

New Beginnings



Bible Notes
January - March 2012

50p

January 1st (Naming of Jesus)

Acts 1v1

Imagine an orphan boy, who has been brought up to believe that his father died a hero's death. As the boy grows up, his greatest ambition is to be worthy of his father's memory and he himself becomes a hero.

Now suppose that actually his father was a coward, shot in the back whilst deserting in the face of the enemy, but the boy's family had decided to keep the truth from him as an act of kindness. The boy's heroism would have been inspired by a lie, but that wouldn't make the boy any less of a hero. But are you comfortable in thinking that the boy's whole life might have been based on a falsehood? If he had known the truth about his father, however, he might not have been inspired to become a hero himself.

So, would it be right to teach people stories that were not necessarily true in order to inspire them to be better people? Some people think that it does not matter whether or not the story of Jesus is true because, true or false, it would still have the power to inspire us to be better people. Luke (who, most people agree, wrote Acts) is not such a person. He takes great care to ensure the accuracy of what he is writing. See also Luke 1 vv 1-4.

January 2nd

Acts 1 v2

Until the day that he was taken up.

I agree with Luke. It does matter that the story of Jesus is historically true. He really did give the teaching attributed to Him in the Gospels. He really did what the Bible says He did. Our faith is not based on a falsehood, a noble lie or even a myth. It is founded in historical reality. When we follow the example of Jesus (if by God's grace we can do that) we are following in the footsteps of a real person, not an image invented by the Church. To use the technical vocabulary, the Christ of faith is the Jesus of history.

But there is more to it than that. In the 33 years between Christmas and Ascension God really and truly actually experienced what it is to be a human being.

January 3rd

Acts 1 v3

I'm writing these notes on the Feast of St Simon and St Jude (28th October) when the collect speaks of the apostles and prophets as the foundation of the Church and Jesus Christ as the head corner-stone. The prayer is that all of us Christians may be joined together in unity of spirit by their teaching to form a holy temple, an acceptable dwelling-place for God. Jesus revealed Himself risen from the dead to His apostles. The Holy Spirit of the risen Christ inspired the prophets. God reveals Himself to and through His Church. This is what St Jude's own epistle calls *the faith which was once delivered unto the saints*. He exhorts all of us *that ye should contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints*. Our faith is based on historical reality – what God has done at particular times and in particular places. Faith is not simply an emotion, how we feel about God. Our personal faith is (or at least it ought to be) our personal response to what God has made known of Himself in the historical event of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and the concrete actual experience of the Church down through the centuries. It's not up to us to believe what we find personally congenial. It is up to us to believe the Truth of God as revealed. Obviously we may apprehend only a fraction of that Truth and accordingly we must be humble in what we assert (especially against other people), but we are seeking the Truth, not making up a religion to suit ourselves.

January 4th

Acts 1 v4

Jesus was present with the apostles when they were assembled together. Now of course Jesus is always present with us. We can always pray to God through Him wherever we are and whatever we are doing. Sometimes He makes Himself known in remarkable ways to individuals – like He did to St Paul. However He does say that He is present in a special sense when *two or three are gathered together*. The Church is a corporate body – the Body of Christ. Assembling together with other Christians for prayer and worship is not an optional extra for Christians. It is intrinsic to being a Christian that we belong to Christ's Body the Church. That's why so many faithful people have been prepared to risk martyrdom rather than miss taking part in Sunday worship. Christian faith is much more than *personal spirituality* or *individual piety*.

January 5th

Acts 1 v5

This is the fulfilment of Christ's promise *I am with you always*. Obviously when the second person of the Holy Trinity became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, He limited Himself as human beings are limited. He could only be in one place at a time. He could only relate directly to a limited number of people. When He was showing Himself risen from the dead to certain apostles or teaching particular people, He was not with other people somewhere else at the same time. But He promised *I am with you always* and that promise is fulfilled in the gift of the Holy Spirit. The third person of the Holy Trinity is limited by neither time nor space. So He is with us (and within us if we welcome Him in) at all times and in all places. The Holy Spirit sustains us and empowers us to be the people Christ calls us to be. The Spirit bears witness with our spirit and enables us to bear witness to the world. We traditionalists on the Feast of St Simon & St Jude say the Athanasian Creed. This asserts in a number of ways *Such as the Father is, such is the Son: and such is the Holy Ghost*, which means that to know God in any of His three persons is to know God.

January 6th Epiphany

Acts 1 v6

The wise men brought their gifts to Bethlehem because they knew that a new king had been born, but what was his kingdom about? Kings aren't generally born in stables. So what did the wise men expect of Jesus? What did the crowds who flocked to see Him expect? After the Feeding of the 5,000 the crowds wanted to make Him King, but He sent them away. Pontius Pilate crucified Him as *King of the Jews* but the Jews said that they had no king, but Caesar. Jesus told Pilate that His Kingdom was not of this world. So what is this Kingdom of God? What do you expect? Maybe the Jews in His own day expected a Messiah like King David, someone who would lead an army to throw off the Roman yoke and reign in Jerusalem. Maybe that is what Pilate feared. Maybe they hoped for a miraculous deliverance as when God sent ten plagues on the Egyptians and parted the Red Sea. Perhaps some people, like the wise men, hoped that the final redemption would include people of all nations not just the Jews, as some of the Old Testament prophets prophesy. For other people, the Kingdom of God might have been a moral movement, people inspired to behave in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount, because the Kingdom of God was among them or within them (depending on how you translate the Greek of Luke 17 v21). Can we grasp what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God?

January 7th

Acts 1 vv 7&8

I think the answer to the question with which we ended yesterday's study is that there are some things beyond our understanding. Whatever is ultimately meant by the Kingdom of God, at least for the time being we've just got to get on with our part of the Church's task. *God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son.* Jesus' mission was accomplished when He yielded up His Life on the Cross as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. The title *King of the Jews* is nailed up as a superscription on the Cross. This is what it means to be King and whatever the Kingdom of God turns out to mean it is the Kingdom of the crucified King. *It is finished.* This Kingdom now has to be proclaimed throughout the world. It is Good News for the whole of Creation. As the Father sent the Son, so the Son sends His Church and the Church is filled with the Holy Spirit so that she can participate in the life and purpose of God the Holy Trinity. Don't worry about what you don't understand. Just get on with loving people into the Kingdom of God, as the Spirit gives you utterance.

