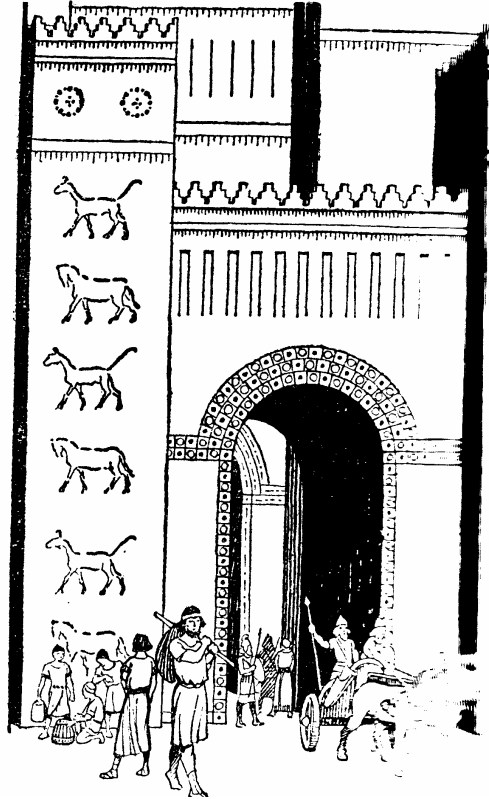


Bible Notes

April-June 2006



The Book of the Prophet I saiah

April 1st

Isaiah 1 v1

I thought it was time we did some more Old Testament. After all, the Old Testament is the foundation for the New. Isaiah has been called the fifth evangelist. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell the story of Jesus in the New Testament. Isaiah's prophecies put the story of Jesus in the context of God's plan for saving the whole world.

Isaiah of Jerusalem lived in the 8th Century BC. The Kingdom of Israel had long been split by this time into a northern kingdom (often called Israel) and a southern, Judah. Hezekiah is one of the very few kings of Israel praised in the Bible. He enjoyed a long reign. It was at this time that Israel and the surrounding countries were ravaged by Assyrian imperialist armies. The first part of the Book of Isaiah deals with this period.

The latter part of the Book deals with events a century or so later. Some people believe that Isaiah himself foresaw these events. Others believe that Isaiah had successors who continued his work and added to the Book as the story of God's people developed.

April 2nd

Isaiah 1 vv 2-4

The first few chapters of Isaiah are often grim. They are about the people's sin and coming judgment. What we ought to ask is whether this message applies to us. By the time of Isaiah, Israel had a wonderful history. There was the Exodus, the wonderful times under David and Solomon. What had gone wrong? God had done so much for His people. Why had they forsaken Him?

Many of us have had good Christian upbringings. We can think of many blessings we have received. We know the wonderful story of Jesus – His life and death on the cross for the salvation of the world. How is it that people drift away from God? Our love grows cold. We talk about our nation as a post-Christian society. Faith is hardly paramount in the lives of many who call themselves Christians. The ox does better in that it knows his master's crib.

April 3rd

Isaiah 1 vv 4-9

People think they can manage perfectly well without God. Indeed they can manage better without Him. God is all right to fall back on when you need someone to pray to in an emergency. Church provides a context in which to celebrate or mark a birth, death or a marriage, but the rest of the time we can get on perfectly well without God. We can run our own lives and we can run our society without reference to God.

Only we can't. Either the ultimate reality is God or there is no ultimate reality. It might be that *what you see is what you get*, that there is nothing beyond the physical universe. If so, there is no purpose for our existence. We are literally going nowhere. And there is no moral context for our decision making and our relationships. We might just as well *eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die*. Or, if there is ultimate reality, if there is God, we had better come to terms with Him because *in Him we live and move and have our being*.

April 4th

Isaiah 1 vv 10-17

Most people are religious. Most human cultures have some kind of religion. In 21st century Britain, when people by and large don't come to church and boast about not being religious, they have secular funerals, secular naming ceremonies and go through marriage ceremonies in secular locations. Even civil partnerships for people who cannot legally marry attract a ritual. People want the order that religious rituals give to their lives. People talk about their own spirituality when they practice yoga, feng shui, or the more way out alternative medicines or indulge in superstition. People feel instinctively that there is more to life than this world and its material values. They want the comforts of religion, but they do not want to take on the obligations. There is very little in the Bible about people failing to follow religious rituals. They loved going to the temple and other shrines with sacrifices, services and social life around the altar. What the Bible complains about time and time again is that all this is lip service. They claim to be religious. They claim to follow God. Their rituals are empty, meaningless. Because they do not act like God's people at home, in their business or in their ordinary social activities.

April 5th

Isaiah 1 vv 18-20

These verses were beloved by the old time evangelists. That conviction of sin as scarlet – the colour of blood. The idea that sin really matters. We seem to have lost any idea that God is our Judge. The word “sin” is devalued as a synonym for some peccadillo such as eating too many cream cakes. We may not be particularly good, but we aren’t particular bad. We are so used to believing that we shouldn’t condemn anyone, that we can’t quite believe that God might condemn us.

But God says, “Let us reason together.” Now there’s a thought! Reason together with God! If God is love, what would God’s people be like? Wouldn’t they love God whole-heartedly? Wouldn’t they love their neighbours as themselves? What? You fall short of that? Well, how far short do you fall? That far? Now we’re getting somewhere because if you’ve got this far, you’re close to repentance and, if you repent, those scarlet sins will be washed as white as snow and you will eat the good of the land. But, if we persist in rebellion against God, then what do we expect? To be devoured by the sword? To be given more chances to repent? Or to be let off whether we repent or not?

April 6th

Isaiah 1 vv 21-31

Sodom and Gomorrah were notorious for their wickedness. Conversely, Jerusalem was the holy city. We can be complacent about western civilisation and our Christian heritage. We read about Saddam’s Iraq, Mugabe’s Zimbabwe, Siberian prison camps under the Communists and we thank God that it could never happen here, that British politicians, soldiers and police would never behave like that. Of course we know that is not quite true. We have had notorious miscarriages of justice. Some British police have turned out to be corrupt. Some of our soldiers have behaved brutally. Some of our politicians have turned out dishonest. For all that, however, we do live in one of the best societies in the world and our institutions and traditions underpin our values. We must never forget how precious and how fragile these values are. The civilisation of Beethoven and Luther produced the Nazi Holocaust. Josef Stalin was trained as a Christian priest! As we lose respect for the notion that human beings are made in

the image of God and that God became one of us in the person of Jesus Christ, we chip away at the edges. Abortion becomes acceptable. Embryos get to be used as resources for human tissue. Euthanasia is made available at first to the terminally ill, but then what? We no longer see the value of self-sacrifice. Living becomes a matter of making the best of what you've got and those on the margins matter less and less. Christian civilisation is fragile and needs the support of a truly committed Church which itself lives by Christ's example and teaches others (especially our children) to do the same.

April 7th

Isaiah 2 vv 1-5

Isaiah the fifth evangelist! "All nations shall flow to the House of the LORD." That is, the gentiles shall come to the LORD. Mostly, this truth is not obvious in the Old Testament. By and large, the Jews are God's people and the gentiles are the outsiders, the threat, the enemy. Yet Israel had a vision that the LORD is omnipotent. There is no other God. He is the Creator of everything, of all the nations. All the lands and the history of their peoples are in the hands of the LORD. Nothing happens without God. All human beings (Adam) are created in God's image. Certainly, Israel is privileged by having received the revelation through Abraham, Moses, etc, but privilege brings obligation. The revelation at Jerusalem is ultimately for all nations.

And what is the revelation? Christ crucified at Jerusalem. In Him, people of every nation come to God and learn to live in His ways.

April 8th

Isaiah 2 vv 6-9

Privilege brings obligation. The gentiles worshipped fertility gods. They put their trust in silver and gold. They devoted their lives to what they made for themselves. In superstition they turned to soothsayers, magicians and horoscopes. The gentiles did all this in ignorance. And the chosen people copied them. And because the chosen people should have known better, the consequences of their giving into superstition, of putting wealth before God, of obsession with sex and prosperity, of worshipping that which is not God, were all the more serious. The chosen people are the light of the world. They are the salt of the earth.

