the world are satanic. Yet God is mightier. He is the Judge. Jesus is the Redeemer. He conquers evil with good, death by dying and rising again, Satan by accepting the Will of God for His life, self-centredness by self-sacrifice. He redeems the created order by offering Himself on the Cross as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world and He reigns for ever at God's Right Hand, bringing with Him the saints of the Most High, all those who have been washed in the Blood of the Lamb, you and me I trust, through faith in His Name.