January 8th

Acts 1 v9

I nearly wrote that the period of the incarnation was over! What heresy! Jesus certainly did ascend into Heaven, but He takes with Him His humanity as well as His divinity. There is a human being in Heaven. He opens the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden because they sinned against God. How much less should human beings expect to go to Heaven. How could we sinful creatures expect to stand in the presence of the thrice holy God? Yet Jesus is the atoning sacrifice. *It is finished.* There is a human being in Heaven Who is there by right, because He loved God and because He loved His fellow human beings to the point of making the ultimate sacrifice for God and for humanity and for the whole of Creation. There is a human being in Heaven by right and He opens the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. He is the firstfruits of the new Creation. He calls us brothers. We are coheirs with Christ. We are the children of God because we have the Spirit of the Risen Christ Who bears witness with our spirit and inspires us to cry *Abba, Father.* There is in Heaven a human being Who is there by right to intercede for us and to prepare a place for us.

January 9th

Acts 1 vv 10&11

Why stand ye gazing up into heaven?

The apostles appear to have lost the plot. Jesus has told them what to do. They are to wait in Jerusalem till they receive the Holy spirit and then they are to be His witnesses to the uttermost part of the earth. But they stand gazing into Heaven. How often do we in our Church in the present day spend time on purposeless activity, unnecessary debate and needless contemplation when it is quite simply what we are here to do and we should just get on with it?

January 10th

Acts 1 vv 10&11

This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come again in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.

What is the Kingdom of God? Is it a change in human nature so that people live in accordance with God's perfect Law of Love? Is it God intervening to save His people from persecution? Is it a time when the nations of the world learn to live in peace? Is it God miraculously bringing an end to war, poverty, hardship, disease and ignorance? Is it the establishment of a Body of faithful people to do God's work in the world, the Church in fact? Is the coming of the Kingdom of God the conversion of all nations to Christianity? Is the Kingdom of God the place where we go when we die? Is it knowing Jesus in our every day lives, in prayer, in the Word and the Sacrament? Is it recognising Jesus in other people? All those things are consummations devoutly to be desired and they are all aspects of the Kingdom of God. What the Bible teaches, however, and what the Church believes is that this world will come to an end. Time and space came into existence when God created the material universe. Time and space will cease to be when the material universe ceases to exist. Jesus was present at the creation. God is eternally Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The world was made by Him and for Him. The Spirit moved upon the face of the waters. *End* can mean finish. *End* can also mean purpose. The Kingdom of God is the end in both senses of the word. The Kingdom of God is the end of the physical universe and especially of the human part of the universe, the part made in the image of God. The end of the universe is in Christ, just as was its beginning.

So, what will happen when Jesus returns? I don't want to go into some of the speculations that some Christian groups come up with. It's far better to be humble and to admit that there is a very great deal we don't know. The Bible doesn't tell us much about what is beyond our understanding. Jesus points out that we don't understand when He speaks of earthly things. How would we understand if He spoke to us about heavenly things?

We can, however, say the following. There will be a judgment. The Athanasian Creed again: *At whose coming (Jesus') all men shall rise again with their bodies: and shall give account for their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting: and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.* This is classic Christian doctrine which we're all too good at explaining away or even ignoring. So let me make some points about it.

1) Don't get caught up in debates as to whether the Judgment comes when we die or at the end of the world. There is no time once we have left this physical universe behind us.

2) Bodily resurrection doesn't mean we carry the same molecules into eternity that we had on earth. It means that we are recognisably the same person as we are on earth, not a drop of cosmic spirit in a cosmic ocean.

3) We are all responsible for what we do with the talents and opportunities God gives us. We don't live for ourselves and our own pleasures in this world. We live for God, which also means that we live for other people. Selfishness ruins our lives on earth and spoils our prospect of heaven.

4) When it comes down to it, only Jesus is judged as deserving life everlasting. Life everlasting is available to the rest of us only because He has offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world and we plead His sacrifice through faith in Him. Through faith in Him we are set free from sin, free to lead righteous lives which bring blessing in this life and the next.

5) Everlasting fire is not to be taken literally. It is a metaphor for whatever it means to spend eternity without God. So to spend eternity is a possibility. St Paul teaches us that it is God's Will that everyone should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. However God also gives us the freedom to reject Him and, while it may be reasonable to hope that no one ultimately goes to Hell, it would be complacent to assume it. What would be the message to the victims of Gadaffi or Mugabe if, when it came to it, God just let them off without any penitence on their part?

January 12th

Acts 1 vv 12-14

The apostles obviously are still in ignorance about what they ought to do. They are probably also very fearful. They've been given an enormous task which they probably feel is quite beyond them – to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth – and, of course, their leader was tortured to death only a few weeks previously at the last major festival. The next one is due in ten days time – Pentecost. They stick together and pray. We don't face violent persecution, but we may well feel that the task of witnessing for Jesus to the world is beyond us. There is a kind of aggressive indifference to the faith in contemporary society and even people who call themselves Christians vehemently insist that they don't have to belong to the Church. I wonder how they'll feel if there comes a time when there is no longer any Church for them not to belong to? Those of us who do try to be faithful are doing the right thing when we remain in fellowship and continue to pray.

January 13th

Acts 1 vv 15-20

I find that I value loyalty very highly. I expect you do to. It is a horrible feeling to be let down by a friend. The apostles must have felt very badly let down by Judas. They were probably bitterly angry with him. What he did may well have shaken their faith in human nature. It probably damaged the sense of trust within the apostolic band. I expect they felt conflicted, half sorry for him in the horrible way he died, half feeling that he got what was coming to him. Our emotions can be very confused when we are let down by people we love or even by people we just thought were our friends or colleagues. Peter seeks to understand and to explain what Jesus did in the light of Scripture. It is a very strong theme in the New Testament that we can recognise the Hand of God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, because what He did and what happened to Him fulfil the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Peter quotes several passages as foretelling and explaining Judas' betrayal. We may not always find specific scriptures to relate to what ever troubles we might be going through, but we will find that the scriptures are a tremendous resource to help us to understand ourselves and other people, to explore the nature of the world and of God. We make sense of what happens to us in the light of what we read in the Bible.

January 14th

Acts 1 vv 21-26

Twelve is, of course, a symbolic number. There were twelve sons of Jacob (Israel) and they were the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel – the Old Testament people of God. The New Testament reveals that the people of God ultimately are the people who share Abraham's faith rather than his DNA. The people of God are not Abraham's descendants by birth, but the people of every race who have faith in God in Jesus Christ. These faithful people of all races and both sexes are God's holy nation and royal priesthood. Their inheritance is in Heaven rather than Canaan. The Church is the new Israel, grafted on to the old Israel by the gracious act of God in Jesus Christ. This is symbolised in that there are twelve apostles, foundations of the Church, just as there were twelve sons of Israel, fathers of the tribes.