If the salt loses its savour, how will the food be salted? A worldly church not only lets down God and brings judgment on itself; it also lets down the world, the gentiles, the ones who are to find God through the Church's faithful witness in word and deed.

April 9th

Isaiah 2 vv 10-22

Isaiah sees God's Judgment as something we really ought to fear. People will be forced to hide from the wrath of God. False gods, riches and power won't help. The higher you are, the farther you've got to fall. It won't matter whether you are in the open country, in a fortress or in a ship at sea. God's Judgment is inescapable and it is terrible.

But, you say, God is merciful. He is Jesus' Father and ours. He doesn't desire the death of a sinner. Surely He won't really punish anyone. Judgment is a mere formality.

Well is it? What about the consequences of human sin? What about the victims of violence and dishonesty, women beaten by their husbands or deserted by adulterers? What about those blown up by terrorists? People who live in countries torn apart by war? What about those who die in poverty while the rich pass by on the other side? Is there no justice? Do we get away with all this wickedness because God is too nice to condemn us?

The Christian answer is that God resolves the demands of Justice and Mercy because Jesus takes all the pains of the victims and the just punishment of the perpetrators on Himself in His agonising death on the Cross. If we love Jesus, we know that we do not have to fear Judgment, but, thinking about what our atonement cost God, we can hardly think that sin doesn't matter and complacently continue to disobey His Law of universal love. Our failures to live as Christians must bring us back in bitter repentance, not because we fear God, but because we love Him.

April 10th

Isaiah 3 vv 1-8

As the Assyrians rampage through the Middle-East, tiny kingdoms like Judah are totally disrupted. Armies destroy crops and disrupt

agriculture. Nations' economies are diverted to the war effort. Military losses lead to the loss of some of the best and the bravest. Defeat means payment of tribute to the conqueror and sometimes exile for local leaders. Famine and pestilence kill as many as the enemy. There is chaos and anarchy. War is a terrible thing and we rightly pray *Give peace in our time, O Lord*, not only for this nation, but for all the nations.

Isaiah sees these wars as the consequence of rebellion against God. The other half of the above prayer is a sobering thought, *Because there is none other that fighteth for us, but only Thou, O God*. If we want God on our side, we had better make sure that we are on His and His side is the side of Justice, Mercy and Peace.

April 11th

Isaiah 3 vv 12-15

Leadership is a huge responsibility. There is always the temptation to use your power and prestige to get rich, to get your own back on your enemies, to bully people into doing what you want. A weak or foolish leader creates an anarchic state. A powerful ruler is subject to the temptations of power to corrupt. A weak leader kowtows to other nations and to corrupt courtiers, industrialists, fellow politicians. A really bad leader leads his country into unnecessary wars or sets a tone of greed, materialism and corruption. No wonder then that St Paul tells us to pray for kings and all in authority.

April 12th

Isaiah 3 vv 16-26

Both the Old and the New Testament are rather down on cosmetics and fashion. We tend to treat these passages as no longer applicable in the modern world. Most women and a lot of men use cosmetics and try to dress well. We do not see anything wrong in it. In fact, smelling reasonable is regarded as a basic courtesy to your fellow human beings. This is one of those issues where Christians risk looking out of touch and small minded if they question the consensus. But what is the problem here with taking so much trouble with your appearance? I think there are three main areas of concern.

1. If we devote a lot of our attention to the way we look (and smell) we are not perhaps thinking about what really matters, character. If we judge other people by appearances and expect them to judge us in the same way, we are missing the point of what it is to be human.
2. We can spend far too much time and money on making up and dressing up when there are much more useful ways we could be occupying ourselves.
3. Obsession with our appearance may indicate an obsession with self which precludes caring about people in real need and the state of the world in general.

When I look at the price of designer clothing, the time and money spend in front of the mirror and the horrors of cosmetic surgery, I think we might do well to stop and to listen to the prophets of ancient Israel.

April 13th (Maundy Thursday)

Isaiah 4 vv 1-6

I don't find this passage easy to understand. There is a mixture of the horrible consequences of rebellion against God and the promise of restoration. God does not give up on His people, on Israel or the world. He continues to love us how ever much we rebel and He promises restoration if only we will repent.

Thinking of Jesus in the Upper Room, it was a Passover Meal. They remembered what God had done for them in the past – the Redemption from Egypt. They affirmed that they were very members incorporate in God's covenant people. What God had done in the past and their sense of belonging to God in the present made them confident that God would eventually bring them to the Promised Land.

At the meal, Jesus would wash the disciples clean. He would give them God's Law, the Law of Love. He would consecrate Himself as priest and victim, the redeeming sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. He would consecrate us as God's people. He would give us the Holy Communion, a memorial of what God has done for us, an assurance of His eternal presence and a pledge of final redemption.

April 14th Good Friday

Isaiah 5 vv 1-7

A Christian needs to read this parable in the context of Matthew 21 vv 33-41, where Jesus reinterprets this parable in the context of His own life. God made Israel, as He made all the nations, but Israel was specially privileged in having the Torah. Israel rejected God and His Law and therefore brought about its own destruction. God sent Moses and the prophets, signs of His Justice and Mercy, but they were rejected and ill-treated. At last, God sent His Son and Him they killed. So the vineyard is taken away from those murderers and given to those who will bring forth fruit for its owner.

Israel is a microcosm of human history – mankind’s rejection of God and His Law of Love. God has not left Himself without witness, but His witnesses very often are ignored or mistreated. We all know He sent His Son, but people do not accept Jesus. What are the chances that Jesus would be killed one way or another if He lived in the world today? Those who do accept Jesus, however, will offer God the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.

April 15th Holy Saturday

Isaiah 5 vv 8-30

This is a dark day, the day Jesus lay in the tomb. These verses of Isaiah talk about man’s rejection of God and its consequences in terms of violence and anarchy. They are terrible times, just as it is terrible that the Lord of Life lay in the stone cold tomb. He took upon Himself our sin and its consequences and that is how the human race is being restored by God.

April 16th Easter Day

Isaiah 6 vv 1-8

Isaiah had a vision in which He saw the LORD in all His Glory. His response was to realise his own inadequacy and need for healing. Having discerned something of God’s glory and having received His cleansing, Isaiah was ready to serve the LORD. You and I have seen a greater vision of the LORD’s glory even than Isaiah. We see Jesus. We see Him crucified and risen. Doesn’t that make you humble and see your need for healing? Doesn’t it make you long to serve Him?

April 17th

Isaiah 6 vv 9-13

We talk, rather vulgarly, about *after the Lord Mayor's Show*. And how often it is like that after major festivals, after ordinary Sunday services even. We see the Lord's glory. We are inspired to offer ourselves afresh. And then it is Monday again, back to normal, back to being ordinary, neither cold nor hot, just lukewarm in our devotion to God.

Isaiah was warned that the people would not accept his message. Given God's absolute sovereignty, this has to be accepted – hard as it is to understand – as God's plan. Jesus uses these verses to explain people's failure to accept His teaching (Mark 4 v12). He warns His followers that they will be no more accepted by the world than He was. It is hard graft to get people to open themselves to God's grace. We're not always all that open ourselves.

April 18th

Isaiah 7 vv 1-16

We are more used to reading this at Christmas. The background is that Ephraim (northern Israel) and Syria are trying to bring all the little nations into an alliance to fight Assyria. Judah doesn't want to join and the other two gang up to force them to join. Isaiah's original message to the Judean King Ahaz is not to worry. This alliance won't last long, no longer than it takes for a young woman to have a child and for the child to be weaned.

For Christians, of course, these words have come to mean a lot more. The Greek translators of the Hebrew Scriptures chose to use the word “virgin” for the Hebrew “young woman” and this came to be appreciated as a prophecy of the coming of Jesus, Son of God as well as son of the house of David, Who would redeem all the nations and bring in an everlasting kingdom of righteousness, justice and peace.