January 15th

Acts 1 vv 21-26

The man who takes Judas' place rationally has to be one of those who have been with Jesus since His Baptism. He has to be a witness. As the apostolic Church grows, of course, all Christians, all those who have come to faith through the witness of others, will in a sense become apostles, sharing Christ's commission to bear witness to the world, experiencing the indwelling of Christ's Spirit, bearing witness to others, because the Spirit bears witness to our spirit, sharing the faith as the Spirit gives us utterance. What we might be less comfortable with is that they drew lots to choose between Matthias and Barsabas. It looks like inviting chance into the process, though admittedly they asked God to decide how the lot should fall. It does look a bit like making God choose for them, even perhaps putting God to the test. It's not without biblical precedent. When the Israelites conquered Canaan, they divided it up between the tribes by lot. Also the Urim and Thummim used to determine the Will of God seem to have been a kind of sacred lottery. Some people point out that the apostles used this method before they received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and we never hear of it being used again in the New Testament. We ought to be uncomfortable at leaving things to chance or forcing God to decide for us, by giving Him the options and then not engaging in the choice ourselves. Personally I'd be happier to choose between two candidates by praying and then thinking and discussing than to pray and cast lots.

January 16th

Acts 2 v1

Three times a year, the Jews were supposed to go up to Jerusalem. The first great feast was Passover, when they remembered the Exodus from Egypt. The last was Tabernacles, which, coming after the Day of Atonement, celebrates the end of Harvest, the forty years spent in tents (or tabernacles) in the Wilderness and the gift of the Law (Torah) and anticipates the coming of the Kingdom of God. Pentecost was the middle one, focussed on the offering of the first fruits of the growing crops. Pentecost emphasises our dependence on the generosity of God and our consequent obligation to be generous to other people. It seems appropriate that the Holy Spirit comes at the Feast of First Fruits. We are dependent on God. We must share. The 3,000 converted that day were the firstfruits of the Church. The Church will grow and expand to fill the whole world and there will be a rich harvest to the glory of God on the Last Day.

January 17th

Acts 2 vv 2&3

A little while ago Professor Brian Cox was speaking on the radio about how scientists understand particles such as electrons. What he was saying about them just didn't seem to make any sense. He seemed to be saying that if you had an electron in a box, not only could you not say where in the box it might be, it could in fact be anywhere in the universe. I'm not entirely sure that he understood himself what he was saying, but he could at least do the mathematics which apparently describe the unimaginable.

At the beginning of October 1976 I attended a freshers' party at Kings College London where I had just started studying Theology. The wine flowed freely and I got into an argument with a Chemistry student who tried to maintain that religion was nonsense because there is no evidence for it. He nearly choked on his wine when I said to him, *Well you swallow electrons hook line and sinker*, and I had little idea then just how mysterious electrons are. The world is very much more marvellous than we can conceive – whether the material and temporal or the spiritual and eternal. Just because we fail to grasp something, it isn't necessarily false. We can only approach the truth – scientific or religious – humbly, using metaphor – in this case wind and fire.

January 18th

Acts 2 vv 2&3

So why use metaphors of wind and fire if we want humbly to approach the mystery of the truth of the Holy Spirit? In Hebrew and Greek the words for spirit, wind, breath, air, are all closely related. Obviously they are forces you can't see. You can't touch the wind, but you can feel it. Obviously these things are vital for life. Human beings are made of the dust of the ground. When God breathes into Adam the breath of life he becomes a living soul. Spirit is unseen. Spirit is power. Spirit is life.

Fire too is a tremendous force. Fire can keep you warm, cook your food or frighten off wild animals. Flames may be visible or invisible. Fire can be destructive. There is also the refiner's fire. Fire purifies the ore to produce pure elemental metal. The Spirit purifies. The Spirit judges. The Spirit sustains and nourishes. The Spirit protects. Sometimes you are conscious of the Spirit's presence, but He is always there, seen or unseen. The Spirit provides power. One Pentecost I set up my Mammot steam engine in Church. The spirit lamp burns with a flame you can scarcely see. The heat from the lamp excites the molecules of the water in the boiler into ever faster motion until they turn into unseen steam and generate a pressure which turns a wheel and can be used to do useful work in the world. So the Spirit works in the Church of God.

January 19th

Acts 2 v4

God created human beings in His own image. We are incredibly powerful. Look at what the human race has achieved – for good and ill. When we work in accordance with God's perfect Law of Love, we can do great good, cultivating crops, curing disease, relieving poverty. When we go against God, we can produce some pretty effective killing machines. God makes us like Himself. He sets us free. We rebel. He constrains our freedom to protect us from ourselves. So when the people of Babel thought they could build a tower that would reach up to Heaven, God destroyed their tower and caused them to speak different languages so that they could not combine to do evil. Pentecost reverses Babel in that redeemed humanity is set free once again to work with God for the good of all.

January 20th

Acts 2 vv 5-11

This is the passage everyone wants to be asked to read out loud in church. The point is that a lot of these people from all over that part of the world had come up to Jerusalem for the feast. They were Jews who lived in other countries, what we call the Diaspora, who had made the trip to Jerusalem especially to be there for Pentecost. This was the great opportunity to preach the Gospel to people who would not only hear it for themselves but would take it home with them to share with their families and neighbours all around the world. At this stage, the Gospel is still being preached almost exclusively to Jews, but its reach will soon stretch far beyond the borders of the Holy Land itself. So Jesus' words about the Gospel being preached to the uttermost parts of the earth are beginning to come to pass only ten days after His Ascension. In the New Testament the Gospel is urgent. So it is today, if only we could bestir ourselves to share the Good News.

January 21st

Acts 2 vv 12&13

Some people just thought the apostles were drunk. All those Parthians, Medes, etc. heard the wonderful works of God in their own tongues, but others just thought the apostles were drunk. You have to open to the Word of God in order to hear it.

I'm just thinking of those distressing pictures of young drunks on our streets in the early hours of the morning: fighting, flirting, damaging property, intimidating other people and showing themselves up by losing control of their bodily functions. Alcohol (and other drugs) counterfeits spiritual experience. Without spiritual experience there is no life. But alcohol kills both spiritually and physically whereas the Spirit gives life. That is why S Paul says, *Be not drunk with wine wherein is excess; but be filled with Spirit.*

January 22nd

Acts 2 vv 14&15

It always amuses slightly that Peter says they can't be drunk, because it's only 9.00 am. It is true, however, that only really hard drinkers are likely to start as early as that or still to be drinking from the night before. Jesus said, *Men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.* Jesus is the Light of the World.

January 23rd

Acts 2 vv 17&18

Peter turns to the prophets for an explanation of what is happening. If we know our Bibles as we should we make sense of the world and of our own lives in the light of the truth revealed within it. It is so important that we read the Bible ourselves and teach it to others, especially to children. We can't start too soon to tell children Bible stories and to encourage them to read the Bible for themselves.

What a wonderful world Joel promises when men and women, young and old will be full of God's Spirit. This is the life in all its fulness which Jesus came to bring. This is joy in abundance. This is what it means to rejoice in the Lord always. Joel's prophecy may have been fulfilled in many ways in the experience of the people of God. Joel's contemporaries and their immediate descendants may have experienced an out-pouring of the Spirit. Throughout the history of the Church men and women, old people and young have experienced God's Holy Spirit. Pentecost was one crucial fulfilment of Joel's prophecy. It will be fully and finally fulfilled at the Second Coming of Jesus when we (through His grace) shall see Him face to face and know Him as we are known so that we shall be made like Him. Our present experience of the Spirit is a foretaste of that great day. St Paul says, *Quench not the Spirit*.

January 24th

Acts 2 vv 19&20

Scientists believe that the Universe began with a big bang when energy and matter, time and space came into existence. It is tempting to equate this moment with the moment when God said *Let there be light*, but we ought to be cautious about forcing complementary stories (the religious and the scientific) about how the world began into one unified story which may do justice to neither. Since the Big Bang the Universe has been expanding and this has created the conditions in which there is at least one planet on which there is intelligent life. Some scientists think the expansion will continue until everything is so attenuated that life ceases to be possible. Others think it will end in a Big Crunch when everything contracts back to a single point. Long before either of those events the earth could be wiped out by the death of the sun, by a meteor strike or by something we d, like nuclear war or climate change. The Bible foresees the end and describes it in apocalyptic terms, but the Bible knows that in whatever way the end may come, the end will come in the Providence of God. Jesus will be there and bring His people home.

January 25th (Conversion of St Paul)

Acts 2 v21

Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

St Paul too, like St Peter, takes up this quotation from Joel. Paul's great revelation is that we are not saved by race or religion or by good works. We need to be saved because we have made such a mess of things. We have messed up the world and we have messed up our own lives. We have messed up because we have not been faithful to God. We have disobeyed God's Commandments to be good because we have worshipped the false gods of wealth, power, celebrity and self and we have gone for the counterfeit fixes this world offers (drugs and alcohol, material goods, shopping, sex, ambition, etc.) rather than for the only true fulfilment which is to be found in Christ alone. We therefore come under judgment. We have alienated ourselves from God and there is nothing we can do about it. We are too weak and foolish to pull ourselves up by our own boot laces. There is no way we can do enough good works to deserve God's favour. It will help us not a jot to belong to a particular race, social class or religion. *All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.* We cannot help ourselves, but God has helped us. God has not given up on us. God has sent us Jesus. All we have to do is to call on the name of the Lord. *Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*

January 26th

Acts 2 v21

I might have offended someone when I quoted Ps 14 v1 *The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God.* She told me about a very good and intelligent atheist she knows and it was rather rude of me to say that, nevertheless, he was a fool. It is dangerous to call people fools because Jesus said, *whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.* The reason the atheist is a fool is that *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.* The atheist builds his house upon the sand. He may be very intelligent and a wonderful architect. He may be very artistic and a great interior designer. He may be a loving family man and a hospitable host. All those are good things, but his house is still built on the sand. God is the only ultimate reality and everything apart from God depends on Him. You can't understand how the world works (scientifically or morally) without God. Faith isn't an optional extra to a good life. Neither people nor cultures can do without God.

January 27th

Acts 2 v22

The great Scottish philosopher of C18 David Hume was very dismissive of miracles. Basically he thought that miracles were so improbable that anyone who told you he had experienced a miracle was either lying or mistaken himself. Hume's ideas have pretty much caught on and they make it impossible to prove anything to the satisfaction of anyone else by claiming a miracle. So, if I say that Jesus must have been special because He fed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fishes, you might well reply you don't believe He did any such thing. Maybe the Gospel writers made it all up. Or maybe they misunderstood and what really happened was that when one small boy shared the food he brought, other people who had thought to bring food shared theirs too. So the story of the miracle doesn't prove that Jesus was the Son of God. However, I would make two points. The first is that no one can prove that miracles don't occur and it would be narrow minded to rule out the possibility absolutely. In fact, if you believe that Jesus is God born into the world, you necessarily acknowledge that God does intervene in this world's affairs and that therefore He may answer prayer or perform miracles – (for the moment) defining miracle as a supernatural event. My second point is that (supernatural or not) the marvellous things which Jesus did are signs of Who He is, even if they are not proofs in the sense that Pythagoras proved that the square on the hypotenuse must equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides.

January 28th

Acts 2 v23

This is a recurrent difficulty in understanding the Bible. Certain individual people were responsible for the Crucifixion of Jesus. They made certain choices and these choices were wrong – wicked even. They are responsible for their actions and rightly come under judgment.

On the other hand all this is in accordance with *the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God*. God's eternal plan for the salvation of the whole of Creation is the Crucifixion of Jesus – that the second person of the Trinity, united in one person with the only truly perfect human being Who ever lived, should offer Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world – including for the people who crucified Him. *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*

January 29th

Acts 2 v24

It was not possible that he should be holden of it.

The early Church puzzled for centuries over what God has done in Christ. They prayed. They argued. Shockingly they sometimes fought. Eventually they came up with the formulae of the Creeds. It's not so much that the Creeds define or explain God. That would be impossible and it would be impious to try. What the Creeds do is to rule out certain understandings which, taken to their limit, would undermine any understanding of what God has done in Christ.

If Jesus is a complete revelation of God, then He must be wholly God, as the Father and the Spirit are God. If Jesus prays to the Father and promises to give us the Spirit, then Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three. Each of the three must be wholly God. And yet there is one God and there can only be one God. Hence the doctrine of the Trinity – that there are three persons, but one substance (or being or nature or essence - as we strive to find a human word adequate for what is beyond our understanding).

If Jesus is really tempted as we are, if He truly understands, if He is actually our brother, if the Word really was made flesh, then Jesus must be fully human as well as fully divine. He has to be the same as us and the same as God. He has to be really human and really divine, not some hybrid of the two. That is why we say that Christ is one person with two natures (or substances or essences) – the human and the divine.

January 30th

Acts 2 v24

It was not possible that he should be holden of it.

Jesus died a very terrible, but very human death. *The wages of sin is death.* So it cannot be right that the only sinless human nature should die. God cannot die. So it cannot be right that the divine nature should die. This is not something we can understand, but we can understand that St Peter says that death cannot hold Him. Whatever wicked men did to Jesus, despite the fact that the Crucifixion of Jesus is God's eternal plan for the salvation of Creation, the Resurrection inevitably follows from the very nature (or natures!) of Jesus. And, through faith in His Blood, we share in that Resurrection.