April 19th

Isaiah 7 vv 17-25

A little while ago I was reading another biblical passage about the land becoming waste because people do not obey God. In the past people would have seen things quite straightforwardly. A lack of rain or violent storms was a punishment for sin. We tend not to see things so

simply. But, look, here in this passage, the desolation is a result of war – sin. The people of Judah have opened themselves up for war by their ill-treatment of the poor and foreigners, by their dishonesty, by their neglect of God. In the other passage I was reading, people were never satisfied. They no longer found their rest in God. Our contemporaries, not finding their rest in God, drive around in their cars, fly to exotic destinations for holidays, keep buying consumer goods and throwing them away. And there is global warming, the threat of an energy crisis, water shortage in many parts of the world, hurricanes possibly caused by man-made climate change, radiation getting in through the hole in the ozone layer, land and sea polluted. Naïve to think that all these things happen because we disobey God?

April 20th

Isaiah 8 vv 1-22

What do we do when things are desperate? For some people, prayer is the last resort. They don't think much about God until things are dire. Then they pray.

On the other hand, there are also fair weather Christians, people who worship God when they haven't got too much else on, people are too busy or too worried to pray, people who only give to God's work, when they've got plenty, people who put off doing Christian service until they've got more time.

There are also, even modern times, people who turn away from God and seek spiritual guidance in mediums and superstitious mumbo jumbo.

None of these attitudes is right. Only God can save us. We shouldn't turn to Him only as a last resort. We shouldn't try to save ourselves by resorting to courses of action which are unworthy of those who call themselves Christian. They don't work anyway. God is the Maker of Heaven and earth and if we disregard the Maker's instructions, we muck everything up.

April 21st

Isaiah 9 vv 1-7

Christmas again! Isaiah is writing in the midst of the misery of war. Lands are devastated, people injured and killed, infrastructure and government undermined, famine and pestilence stalk the countryside and the cities. To a large extent, these miseries are of the human race's own making. Nevertheless, there is light in the darkness. God is present with us. He is Jesus our Immanuel. We can pray to Him in our troubles. We can ask Him to forgive us our sins. We can look to Him for Law, a law of justice and mercy. We can hang on to Him and let Him support us in our difficulties and lead us out to His Promised Land.

April 22nd

Isaiah 9 vv 8-21

The people are defying God. They've been warned that their problems are all their own fault. It is because they live in a godless, greedy, selfish nation that all these things have come upon them. Counter-intuitively, what is needed is not military alliances, more powerful weapons and fortifications, but repentance. If they want to be saved, they should turn to the LORD. They should share their goods with the poor, respect the rights of other people, conduct their businesses honestly. The meek will indeed inherit the earth. Trusting in human alliances with shady allies, armies and fortresses will only lead to disaster.

April 23rd

Isaiah 10 vv 1-4

If this weren't a Sunday, it would be St George's Day. The two things most people know about George are him slaying the dragon and his red cross on a white background. Not everyone realises that St George's flag is composed of a martyr's blood on a white pavement. Slaying the dragon is a symbol for victory over evil. What defeats evil is good. Good isn't having a brighter sword (or a bigger bomb) than the bad guys. Good is love, the sort of love that Jesus has when He lays down His life for the human race which rejects Him. I'd like to think that all those people painted with St George's flag at the football had a vision of what that cross is really all about – self-sacrificial love. It's no use our being superior. If we want our country's young men to know about Jesus, we have to tell them!

April 24th

Isaiah 10 vv 5-19

This is very hard to understand, but it is so profoundly bound up with the history of our salvation that we have to try. The argument goes something like this.

The Assyrian invasion of Judah is God's punishment because they have disobeyed Torah. They do not love God with their whole hearts, nor their neighbours as themselves.

The Assyrians therefore are God's instrument of punishment..

The Assyrians are nevertheless morally responsible for their own actions.

The Assyrians therefore will come under judgment for the atrocities they commit.

Assyrian dominion will come to an end and Judah will be saved.

Human beings, therefore, are both controlled by God's providence and free agents. If our lives were not in God's Hands we could not be sure of ultimate salvation. If we were not free, we would not be responsible. It is a paradox, but one which we have to hang on to, if we are not to make a shipwreck of faith, either by limiting God's power to achieve His purposes for us or by limiting our freedom to choose to accept or reject Him.

April 25th St Mark

Isaiah 10 vv 20-23

This idea of a remnant that shall be saved has been very popular in evangelical preaching. Originally, in the Bible it was probably an indication of the completeness of devastation. Things were so bad that only a remnant would be saved. In time great hope was attached to this remnant. The remnant not only enjoy the blessings of salvation; they are the hope for the future. Noah's family are a remnant, but they repopulate the earth. A remnant of Israel survive the Assyrian and Babylonian wars, but they rebuild the Holy City and the Temple. Only a remnant of Israel accept the Messiah when He finally comes, but they proclaim Yahweh to all the nations. In our secular society, we Christians feel like a faithful remnant, the few who are left, but it falls to us to restore the nation to God.

April 26th

Isaiah 10 vv 24-34

Popular preachers tell people what they expect to hear. They tell prosperous people that their prosperity is God's blessing. They tell poor congregations that that is the way it is. They feed popular prejudices. They comfort complacency. They denounce the already demonised. Preachers like that (especially in more religious countries than this one) have full churches and plenty of money in the offertory box.

In the Bible, God's prophets and God's Son are not, generally speaking, popular preachers. They tell people what they need to hear, rather what they want to be told. The rich are told to beware of the deceit of riches. The poor are told that God really cares for them and to work for justice. The prejudiced are taught to open their minds. The complacent are challenged. The proud are taught humility. The downtrodden are encouraged to lift up their heads.

Such preachers often do not attract many hearers. Sometimes they are rejected and persecuted. But when they are heard, their Church is built on a Rock.

April 27th

Isaiah 11 vv 1-9

This is one of the first lessons I remember having to read out loud in church when I was a child. It is a beautiful reading and another one which forms part of our Christmas devotions. It is easy to get lost in its beauty, but we ought to pause and think about what it means. The original hearers of the prophet would have been expecting an earthly leader, a king, who would be a descendant of David, who would rule so thoroughly in accordance with God's Law. Filled with God's Spirit, He would reign with justice, mercy and peace and a kingdom so ruled would be an earthly paradise. This passage then is a model for all who have power or authority – in the state and in the church, policemen, magistrates, teachers, parents. Anyone who is in a position of responsibility should take this passage as a model and seek God's Holy Spirit as their inspiration.

Having laid this foundation, now we can think of the ultimate fulfilment of these sublime words in Jesus and His proclamation of the Kingdom of God.

April 28th

Isaiah 11 vv 10-16

I don't like being asked to read this passage out loud because I have trouble in pronouncing "ensign". The thought is that the king descended from David will be a rallying point. Israel and Judah will reunite. The exiles in foreign lands will return and will be able to defeat their old enemies.

This vision expands. All peoples seek unity under God. Those coming to the LORD are not just those of Hebrew blood who have become dispersed among the nations. We come to see the enemy not as other people, but as sin, sins which divide us from one another, sins which get us down, sins which divide us from God.

Jesus is the Son of David who becomes the rallying point, the ensign. He draws all nations to Himself as He is lifted up on the Cross. In Him we are one. In Him, we have victory over sin, the world and the devil.

April 29th

Isaiah 12 vv 1-6

Think about the words of this hymn. The LORD is our salvation. He is with us. In Him are joy and praise. We can have confidence in God, confidence for our own lives, confidence for the Church, confidence for the Kingdom of God.

April 30th

Isaiah 13 vv 1-22

Babylon was one of the great civilisations of the ancient world. The Babylonians were wealthy and powerful. They were also expansionist, swallowing up neighbouring small kingdoms such as Judah. People were in awe and fear of Babylon. Isaiah says that the destiny of Babylon, like the destiny of all nations, is in the Hands of God. They have abused their power and their empire will come to an end. There is a warning for the rich and powerful, the seemingly invincible, in our own age.

May 1st St Philip & St James

Isaiah 14 vv 1-32

The great empires, Babylon and Assyria, who crushed the surrounding nations, will themselves be destroyed. This will mean peace for the world, peace for Israel and new hope for the poor and despised.

The glorious King of Babylon is described as the shining one, Lucifer, one who sees himself as a rival to God, perhaps even a god himself. He will fall. The mighty are put down from their seat and the humble and meek are exalted.