January 31st

Acts 2 vv 25-31

Lots of people claim to be speaking with the authority of God – not only Christian clergy, but rabbis and ayatollahs and the holy men of different religions. In two world wars, British and Germans were praying for victory for their own sides. Some clergy, quite honestly, are a disgrace to their profession. There are different voices in the Anglican Communion, traditionalists fearful that the liberals have become disloyal to the Bible and the Church's God-given heritage, liberals fearful that traditionalists' slavish adherence to past ideas makes them deaf to what the Spirit is now saying to the churches – about, for example, women clergy or homosexuality. So how do we recognise whether someone is speaking authentically on behalf of God and how do we know whether they are misguided or outright charlatans? The Bible's answer takes the long view. What is claimed to be revelation now must accord with what has been revealed before. God doesn't change. What is claimed as revelation now will (if it is authentic revelation) come true in the present and future. God is love. God's Law is love. Justice and mercy govern the universe as surely as (more surely than, perhaps) the Laws of Gravity and Thermodynamics. Alleged revelation that glories in death and destruction, even the death of sinners, is not genuine revelation. But neither is alleged revelation that complacently claims everything will be OK even though people are selfish, greedy, dishonest, unfaithful and aggressive. The Bible's answer takes the long view, which humbly and patiently waits on the Lord, rather than rushing in to affirm or condemn while things still remain uncertain.

In this passage, Peter quotes the psalms in order to understand and to affirm the Resurrection. David knew that God does not abandon his servant in death, but David was buried in Jerusalem and anyone could visit his tomb. It follows that David was speaking about something even more wonderful than God's care for himself. David was anticipating that God would raise Jesus, the Son of David, Messiah and King. In Christ, of course, God will raise all His servants. He will raise everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord. David's words proved to be prophetic. They are authenticated by the events Peter is describing and David's words authenticate those events in a virtuous circle.

February 1st

Acts 2 v32

The Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ are eternal life for those who believe in Him. But how can people believe unless they've heard? And how can they hear unless someone proclaims the Word? The apostles were witnesses. All those who believe through their testimony (us) are then witnesses. If we know Jesus, we are mandated to be His witnesses so that the world may believe and be saved. The Greek word for witness (μαρτυς) is our word for martyr. People find that their life in Jesus is so fulfilling that they are willing to give up their lives in this world in order to bear faithful witness of Him.

February 2nd (Candlemas)

Acts 2 v33

I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.

Flesh and spirit. Flesh is the ordinary, the mundane. Flesh is nature, specifically human nature. In essence flesh is a morally neutral term, but because of original sin, our innate tendency to rebel against God, the flesh (human nature) is necessarily evil. Flesh is mortal. Flesh dies. Flesh suffers corruption and ultimately ceases to be. The Spirit gives life. God breathes into Adam the breath of life and he becomes a living soul. Jesus pours out His Holy Spirit on all flesh and to as many as receive it, He gives the power to become the children of God. Jesus is a quickening spirit. In other words He gives life, second birth, radical renewal to all those faithful people who are baptised in His Name. This is God's gracious gift to the whole world, *a light to lighten the gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel.*

February 3rd

Acts 2 vv 34-36

Peter here is quoting Psalm 110, which is used in a number of places in the New Testament to explain the significance of Jesus. In its original context, the psalm must have referred to the political and religious leadership of the earthly Jerusalem hundreds of years before Christ. In the New Testament, however, it is taken to refer to Jesus as Messiah – King and High Priest, infinitely greater than David because He is literally the Son of God, reigning in Heaven over everything, not merely reigning in Jerusalem over Israel. God has raised Jesus from the tomb and exalted Him to His Throne in Heaven where He reigns at God's Right Hand while the Holy Spirit works in the Church and in the world towards the final consummation at the end of time.

February 4th

Acts 2 vv 37&38

What shall we do?

This is the essence of the Gospel message. All that we have to do is to repent and to be baptised in the Name of Jesus Christ. That is all we have to do. God has done the rest. If we repent and are baptised our sins are forgiven and we receive the Holy Spirit. This is eternal life.

Peter's hearers had come to the crisis point. They suddenly recognised their need for God. And Peter told them quite simply what they had to do. And it is the same today.

February 5th

Acts 2 v39

There are no limits to God's grace. This promise is for you and for your children and to all that afar off, as many as the Lord our God shall call. We don't have to doubt. The Good News is for us. We don't have to hold back in sharing the Good News. It is good news for everyone.

February 6th Diamond Jubilee Accession HM Queen

Acts 2 v40

Save yourselves from this untoward generation.

Church and state. In ancient Israel they were the same thing in that all the Israelites were called to be the people of God. The king governed under God. The Law (Torah) governed every aspect of life – business, social, judicial, political, military, agricultural, ethical, etc. - as well as religious life. In fact there was no real distinction between the religious and the secular. Israel was to be a holy nation – holy because the LORD is holy. In New Testament times the state definitely wasn't Christian. There could be a conflict of loyalty between to God and loyalty to Caesar. Generally Christians were to *render to Caesar what is Caesar's*, but not if Caesar's demands (e.g. to worship his image) conflicted with the commandments of God. Later on Caesar claimed to be a Christian and the Church increasingly insisted that the state should be governed on Christian principles. That was the intention at the English Reformation and our monarch is supreme governor of the Church and head of state. As our country becomes increasingly secular, we have to ask ourselves whether we want to resist the secularization of society as a whole or to separate ourselves from the outside world.

February 7th

Acts 2 vv 41-42

Peter's converts on the Day of Pentecost did become a separate group within society. They met together, they had their own standards of conduct and they worshipped in their own particular way – though, for a start, they continued to worship as well with the Jews who had not joined the nascent Church. As a separate group, they could keep themselves relatively pure from the influence of the world. As a fairly small group, they weren't responsible for political, economic or social questions. Their life as a group was an unambiguous witness to the outside world that they were different.

On the other hand, any influence they might have on the wider society was limited by their small numbers and their separation from the larger culture. Such a tight knit group would not survive expansion.

Which do we need to be in contemporary Britain? Should the Church in England be a tight knit, relatively small group of committed Christians who preserve their purity precisely by not mixing with our increasingly secular society, bearing witness by our specialness? Or should we mix in with society at large in the hope of engaging with it and transforming it from within? The danger of being a tight knit group is that we become petty and introspective and useless to the world which God so loved. The danger of mixing in is that we cease to be in anyway distinct from and therefore become useless to the world which God so loved.

February 8th

Acts 2 vv 41-47

Having said all that yesterday, I still envy the effervescence of the early Church. They actually wanted to meet together for worship, daily, not merely weekly. They liked hearing sermons. They gave up all their material possessions. Such was the power in their fellowship that other people were in awe of them. They grew daily in numbers.

I suppose it couldn't last. It doesn't last many more chapters even of Acts. But I can't really understand why we are so very different from them, given that we worship the same God.

February 9th

Acts 3 vv 1-8

Until recently to fail a medical was to be told that you were not fit enough to do something you wanted to do, to do a particular job or to join the army or something. Nowadays, however, I hear people talking about failing their medicals when a doctor tells them that they are well enough to go back to work and are therefore no longer entitled to claim incapacity benefit. It is as if the man in this story said to Peter and John, "Don't heal my ankles. I'd rather have silver and gold." It's a topsy turvey world, though I can understand it in a way. If you've been out of work a long time, you may really feel you can't go back, even if you can find an employer willing to take on someone who's been off sick for ages. If you're made redundant in middle age from an office job, you may feel genuinely unable to start again in some manual or menial occupation. After months without work, you may genuinely have depression or a bad back or some other condition which is hard to diagnose and easy to fake. So it's not clear cut. But I can't help feeling personally that we all ought to be a lot more self reliant and a lot less ready to plead victim status every time we don't want to make the effort to make provision for ourselves and our own family. If we don't pull our weight in society, we're adding to the burden other people have to carry and that isn't fair.

February 10th

Acts 3 vv 9-11

The people were amazed that this man had been healed. If you were sick in those days, medical help was pretty limited and was only available to those who could afford it. If you couldn't support yourself begging was the only option. The people of those days would think that what are routine medical procedures to us were miraculous. They would be astonished that they are freely available to whomever needs them. They would think it remarkable that there is a welfare state to provide for people who cannot work. I think we can say that much of the progress we have made is at least partly to the credit of our Christian religion. Certainly Christianity promotes compassion and a sense of social solidarity that we are members of one another and mutually responsible. Monotheistic religion also supports scientific advance because it assumes that the Universe is governed by laws. We should thank God for these things, not take them for granted.

February 11th

Acts 3 v12

This is something I find difficult. Quite rightly, Peter gives the glory to God. It isn't because he and John are such marvellous people that the man is healed. God has healed him. This is the proper humility of a Christian leader.

On the other hand, Peter has had a responsibility. He told the man the truth when he said they had no money. He had the necessary discernment to recognise that God would heal this man and he had the faith to trust God. He acted with authority when he told the man in Jesus' Name to get up and walk.

Some of us Christian leaders are too arrogant and confidently throw our weight around, exerting our own authority, but behaving as if it were God's authority. On the other hand many of us are perhaps too meek and lacking in confidence. We don't like to exert any authority and consequently the Church is without leadership. I don't know the answer! I think I err in both ways.

February 12th

Acts 3 vv 13-18

This is a difficult message to give to the crowds. They are astonished and delighted that the crippled man has been cured but now Peter has to explain that he has been cured by the power of Jesus. This is the Jesus they had crucified not long before. Moreover Peter insists that God has raised this same Jesus from the dead and that the world will be judged through Him. Either the crowd will accept Peter's message in which case they will have to repent big time, or else they will have to reject it decisively and probably violently. Peter makes it a bit easier for them. It was really their leaders who did it. They were all acting in ignorance. (*Father forgive them for they know not what they do.*) Their ignorant and wicked action actually worked out to accomplish God's purpose to redeem Creation through the Death of His Son. It was all in any case foretold in the Scriptures.

February 13th

Acts 3 vv 19-26

Moses was uniquely close to God. Not only was he commissioned to set the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt, he was the one to whom God revealed the Law on Mount Sinai, the Ten Commandments and all the other lesser commandments, and also the pattern of the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle, which somehow reflect the very glory of Heaven. Moses had a wonderful vision of God and he remained close to God in all the time when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. Moses was special. He promised that God would send a prophet, the bearer of God's Word. Moses' prophecy is partially fulfilled in every one of the many prophets – Samuel, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.- whom God sent with His Word to His people. They were all part of the divine revelation, the epiphany or theophany. God made Himself known to and through Moses and all the prophets. But it all – the Law and the Prophets, the whole epiphany – is fulfilled in Jesus, Who is the Lawgiver and the Law, the Prophet and the Word, God's very nature in human form. To believe in Jesus is to know God and to know God is to have eternal life. This is Peter's invitation to the crowd and God's invitation to the world.

February 14th (St Valentine)

Acts 4 vv 1-4

Till death us do part.

St Valentine's Day seems to be one of those days which has seized the nation's attention. Millions of cards must be sold, plus bunches of flowers, chocolates and other suitable gifts for lovers. There will no doubt be many proposals of marriage today and some people will have contrived to hold their weddings on this romantic occasion. The cynic in me wouldn't be surprised if the secular wedding venues had put up their fees today.

All this fun and froth hopefully is a manifestation of real love and real love is love whatever happens *till death us do part*, the love the apostles had for Jesus when they were prepared to go to prison for Him. A Church that loves like that grows like that.

February 15th

Acts 4 vv 5-10

At the Name of Jesus every knee shall bow.

This is the first line of a very popular hymn, but what is the Name of Jesus? It is a Greek form of the Hebrew name which usually translates into English as Joshua (יהושע) which means something like the *LORD is salvation* or *the LORD saves*. This is the Name the angel told Joseph to give Jesus, *because He shall save His people from their sins*. The *Jo* part of the Name (יהו) is the divine Name of the Old Testament (יהוה) the Name you mustn't take in vain. It is in the Name of Jesus that the Church acts. It is in the Name of Jesus that we have power. What we do as a Church and what we do as individual Christians has to be worthy of that Holy Name. Otherwise we take it in vain.

February 16th

Acts 4 v11

As they went up to Jerusalem for Passover every year, the Jews sang psalms. One of these Passover psalms was 118 and they were singing it on the first Palm Sunday when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. It includes this verse about the stone which the builders rejected becoming the chief cornerstone. This psalm verse is taken in several places in the New Testament to refer to Jesus. The cornerstone is so important that skilled builders should select the best stone available for this purpose. The builders of God's Kingdom ought to have been the Pharisees and Sadducees, but they failed to recognise Who Jesus was. They handed Him over to the Romans, cast Him out of the Holy City and caused Him to be crucified. But God raised Jesus from the dead and built His Church on Jesus, a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers.

O Almighty God, who hast built thy Church upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the head corner-stone; Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their doctrine, that we may be made an holy temple acceptable unto thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Collect for St Simon & St Jude.

It is something to think that two of those foundation stones, Peter & John, feature in this story of the Head Corner-Stone.

February 17th

Acts 4 v12

None other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.