In time, Lucifer came to be seen as a personification of the Devil, the Serpent, Satan. He epitomises prideful rebellion against God. The danger is always that we are blinded by the light of Lucifer. We are easily impressed, even awed, by wealth, power or celebrity status. However, the people we should admire and take as role models are the people who are of good character - not necessarily, not often perhaps, the top dogs of society. Those who do have fame, power or wealth need to be ware of the dangers of trusting in themselves instead of God.

May 2nd

Isaiah 15 vv 1-9

I am tempted to cut straight to Chapter 40, where we shall get to the sublime passages which we all love so much. I shan't, however. This is all Scripture and we ought to read the uncongenial, difficult bits as well as the bits which reinforce what we already believe. Moab is one of the many small nations (in the mountains east of the River Jordan) devastated by the wars of the great empires. By and large, the Israelites did not have a high opinion of the Moabites. They were descended incestuously from Abraham's nephew, Lot. Their God was Chemosh, seen as an opponent of Yahweh. Their troubles are their own fault. They are an ungodly, blood-thirsty people. Even so, their sufferings demand compassion. God does not desire the death of a sinner, but rather that he should turn from his wickedness and live.

May 3rd

Isaiah 16 vv 1-14

When I was in the land of Moab (part of modern Jordan) I was very interested to see an artefact known as the Moabite Stone. This is an

important piece of archaeological evidence of ancient languages and the history of the Middle East. It is, basically, the Moabites boasting of their success in war against Israel and attributing their success to Chemosh. Here Isaiah puts this right. It is the LORD Who is God and He will prevail. Ultimately, of course, the Moabites, like all the gentiles, will be welcomed to worship Him. (I was disappointed to find that the Moabite Stone in Moab is a replica. The original is in the British Museum!)

May 4th

Isaiah 17 vv 1-14

Like Moab and Israel, Syria (or Aram) is in for a tough time. War leads to poverty. Isaiah sees some hope. A remnant will be saved. The remnant will reconsider and stop putting their trust in false gods, military alliances, money and what money can buy. When they return to the LORD, the holy land will be restored.

May 5th

Isaiah 18 vv 1-7

The Ethiopians now rule Egypt. They send ambassadors to King Hezekiah trying to persuade Judah to join an alliance against the Assyrians. Militarily, this alliance does not have much chance and it is hardly in the interests of Judah, who would be in the front line. The peoples of the earth can scheme as they please but the LORD is in control and Assyria's ultimate downfall is certain.

There is another point. Israel are the people who were delivered from Egypt, with its false gods and slavery. It is always dangerous to go back. Israel is a pilgrim people travelling in a harsh land in company with the LORD. The fleshpots of Egypt represent the appearance of an easy life at the cost of loss of freedom and integrity.

So what does this mean for us? Living a worldly life appears more comfortable than following God. There are worldly certainties, common sense, which seem safer than relying on faith. But this safety is an illusion and the price of being sucked into the ways of the world is the loss of freedom and integrity.

May 6th

Isaiah 19 vv 1-25

Egypt was a wonderful civilisation. It depended on the Nile and its annual flooding. The priests monitored the flow of the waters and they were therefore the ones who told people when to plant and harvest their crops. The Egyptians achieved technological marvels, art, writing, but they were extremely superstitious. They not only conquered other lands. They also suffered invasions and civil wars. Their reliance on false religion and superstition was the weak point of their civilisation and would bring about its downfall. The last verses of this chapter are wonderful as Isaiah foresees a time when the old enemies, Egypt, Israel and Assyria will be united under God – something which is already true in embryo in the Egyptian Coptic Church, the ancient Assyrian Church in Iraq and the Palestinian Church. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the whole of the Middle East could unite under the loving rule of the Prince of Peace! Instead of that, war and bloodshed.

May 7th

Isaiah 20 vv 1-6

How do you get the message across? Israel's prophets performed some powerful symbolic actions in order to get people to take notice of the Word of God. The Word of God effects what it proclaims. Those who harden their hearts against it condemn themselves.

May 8th

Isaiah 21 vv 1-17

This is all very hard to understand, though I guess that some of these verses stand out as familiar. *Babylon is fallen, is fallen. Watchman, what of the night?* When mighty empires fall, there is confusion, anarchy, civil war, maybe a new tyranny. It is terrible and confusing. The fall of Babylon becomes a symbol of the fall of every mighty and unmerciful empire and the fall is terrible in every sense of the word.

Watchman, what of the night? expresses our longing so well. What is happening? Is the cold, dark night nearly over? Does our redemption draw nigh? As heirs of the prophets of Israel, we stand our watch with confidence in the victory of our King.

May 9th

Isaiah 22 vv 1-25

We are back with the plight of Jerusalem. The fortifications have been badly knocked about. What ought to have happened was that the people should have turned back to the One Who established the Holy City, the LORD Himself and his servant David. Instead of repenting of their sins, however, they were merry-making. Maybe they thought they were safe, protected by alliances with other countries or by divisions and policy changes on the part of the attackers. Shebna is particularly criticised for making his own position secure instead of serving the people.

Prophets are realistic people. They see the world the way it really is, not despairing as if God couldn't help in the direst of situations, nor being falsely confident seeing the world through rose coloured spectacles. The prophet's insight into the nature of God makes him able to be realistic about the world God has made. This is the discernment we need if we are to give God's Word to the world, if we are to be the Church Jesus wants us to be and if our own lives are to be holy and Christ-like.

May 10th

Isaiah 23 vv 1-18

Tyre was a great trading city. Surrounded by water, it was considered impregnable. There was plenty of wealth. The Tyreans were great traders across the seas, including running a slave trade in prisoners of war. The warning here is that no-one is safe in the Day of Judgement.

May 11th

Isaiah 24 vv 1-23

Usually the rich and powerful escape the worst. Their better built houses withstand the earthquake better. They do not live nearest the volcano. They can afford inflated food prices in time of famine. This judgement, however, will be complete. Everybody will come under God's Judgement, rich and poor alike. Far from saving you, privilege, with its own special temptations and responsibilities, will mean you have even more to answer for.

May 12th

Isaiah 25 vv 1-12

The Kingdom of God means a righting of wrongs. All these rich and powerful oppressors are cast down. The humble are lifted up. All wrongs are put right. Even death is defeated. We no longer have to be afraid of death. If we believe in Jesus, we are going to a better place.

In the mean time, how can we use our money and any influence we may possess to help the poor and oppressed? There are so many charities and missions we could support. There are various voluntary organisations and political movements. There is Fairtrade. The possibilities are endless.

May 13th

Isaiah 26 vv 1-21

Let's take a verse out of context. The context is restoration. God will restore His people. His people must repent of their past sins which alienated them from God and not return to them. This is all true and very interesting, but is it relevant? What difference does it make to you and me? If it doesn't make any difference, why read it and why try to share it with other people? The Church has always found these Scriptures immensely valuable and that means re-reading them in the light of the revelation we have received in Jesus Christ. The ancient history of ancient Israel isn't perhaps all that interesting to a lot of people, but what it means for the whole world in the light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is fundamental to our understanding of our human destiny. We read the Old Testament in the light of the Gospel and in the light of the Church's experience of Christ and His Holy Spirit down through the ages. In this light, we can develop these readings, move them on from their original context and apply them in ours. We cannot interpret them in a way that it is inconsistent with their original message, but we must interpret them so that the message God gave to ancient Israel can truly be His message to us. This can mean taking verses from their context to meditate on them as they stand alone so long as we do not force them to bear a meaning alien to the original spirit. In this light, I want you to meditate on v3: *Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee.*

May 14th

Isaiah 27 vv 1-13

In the creation story, in the beginning the Spirit of God moves over the face of the waters. Noah's Flood is the return to watery chaos. The Red Sea and, forty years later, the River Jordan divide to admit the children of Israel to the Promised Land. Jesus walks on water and calms the storm. In the mythologies of many ancient peoples, the forces and gods of chaos are represented by the sea and sea monsters like Leviathan and these are seen to be at war with the God Who brings order and life. The forces of death and disorder are ranged against God and His people and He will overcome. The problem is that many of His people have a foot in the enemy camp, their lives are a compromise with sin, the world and the devil. They too, therefore, come under judgment. What is needed is total repentance and singleness of purpose on the Lord's side.