This verse is often interpreted to mean that only Christians go to Heaven. You can't be saved, it is said, unless you have named Jesus as your Saviour. That seems unfair to all those who lived before the time of Jesus and anyway we do know that people like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are in Heaven (not to mention Moses and Elijah) because the Bible says so. It would also seem unfair on all those people who have never heard the Name of Jesus or who have never had the significance of Jesus explained to them. St Paul seems to imply that they will be judged in accordance with how they have responded to the promptings of conscience. I think it would also be unfair on people who have apparently lost faith because of their disgust at some of the terrible things the Church has got up to – paedophile priests, hate-filled rows over things that don't really matter, amassing great wealth in the face of poverty.

My judgment is that we should leave Judgment to God. Proclaim the Gospel. Pray that it may be received and believed. Trust God for the outcome.

I am not ready to go down the road of saying that all religions are as good as one another and that to have no religion is no worse than being a Christian. God has made Himself known in Jesus Christ uniquely and all other claims about what is True have to be measured against the One Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. That's what I take this verse to mean. Non-Christians may perhaps, by the grace of God, make it to heaven, but, when they get there, they will find that God is as revealed in Jesus.

February 18th

Acts 4 v13

Unlearned and ignorant men.

I think the point is that the apostles must have been inspired by the Holy Spirit because they weren't smart enough to make all this up. It isn't saying (as some people seem to think) that God doesn't use intelligent and well-educated people. Just look at St Paul. It is saying that He can use anyone.

February 19th

Acts 4 vv 14-17

The Jewish leaders admitted that there had been a miracle done in the Name of Jesus, but that didn't mean that they became Christians. Quite the reverse. It made them all the more determined to silence the apostles, lest the ordinary people should believe. I mentioned a few weeks back that David Hume's scepticism about miracles makes it hard to use miracles as proof of anything. Here we see that people can believe in miracles without believing in the Source of the miracle. Faith is not just a matter of believing that certain things happened or that certain things are so. Faith is belief in God. You can believe that there is a God. You can believe that He made Heaven and earth. You can believe that Jesus is His Son. You can believe that all kinds of miracles have occurred. But you aren't a Christian unless you believe in God. You yield your life to Him because you know that you can trust Him and there is nothing and no-one else that you can trust.

February 20th

Acts 4 vv 18&19

Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye.
Arrogance or faithfulness? I confess that I applied this verse to myself once when there was a terrible disagreement in our Church. I thought that the people who disagreed with me were going against what the Bible teaches as it has been generally understood within the Universal Church and specifically within the Anglican branch of that Universal Church. I thought I must be like Peter and John, faithful to the Word of God, and stand up to powerful people in positions of authority whom I believed to be acting contrary to the Word of God. Arrogance or faithfulness on my part? If I was right that, for whatever reason, powerful people within our fellowship were going against what God Wills, I had to stand up to them at whatever cost to me or to the Church. I say *for whatever reason* because these were not bad people and they were acting in a way which they believed to be right. So, if I was wrong, and maybe they were acting in accordance with the Will of God (or maybe God just hasn't spoken on the matter in question) I was guilty of the serious sin of causing a split within the fellowship of God's Church for no good reason. A serious dilemma. Are we being arrogant or faithful when we push a point of principle to the point of schism? Was Luther right to go against Rome, Wesley against Canterbury? And what ought we do about our divisions over women and homosexuality?

February 21st

Acts 4 v20

For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.

Is that how you feel?

What can we do to work God's work, to prosper and increase

The brotherhood of all mankind, the reign of the Prince of Peace?

What can we do to hasten the time, the time that surely be,

When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea?

February 22nd

Acts 4 vv21&22

I've been reading John Humphrys' book *In God We Doubt*. Humphrys writes very well and I can recommend his book (which I got from Strood Library). He was brought up to go to Church and pray, but somehow church services and prayer never did anything for him, though he carried on with church and then with prayer alone for years. Apart from the lack of anything he can call a personal relationship with God, Humphrys' three big problems with religion are that there is no rational proof of God, that the sheer amount of evil in the world seems to rule out the possibility that there is an all-loving, all-powerful being in charge, and that the convoluted thinking of religious thinkers just doesn't seem to make sense. On the other hand, against atheism, there is the fact that very many people throughout the world and all through human history have been and are believers, that faith sustains people through all kinds of hardship, that it inspires the best (and the worst) in people, and that it seeks to make sense of the world. If there is no God – no rational mind behind the Universe – why is there anything, how can there be any ultimate purpose, and why do we care? Whether or not there is a God appears to be the most important question and yet Humphrys (along with millions of others) finds it unanswerable. I wonder if it is significant that his father seems to have been put off faith by a particularly arrogant and unpleasant parson? Humphrys cares passionately about justice and peace, but he does not have the passion for God that the apostles evince. I wonder how we share that passion with good people like him?

February 23rd

Acts 4 vv 23&24

Maybe we can't judge because we're not there and maybe it will all be ancient history by the time you read this, but I'm puzzled by the reaction of the Dean and Chapter of St Paul's to the presence of the anti-capitalist camp in front of the cathedral. To date of writing, three clergy have resigned over the affair. The cathedral has been closed on *health and safety* grounds and then re-opened. It would appear that the cathedral authorities are happy to use the law to make the campers leave, but they don't want force to be used if the campers refuse to obey the law. I'm sorry if it turns out that I am being unfair, but it all seems bizarre to me. Last winter there were churches which cancelled their services because of snow! I've even heard of churches cancelling their services when roads have been closed for sporting events such as the Tour de France when it came to England. Do we no longer believe in the God Who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them? We don't conduct church services because congregations like them and find it convenient to turn up. Worship is the duty we owe to God. Prayer is the duty we owe to the world. We can't take days off because it's snowing or because the church is difficult to reach because of road closures or for *health and safety* reasons. We carry on unless and until it becomes literally impossible and I don't see how it could ever be impossible to fulfil the Will of the God Who made heaven and earth.

February 24th

Acts 4 vv 25-30

Peter quotes the second psalm. Psalm 2 is about the King of Israel and his battles with the surrounding heathen nations. The King of Israel is described as God's son and the psalmist is confident that the King will triumph over his enemies in the power of God. I think the way the psalm is translated in the BCP (by Miles Coverdale) it is assumed to refer to Jesus. A later verse in the psalm is attributed to Jesus in the Revelation of St John the Divine. The verse about the King being the begotten Son of God is said to Jesus by God the Father when Jesus is baptised by John. Jesus fulfils all the Old Testament archetypes – King, Priest, Temple, Sacrifice, Law, Prophet, Redeemer, etc. Peter finds in the Old Testament the explanation and authentication of what has happened to Jesus and is happening to the nascent Church. This recognition confirms his faith and that of his hearers and ours.