May 15th

Isaiah 28 vv 1-8

There used to be a powerful temperance movement in this country and in America. A lot of people laughed at Christians for what seemed to be an obsession with drink. Surely the odd glass of wine is harmless pleasure. Christians got a bad name as killjoys. Prohibition in America gave rise to a gangster culture. Britain's licensing laws were seen as archaic and vastly inferior to European café culture. Yet look at what happens in our town centres nowadays. Human beings made in the image of God are degraded by the effects of alcohol on their behaviour. There is a surfeit of alcohol related crimes. These young people are storing up horrendous health problems. Total abstinence is unnecessary (except in the case of addictive personalities). Moderate quantities of alcohol make us feel good and probably do us good. In excess, however, alcohol is as dangerous and degrading as it was in Isaiah's day. People turn to drink and other drugs because their lives are so unsatisfactory lived without God. So St Paul says: *Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit* (Ephesians 5 v18)). And he doesn't mean that brandy is preferable to Beaujolais!

May 16th

Isaiah 28 vv 9-29

The people of Israel were given God's Law plainly and repeatedly. They ought to have learned it as a lesson and lived by it. Having failed to learn it in Hebrew from their own priests and prophets, they will find out what happens to an ungodly nation when foreigners invade their land. They think they are safe because of the alliances they have made. It is as if they had made a pact with death not to devour them. None of this will work, however. The stone in Zion will be salvation for those who rely on it, but it will crush those who reject God's Salvation. Jesus, of course, interprets these words of Himself. There will be Judgment and the only escape is to call on the name of the LORD.

It is extraordinary that people cannot see this. It is so obvious. Farmers can understand how to cultivate their crop. Why can't people in general understand how to cultivate their lives, to grow in the Holy Spirit?

May 17th

Isaiah 29 vv 1-24

Verses out of this chapter resonate in the New Testament. Jesus talks about people whose religion is lip service. They say they follow God ardently. They even believe it, but their religious practices are man-made and they have lost a true understanding of what it is to serve God. The whole Law hangs on the commandments to love and unloving interpretations of the Law are necessarily false. St Paul takes up the bit about how being like clay in the hands of a potter. How can we deny the One Who made us? How can we question His plan for our lives? Our lives must be grounded in the Love of God.

May 18th

Isaiah 30 vv 1-33

What do you base your life on? For many people, faith isn't important. For some people, faith is peripheral. It is fitted in with the rest of their busy lives. For some faith is a very important part of life. Isaiah warns the Israelites that they are wrong to put their trust in Egypt – to rely on human power, wealth and civilisation. It will all go wrong. God will save His people. Only God can save His people. *In returning and quietness ye shall be saved.* Faith is not just an important part of life. It is life.

May 19th

Isaiah 31 vv 1-9

What can the Church learn from the world? Some people would say, Nothing, basing their ideas on passages like this. God gives us everything. We only have to trust Him. This sounds pious, but it does not make sense. We have to work for a living. We need to learn the same skills as non-believers – reading, writing, arithmetic etc. There are things we learn from the world.

The Church looks to the world of business to see how to manage its accounts and to raise money. We look at the world of advertising to see how we can communicate our message.

And this is where the alarm bells begin to ring. Business, quite legitimately, is about profits. Its clients are customers. In a well-run business, the workers, the shareholders and the customers all benefit. But the Church is not a business. We have no profit motive. We are all workers. We all help to fund the enterprise and do not expect a reward. There are no customers, just people to be loved and hopefully converted.

Advertising is about persuading people to buy. It is a good thing so long as it is honest and not too pushy, putting people who want something in touch with people who can supply it, but we are not selling a product to potential customers. The Church is proclaiming the Word of God to those who know they need Him and to those who don't.

May 20th

Isaiah 32 vv 1-20

Reading the first few verses as Christians, we see Jesus and the coming Kingdom of God. We realise that, in His Light, things will be shown up to be what they really are. There will be no hiding from the truth, no space for hypocrisy. Deliberate wickedness and careless indifference to the needs of others are tearing the world apart. What saves the world is the Spirit of the Risen Christ. Just as rain makes the desert blossom, so the Holy Spirit softens hearts, makes them fertile, enables them to bring forth those fruits of the Spirit: *love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.*

May 21st

Isaiah 33 vv 1-24

The Holy City will be restored. All those who defiled her, her own citizens who defiled her with their apostasy, adultery, violence, dishonesty and complacency in the face of injustice, will be condemned or forgiven, depending on their willingness to repent, as will the foreign nations who attacked her walls, killed her soldiers and defied her God. Which side you find yourself on at the Judgment – eternal bliss or outer darkness – will depend on where you stand on issues like those raised in v 15, whether you act and speak righteously, whether you make a stand against corruption, whether you are implicated in bloodshed and dishonesty.

May 22nd

Isaiah 34 vv 1-17

Utter destruction of all the nations. What do you make of this? Think back to Noah's Flood when God destroys the world because of the wickedness of its inhabitants. Or maybe you look to the future when Jesus will come again and this world will cease to be. Some people almost seem to revel in thinking of ultimate and total destruction. God made the world and He saw that it was good. These things were not meant to be – the bloodshed and dishonesty and all the other sins of which the human race is guilty. We were meant to be people of love, loving God with all our hearts and out neighbours as ourselves. The earth is defiled by the wickedness enacted on it and God's compassion for the victims forces Him to be angry with the perpetrators. He sends prophets and other witnesses of His Will for the world. He sends His own Son to redeem the world. And the world ignores God, remakes God according to the world's image of God, rejects God, persecutes God's messengers. Would it be surprising if God destroyed the world or if He let us destroy it through nuclear war or global warming or some other consequence of humanity's inability to see where our actions are leading? The Christian message is that God sent Jesus into the world to save us from the consequences of our own actions. We know that those who are in Christ are safe in the Last Judgment. How many that will be we are not told, but those of us who do know Him are clearly responsible for sharing that knowledge so that as many as can be are saved.

May 23rd

Isaiah 35 vv 1-10

In Moses' time, the Hebrew slaves in Egypt were redeemed by God. They journeyed to the Holy Land through the desert. God was with them. He led them with a pillar of smoke by day and fire by night. He gave them the Law engraved in stone on Mt Sinai, fed them with manna and gave them water from the rock (which mysteriously St Paul tells us was Christ). It was a great exodus. Hundreds of years later, they were captives again, not now in Egypt, but in Babylon, modern Iraq. Isaiah has this wonderful vision of their return home through the desert, guided, healed and defended by God. We sometimes sing the last verse with the returning exiles in our services today because we look to an ultimate Promised Land in Heaven, our true home, to which we journey through the wilderness of this world, guided, healed and upheld by God, Who reveals Himself to us in the written words of the Bible and the presence of His Holy Spirit in the Church and in our hearts, and Who nourishes us with the sacred bread in the Holy Communion and the life-giving water flowing from the crucified Christ.

From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,
Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
Singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost, alleluia, alleluia.

May 24th

Isaiah 36 vv 1-22

Imagine how the people in Jerusalem felt. The mighty Assyrian army is encircling their city. The commander comes out to address the people in their own language. The Jewish leaders ask him to use the language of diplomacy (Aramaic) because they don't want the common people to understand, but the Assyrians want the ordinary man in the street to understand. Egypt isn't going to save them. Do they think the LORD will save them? A lot of superstitious practices had grown up around Yahweh worship and Hezekiah had put a stop to them. It's as if he'd broken all the mirrors, taken down all the lucky horseshoes and shot an albatross. Anyway, none of the gods of the other nations had saved them. So why would Yahweh save Israel. The Jews can't avoid defeat. So why not surrender. The Assyrians say they'll treat them well if they do. All this is very worrying for the Jewish leadership!

May 25th Ascension Day

Isaiah 37 vv 1-38

Who is the true king in this story? The kings of most of the nations around Judah have been defeated. Sennacharib, King of Assyria, seems to be the real power. He has defeated all these another nations. Surely Judah cannot stand up to him. A temporary setback for the Assyrians isn't going to save Jerusalem.

Then there is Hezekiah, proudly conscious of being David's descendant, sitting on the throne of Israel in accordance with God's promise. Hezekiah is reduced to rending his clothes and covering himself with sackcloth.

The real king in the story is of course the LORD. He is the One Who decides the fate of both Assyria and Judah and indeed all the nations.

Now today we celebrate the Ascension of our King, Jesus. He is One with the LORD. He controls the destinies of nations and individuals. He reigns with justice and mercy. He lives to make intercession for us. He sends upon us His Holy Spirit.

May 26th

Isaiah 38 vv 1-22

This seems like a trivial domestic detail. We've been reading about clashes of nations, international politics, wars, even cosmic destruction, and now we hear about Hezekiah's boil and his unwillingness to face death. We should never, however, forget individuals, the effect on individuals of battles and troop movements, bombing campaigns, food shortages and disease. So many thousand died in this battle. Millions are threatened by this disease. Several nations in East Africa are stricken with drought. The statistics are numbing. We must never lose sight of the individuals involved. God cares for each individual and so should we whether we are thinking of giving to charity, supporting fair trade or expressing an opinion about whether or not to go to war. The sun going back ten degrees is proof for the naïve and difficult to believe for the sceptical, but, like the whole of the Bible, is to be read in the context of faith.

May 27th

Isaiah 39 vv 1-8

This chapter provides a transition from the first part of the book which is mainly about the period of the Assyrian wars to a time a century or so later when Babylon and Persia are the major powers. Assyrian power swiftly ebbed after the time of Isaiah. Babylon expanded to fill the power vacuum and became the dominant power in the Middle-East. It was the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar who eventually sacked the Holy City, something the Assyrians never achieved. After defeating the city twice, Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple and the fortifications. Many of the better class of people were forced to live in Babylon. Some Jews fled to Egypt and other countries. The remainder lived in the ruins of the cities and had to make the best living they could from a war-ravaged countryside. Eventually, the Persians took over the Babylonian empire and the Jews were allowed to return and rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the Temple.

May 28th

Isaiah 40 vv 1-8

I have to admit that I have found the last couple of dozen chapters heavy going and I am relieved to have reached Chapter 40. All Scripture is infinitely valuable, but some of it seems more infinitely valuable than other parts. Perhaps it is just our lack of perception.

These verses celebrate the return of the exiles. They've more than paid for their sins. Now they will return through the desert to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.

In the Gospel, these verses are referred to at the coming of John the Baptist. John goes out into the desert to announce the coming Kingdom. He prepares the way of the LORD by inviting people to repent, to prepare their hearts to be a dwelling place for God and to prepare to follow Him in establishing His Kingdom of Justice, Mercy and Peace. The LORD for Whom He prepares is of course Jesus. He brings in the Kingdom by what He does and Who He is.

May 29th

Isaiah 40 vv 9-11

This is wonderful news. It is wonderful news for the returning Israelites, but it is yet more wonderful news for us, who know the Good Shepherd, who know we are on the highway to Heaven. Isn't it important to proclaim the good tidings to the world?

May 30th

Isaiah 40 vv 12-27

If we think about the true nature of God, we see the absurdity of making idols. No image we might make could be anything like God and nothing could be worthy of worship except God Himself.

This being so obvious, why do we spend our lives on what is not God, treat Him as one thing among many, rather than as the very ground of our existence?

May 31st

Isaiah 40 vv 28-31

About mile 17 in the London Marathon a group of Christians held up a banner with v30 and the first line of v31 on it. Even young men are growing weary by then! I showed off by completing the quotation, perhaps giving away that I was someone who had something more important to do on the Lord's Day than take part in a running race. We have, however, seen what it means to have faith in an omnipotent God. Why should we fail to trust in Him? Why do we think we need to put rely only on our own resources? Why rely on other people's superficial strengths when we and they need to work together within the love of God if anything worthwhile is to be achieved?

June 1st

Isaiah 41 vv 1-9

Babylon went in for idols in a big way. Her armies had enjoyed a good deal of success. Their kings had ruled vast territories. They had been defeated by the Persians, another people who did not worship the LORD. So who was God and whom should one worship? Might it not be prudent to worship the gods who had given success to their worshippers? Might it not be prudent to worship the gods of your rulers? The prophet (Isaiah or one of his successors in his tradition) makes the audacious claim that it is in fact Yahweh, God of defeated

Judah, Who is control. He gave the Babylonians their power and took it way again. He gave the empire to the Persian Cyrus, the ruler who would allow the exiles to return home. If you don't believe that Yahweh was the true God, where are the gods of Babylon and Persia now? If we know all this, surely we will not ascribe success and prosperity to the ways of the world. We will not adopt the beliefs of the world around us, uncritically accept the values of those who see themselves as our leaders. We will be faithful to the LORD and trust Him in good and ill.

June 2nd

Isaiah 41 vv 10-20

I used to be the minister of a small church on a toughish housing estate. A lot of the people were quite poor. There were a lot of single mothers. A lot of people were unemployed. There was quite a high crime rate. Drugs and alcohol presented real problems. The Church itself was small in number, mostly elderly and chronically seriously short of money. People on that estate desperately needed God, but we found it very hard to share our faith with the people around us. Despite the very high levels of commitment, many members of the congregation offered, we found it hard to find the resources to do all the pastoral and evangelistic work that was needed. I remember preaching on these verses. I'm not sure how much effect my sermon had. Preachers very seldom do know the results of their preaching. I hope people found them encouraging, however. How ever weak and inadequate we feel, the work is God's and He has the resources.

June 3rd

Isaiah 41 vv 21-29

By their fruits shall ye know them. In this discussion about who is the true God, one approach is to ask how effective the supposed religion is. Yahweh's prophets had got right the tide of history. The LORD had enabled them to see things the way they were. The idols had turned out to be mere vanity, emptiness. Idol worship had produced no worthwhile results. Fortunes amassed on earth are left behind when we die. Gorgeously manicured bodies rot in the churchyard. Political and commercial empires turn to dust. Earthly scheming comes to nothing. Only Jesus offers eternal life.

June 4th Whitsun

Isaiah 42 vv 1-16

Several passages in Isaiah refer to the Servant of the LORD. Who is meant? The prophet himself? In some contexts, the whole people of Israel seem to be the servant of the LORD. Elsewhere, the servant of the LORD is Cyrus, the Persian emperor who lets the people return. In the New Testament, these passages are interpreted to mean Jesus.

We are used to calling the Holy Spirit the Comforter or Paraclete. If we read carefully, however, we see that Jesus calls the Spirit “another Comforter”. Jesus is the Comforter. The Spirit, in a way, takes His place. Jesus and the Spirit are one, just as Jesus is one with the Father.

Jesus is the servant of the LORD. He takes the form of a servant. He serves God. He serves His Church. He serves the world. He suffers as a servant. He says He has given us an example. We are to continue His work, serving God, the Church and the world, suffering if necessary, because we are participants in His resurrection. We are the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the Body of the Risen Christ.

June 5th

Isaiah 42 vv 17-25

The servant of the LORD is meek. He shares the sufferings of the afflicted. He does not bully. He accepts us as we are. He bears our transgressions. He upholds us and supports us. And He gives us an example. This is how we are to treat one another, in the Church and in the world.

June 6th

Isaiah 43 vv 1-7

God has called Israel by name. They are God’s people. They can look forward to redemption. God will bring His people home no matter what. We see this fulfilled in the Church, the fulfilment of Israel, the completion of God’s people, incorporating all people of faith whatever nation they come from.

Read it too as an individual. The Good Shepherd knows each of His sheep by name, including you and me. He is with us whatever happens and He will bring us home no matter what.

June 7th

Isaiah 43 vv 8-28

Babylon was a mighty city with very impressive gods wonderfully constructed out of precious metals, carried in triumphal processions, weighing down human beings and beasts of burden. It all must have been awe-inspiring especially to subject peoples dragged from their own lands. And all this had come to nought. Stop wondering about these idols, says God, worship Me, the only One Who can save you, the only One Who has saved you. It seems that the returning exiles were a bit slow to re-establish worship. They wanted to sort out their own lives first, build houses and business premises before the Temple, look after themselves before they started making offerings to God, superstitiously keep in with the other gods in case they were powerful like Yahweh. In fact they were in danger of making the same mistakes as their ancestors, the mistakes people make in every generation. Jesus says, *Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you.* The world only works that way round.

June 8th

Isaiah 44 vv 1-8

This is where we need to exalt in our confidence. God has held us in His hands from the very beginning. He knew us in the womb. He knows us now. He knows what our ultimate end will be. He is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent*. This is the God Who has called us by name and taught us to call Him, Father. What more could we ask?

June 9th

Isaiah 44 vv 9-20

It is absurd to worship idols. Worship is to give your life for something or somebody, to live your life for something or somebody. You can only worship something that is worthy of worship. If you live your life for anything or anyone that is unworthy of worship, you demean yourself, you are wasting your life. You yourself are made in God's image and you devalue yourself if you worship anything less than God. It is not easy to give your life to God. It is challenging, sometimes exhausting, sometimes frightening, but always exhilarating. The

* He is all powerful, knows everything and in every time and place.

fleshpots of Egypt always beckon. It looks comfortable and secure living by the Nile, sowing your crops in the fertile alluvium, harvesting in due season, but you are a slave, your integrity is compromised. You are neither living nor free. That is how life can be if you just live by the norms of C21 Britain. Or you can serve the living God. [Fleshpots are nothing to do with the sort of entertainment offered in Soho. They are cauldrons for cooking meat. They symbolise the ordinary life conformed to the values of this passing age.]

June 10th

Isaiah 44 vv 21-28

God has completely forgiven the sin of Israel. It is important that we realise that this matters. Sin alienates us from God. If we are alienated from God, we are cut off from the source of our life. That is why the wages of sin is death. Sin matters. It is not a joke. It is not something to be swept under the carpet in the modern church as we try desperately to gain favour in a world which refuses to condemn anyone or anything. The consequences of human wrong doing are horrific. Sin does make God angry. Given the nature of God, we know that He is always ready to forgive, but forgiveness is not cheap. It depends on the death of Jesus. It is not valueless or cheap. It is priceless. We should be very thankful that we are forgiven. We know we can rely on God. As forgiven, we are born again. We have a fresh start every time we confess. We begin again. We are set free to walk with God. This means we forgive those who have trespassed against us and live according to the perfect Law of Love. Insofar as we fail to do this, we repent again and again until we are set free from all temptation in the life which is to come.

June 11th

Isaiah 45 vv 1-8

At first sight it seems remarkable that so many positive things are said about Cyrus. He is a Persian, not an Israelite. He may have respected the cult of Yahweh, but he was not a believer in any orthodox sense. Yet he is the one whom the LORD uses to bring His people home to the Promised Land. Thinking about it, however, all this is in accordance with Israel's faith that God is in control of everything. All the mighty empires, all the Pharaoh's and emperors might strut about on the

world's stage, but God is in control, bringing about His purposes through what we human beings do. When we co-operate with Him, things go best, but even when we oppose Him we cannot thwart Him. His loving purposes work out in the end. Judas betraying Christ brings about the salvation of the world. God is in control and we can trust Him for the outcome.

June 12th

Isaiah 45 vv 9-13

How important is God in people's lives? We believe that He made us and gave us everything that we have. We believe that He hears the prayers we make for the people we love and for ourselves. We believe that our eternal destiny is in His Hands. So surely God ought to matter to us more than anything. Yet our churches are empty. I was wondering the other day how I could get people to come to church. Then it occurred to me. If they won't come because they love Jesus, what difference can anything I do make?

June 13th

Isaiah 45 vv 14-25

What do we think about other religions? The Old Testament is pretty clear that the LORD is the only God and the New Testament is pretty clear that Jesus Christ is the only fully authentic manifestation of God. This leaves us with three options regarding people of other religions – all of which I think can be found in the Bible.

- They are worshipping evil spirits in rebellion against the LORD.
- They are worshipping illusions, mere nothings.
- They are worshipping the LORD in the wrong way.

People do evil things in the name of religion, including some Christians. That is not authentic. People do worship (live their lives for) illusions, things that are nothing or anyway much less than God. I think it is right to believe that sincere followers of other religions are sincerely seeking God and do have authentic revelations of God and that, when the time comes, they will be judged according to their own consciences, not our judgments of them. We need to treat all sincere people with respect and be prepared to learn from them. Nevertheless Jesus is the standard of religious authenticity.

June 14th

Isaiah 46 vv 1-4

The Babylonian gods were idols. They were carried in triumphal procession when Babylon prospered. Now she is vanquished by invaders, her gods are carried off as part of the spoils of war.

In contrast, the LORD carries us. Human beings sustain their idols – their lifestyle, their career, their own bodies. The things we devote our lives to are our gods and, if they are non-entities, mere idols, they depend on us. We, on the other hand, can depend on God – always and everywhere. Whatever our needs we can take them to God in prayer. So why is worshipping God so much lower a priority than all these worldly things, which are, like our fleshly bodies, on the way out?

June 15th

Isaiah 46 vv 5-13

In commentary on this, let me just quote Psalm 135 and ask whether the cap fits.

What the nations manufacture and worship is only silver and gold.

They have mouths, but they can't speak,

They have eyes but can't see, and ears but can't hear,

They are not alive.

And those who make them and worship them are no better than they are.

(author's own translation).

June 16th

Isaiah 47 vv 1-15

Do you remember when the Berlin Wall came down? For most people it was a complete surprise. The Soviet Union was the second power in the world and it held Eastern Europe in an iron grip behind an iron curtain. No-one, it seems, expected the Soviet empire to collapse so quickly. It had powerful armed forces with nuclear weapons and an efficient and ruthless secret police. In human eyes, it was invincible. I wonder how many people in 1900 would have expected the British Empire to be a spent force sixty years later. We controlled the seas and therefore world trade. We were the workshop of the world. We sat on rich natural resources. It just goes to show that what the world thinks is important is often not important at all.

June 17th

Isaiah 48 vv 1&2

More especially we pray for the good estate of the Catholick Church: that it may be so guided and governed by thy good Spirit, that all who profess and call themselves Christians may be led into the way of truth, and hold the faith in unity of spirit, in the bond of peace, and in righteousness of life.

I like that expression *all who profess and call themselves Christians*. There are millions of people who do that. What the world needs is that we live accordingly. Now we can accuse other people of being hypocrites. We can accuse ourselves of hypocrisy. It is perfectly true that anything less than total commitment to Christ is unworthy of anyone who calls himself a Christian. Still the point is not to condemn ourselves and still less to condemn others. It is only God Who has the right to condemn, and He freely forgives all those who come to Him with penitent hearts. We are not to wallow in past or present failure. It is the future that counts and we pray for God's good Spirit to make us more nearly what we have been called since the day on which we were baptised.

June 18th

Isaiah 48 vv 3-8

The soothsayers would never have foreseen the collapse of the Assyrian or Babylonian empires. Their job was to provide spiritual support for the status quo just as Christian ministers are often expected to say what their congregations want to hear rather than proclaim the Word of God. The political commentators would never have foreseen the collapse of these empires either. It defied common sense that the mighty would be put down from their seats and the rich sent empty away. Only the prophets, only those open to receive the Word of God, those prepared to look at the world from God's perspective, could see the reality. Yet the true lesson of history is that God is right. The meek really do inherit the earth. Proud Rome was swept away, but the Church she persecuted took her place. It was only when the Church became corrupted by power and wealth that she lost ground. There will always be a faithful remnant of true Christians, ready to reseed as soon as the ground is ready.

June 19th

Isaiah 48 vv 9-11

A recurring theme of Scripture is that we are never worthy of God's salvation. We do not live God's Law of love. We are not pure and holy as we ought to be. So why does God save us? Why does He bother about us? He does because of His Nature, for His Name's sake, because His Nature is love.

We do go through periods of affliction, but these refine us and purify us. We have perhaps lost the insight that suffering can make us better people. We reach for the painkillers at the slightest twinge. We demand compensation for every injury. We are encouraged, not so much to keep a stiff upper lip, as to cry long and loud at anything which goes wrong. Maybe we have gone too far down that road. It can be good for us to learn by going without, having to put up with, not getting all our own way.

June 20th

Isaiah 48 vv 12-15

Be Still and Know That I Am God.

We need to take time. We need to spend time with God. We need to pray. Life can be very busy and, when we are under pressure, we panic and make ourselves busier. The One Person Who could really help us gets squeezed out. So next time you feel you really cannot cope with all the things that are piling up on you, take time out. Pray. Let go and let God.

We touch him in life's throng and press, And we are whole again.

June 21st

Isaiah 48 vv 16-19

All these troubles Israel has been through are a result of their failing to live by God's Law. If we lived by God's Law, we would have far fewer troubles and we would have the resources to deal with the troubles we still had to face. So, don't think you have to get the ordinary things of life sorted first and then turn to God when you have earned for yourself the luxury of some spare time. Make use of all the means of grace. Take time to pray and read the Bible every day. Be a frequent and faithful communicant. Make sure you do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together as is the manner of some (Hebrews 10 v25).

I have rather gone on about the importance of attending Church. This is partly because I am worried about the very poor attendances at some of our services recently. If attendance drops enough, we shall face merger with other parishes, shared ministry and the risk that we shall be less able to carry on doing God's work – our pastoral and evangelistic mission. I suppose, in a way, however, that if the people of Cuxton and Halling do not want a church sufficiently to come to it, it is only right that their churches should close.

I am also worried for another reason. When we attend church services, we ought to be filled with a sense of the presence of God. Like these Israelites on their way through the desert to the Holy City, we are accompanied by our God, a God Who cares for us and meets all our needs. We should be filled with joy and Church should be the most important thing in our week, the thing we look forward to, the thing we don't miss except for the very gravest of reasons.

So there is something wrong when a significant proportion of our congregation feel that taking part in shared worship is a low priority in their lives. Either God is not present in our worship or they cannot perceive Him. If people do not perceive God when they attend St Michael's or St John's, the fault either lies in them or in the whole congregation led by me. We do four things which the Bible tells us to do. God guarantees His presence when we do them. So, if people do not discern God in our worship, either they are failing to open themselves to God or we are doing these things wrong.

1. Jesus promises to be present when people are assembled in His Name. Is our coming together truly in His Name, an outpouring of love for God, for our fellow worshippers and for any seekers who may come? If we do not come in love, we cannot expect to encounter God ourselves or to help others to find Him.
2. God promises to answer the prayer offered in faith. Do we pray in faith? Do we pray at all? Or has the service just become a ritual to be gone through and maybe to be examined and

criticised to see if it's what we really want. Does the way we behave in Church create a prayerful atmosphere in which other people may more easily sense the presence of God?

3. We read the Bible together and I do my best, by God's grace, to preach His Word in the sermon. Do we really expect to hear God speak to us in the readings and the sermon or do we just hope they won't go on too long and look for points with which we can find fault?
4. Jesus told us to participate in the Holy Communion in remembrance of Him. St Paul promises that the cup and the bread are a true Communion in the Body of Christ. Do we believe the words we say in our services about our dwelling in Him and He in us or has Communion become a mere ritual, no more significant than any other service and not much more important than catching up on the housework?

If you really want to revive your own personal worship and make St Michael's and St John's places where people can really find God, I suggest the following. [I do not deny the importance of choice of music, forms of worship, audibility, ordering of buildings etc, but what really matters above everything else is that worship is offered in spirit and in truth.]

- Before you come to Church, forgive anyone who has hurt you. Ask God to forgive you for your failure to love Him with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself. Be specific in confessing your sins to God.
- Look at the readings before the service (especially if you are a reader). Think about what they mean and why they have been chosen.
- Think about other people in church. Pray for them. Include them in your mind when we say *we* in the creed or the prayers. Don't criticise or judge them. Be sensitive to their needs, whether they want someone to talk to or need peace and quiet to be alone with God.

- Expect to encounter Jesus in the Gospel, the Sermon and the Holy Communion. Open your mind, comport yourself, as someone who is about to receive the King of Kings as a guest in his or her heart.
- Pray generously for other people, the church and the world, not just for yourself.
- After the service, behave like someone who has been in the company of Jesus. Don't go back to the sins of which you were absolved in Church. Share Christ's love with the people you meet.

June 23rd

Isaiah 49 vv 1-12

Jesus is the Servant of the LORD. God's salvation cannot be confined to one nation, Israel. It must be for all the nations. God has created the whole human race and we all find our rest in Him.

It is good news. It is something to proclaim to the nations with joy. It is not something to be ashamed of, to be hidden away or to be kept for a pious few. It is something which the world must be told and we are the ones who have to tell it.

June 24th St John the Baptist

Isaiah 49 vv 13-17

This is such a beautiful thought. Do mothers forget their children? They may, occasionally, but God does not forget you and me. Do you feel that?

June 25th

Isaiah 49 vv 18-26

Things looked so desperate. So many had died in the wars. The cities were desolate, the land spoiled. How could there be any hope? But with God there is always hope. Faith, hope and love abide. If you've got those three virtues, nothing can get you down. God is in control and God will save His people.

June 26th

Isaiah 50 vv 1-3

There have been plenty of times in history when things have looked bad for the people of God. In the Old Testament, the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt. They came to the Promised Land, but they lost battle after battle, eventually being taken captive to Babylon. North Africa and much of the Eastern Mediterranean were once Christian lands, but they were conquered by the Moslems. There have often been times of persecution in Christian history. Christian countries have been devastated by plague, famine and war. What is going on? Is God unable to protect His people? Has He abandoned them?

Our own problems are more baffling. We are free from persecution. We can easily buy any number of bibles. No-one stops us going to Church. There are enough clergy to provide services within driving distance of everyone in England. Our medical resources give us better health than any previous generation. We are more likely to be obese than hungry. We are mostly well-dressed and well-housed. Yet we have a huge spiritual vacuum and our churches are empty. Has God abandoned His people?

He hasn't. There are times of testing. There are the consequences of sin. But God has not abandoned His people. We had better be careful that we don't abandon Him.

June 27th

Isaiah 50 v4

The Word of consolation is Jesus. God speaks to us in Him. He speaks to us in the pages of the Gospel. He speaks to us through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is the Word of God and, if that Word dwells in our hearts, it is our mission to speak that Word, to offer God's consolation to all who need it.

June 28th

Isaiah 50 vv 4-11

Reading these words about the Servant of the LORD, we think of Jesus coming to the Cross. We put our trust in Him and know that He will keep us.

June 29th St Peter & St Paul

Isaiah 51 vv 1-3

Look unto the rock whence ye are hewn.

Many of you reading this will have had good Christian upbringings or you will remember people who have brought you closer to Jesus. Perhaps you can remember other churches where you were richly blessed, experiences of God in prayer or worship, in bible reading, or in other completely different contexts. If you now feel baffled or discouraged, if your love has grown cold, look back on those times. You can't recover them. Things never are the same again. How ever long you are married, you will never know the joy of first love again.

You can, however, draw on those experiences. They are authentic. They helped to make you the people you are today. The passion you felt when you first fell in love with your wife grew into what you have now. If you are bored with your wife, even tempted to be unfaithful, remember those times, not because you can recover them, but because they are signs of what can be if only you will let it.

The same in your Christian experience. You may now feel much less excited about God than you once did. You won't ever recover what it meant to you to know Him for the first time, to learn certain things about Him. You won't recover the way you felt in Sunday School or Youth Club or Young Wives. But all those things you experienced then are authentic manifestations of God to encourage you to persevere with Him in the relationship you have with Him today.

June 30th

Isaiah 51 vv 4-6

I am disappointed not to reach the end of Isaiah this quarter, but this is a good place to finish.

Visions like these would come to be understood to represent the end of the world. Whatever happens, God is. Time and space will pass away, Heaven and earth will pass away, but God is for ever and ever.

In the here and now, we are called to live by the Word of God, to live by Jesus, to be nourished, sustained, guided by Him. That is how we are called to live and it is our message to the world, to come to Him, to receive Him, to have life in Him in all its abundance.

This is for the here and now. Ultimately there is eternity with God. There are no adequate words for that, only wonder and love.