February 25th

Acts 4 v31

What if the Holy Spirit were so powerfully present in our meetings that the very premises in which we hold them were shaken? We might be afraid. We might be sceptical. We might be inspired. We might be embarrassed. Maybe you're glad this sort of thing doesn't seem to happen much nowadays. Maybe you think it should. Personally I don't think it's very likely that God will physically shake the buildings in which we meet. I rather hope not, considering the cost of building repairs. I don't think it's unreasonable, however, to think we might be filled with the Holy Ghost and boldness to preach the Gospel. PCC meetings could be very different! My suggestion is that, in order for the Spirit to manifest Himself in these ways in our meetings, we should also have to yield our whole lives to Him in faith and hope and love. If I'm entirely honest, I'm not sure I want to do that. How about you?

February 26th

Acts 4 v32

This verse certainly needs explaining away quickly. There must be very, very few churches whose members pool all their possessions and share them out according to need. It's hard to imagine how such an arrangement would be practical and, even if it were, most of us are far too selfish and possessive. It might be a very small church that required all its members to hand over everything they had and it would require leaders of unusual integrity to share fairly rather than to use all that wealth for themselves. Fortunately for us, we don't have to look further than the next chapter for evidence that this arrangement didn't work for long in the early Church.

It's too easy to dismiss this. Even if we don't believe in sharing all our money or time or talents with the Church, I should think we ought at least to be generous. If we compare our weekly offering with what we spend on entertainment, toiletries or clothes, let alone basic necessities such as food, rent and fuel, we ought not to embarrass ourselves. If everything we have comes from God and He is the most important thing in our lives, surely how we dispose of our money, time and talents ought to reflect those two great facts.

February 27th

Acts 4 vv 33-35

Life in the early Church was exhilarating. These verses are often compared with Acts 2 vv 41-47. It was so exciting to belong to the Way (as Christians were then called) that you wanted to be together all the time. You joined by repenting of your sins, professing faith in Jesus and being baptised. You shared everything you had. You longed to be with the others, praying and worshipping together daily and breaking bread, which might simply mean eating together and might have Eucharistic implications. Perhaps the Risen Christ was thought of as present at all communal meals, as you proclaimed His Death in anticipation of His coming again. You longed to hear the apostles preaching and teaching as they told you the stories of Jesus, explained their significance using the Old Testament Scriptures and worked out the implications of being a Christian in your daily life. You experienced miracles – signs and wonders – and new converts joined every day. It must have been wonderful to belong to that early Church.

I suppose it had to be formalised as numbers grew and the Church spread from Jerusalem to places with very different cultures and climates. We still celebrate the Sunday Eucharist. We stand when the Gospel is read, the story of the Jesus of History present with us in the Christ of faith. The Old Testament reading still gives the Gospel its context. The reading from the Epistles, Acts or Revelation still tells us how to live here and now in the light of the Gospel. We still have a sermon to bring us the Word of God today. We still pray. We still have the chance to offer our money and possessions as part of the offering of ourselves, our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice. We can still do all this daily as well as weekly. We still meet together socially and to serve God in various activities – evangelistic, pastoral and generally for the good of the communities in which we live. It's all still there for us to share.

February 28th

Acts 4 vv 36&37

People like the fact that Barnabas' name means *son of consolation*. We meet him here first as one of those enthusiastic new converts. He will be very important in getting the Church to accept that Paul genuinely had been converted and would work with Paul in his missionary work.

February 29th

Acts 5 vv 1-11

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is much less edifying. They didn't have to join the Church. They didn't have to give anything to the Church. But they hoped to gain credit for giving away all their possessions without doing so. It isn't too hard to understand their motives. We can all be selfish and materialistic. We all like to enjoy the good opinion of others. We are all capable of hypocrisy and dishonesty. They dealt with holy things in a profane manner and the consequences were disastrous. *The wages of sin is death.* It's the other side of the coin of the power at work in the early Church. They approached the flame of the Holy Spirit, but, instead of being warmed or illuminated, they were burnt. *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Our God is a consuming fire.*

We might think that God ought to be too nice to smite Ananias and Sapphira. We might believe in a milk and water Deity Whose Church shuts down for *health and safety* reasons. If, however, we believe in the God Who made heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them, we have to recognise that the Power Who is strong to save the world is equally dangerous to those who abuse Him.

March 1st (St David)

Acts 5 vv 12&13

I've come across two reasons for people being afraid to join our worshipping congregations. Some are afraid to join us because of what their non-church friends might think of their joining us. I knew one young man who got as far as the threshold and then couldn't come in for that reason. Some are afraid to come in because they're not sure they'd be welcome. They've got young children. Or they don't know their way through the service books and the hymns. They'd be afraid of sitting in somebody else's seat. They might think they are unworthy or that other people would think them unworthy. They don't have the right social standing. Once or twice I've come across people who claim genuinely to be scared of the numinous, but I'm not quite sure whether they were joking or half-joking. In Jerusalem people were afraid to join because they were afraid – afraid of the power at work in the fellowship, afraid of being thought fools by their friends, afraid of the authorities? I think they were afraid of the power.

March 2nd

Acts 5 vv 14-16

I think people were awed by the power at work in the early Church. The desperate came for healing. The curious came to watch, no doubt from a distance. Many kept their distance. Some were drawn in and committed themselves, joining the worshipping community, being baptised, yielding their lives to God. Rudolf Otto wrote of the *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. There is a Mystery which both terrifies us and draws us to itself. This is the Mystery we call God. This is the mystery the people of Jerusalem knew existed in the early Church. They were in awe, afraid even, but they were drawn. The Church was dynamic. It was full of divine power. That is why it drew so many converts. We can experience this Mystery in landscape or the night sky or in prayer and meditation. We can experience it in people. Sometimes this Mystery just seizes us out of the blue. Most of all, surely, we ought to expect to encounter it in church.

The question this raises for me is has the Church been adopting exactly the wrong tactic for mission over the last few decades? We've deliberately demystified what we do – simplified our services, introduced greater informality, made our buildings cosier, played down the more awe-inspiring and terrifying aspects of Christian teaching. The focus is often on the minister and other worship leaders, rather than on God. (That's why I rather wish lesson readers wouldn't say *Good morning* before reading the lesson, transferring attention to themselves away from the Word.) We think we've made the atmosphere friendlier and perhaps we have, but have we lost the sense of mystery? I feel much closer to my fellow worshippers in the church today than I did when I was a child 50 years ago, but am I as conscious of the presence of God? Do visitors and newcomers experience the *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans* or do they feel they've come into a rather pleasant social gathering? Of course we should feel close to one another. We Christians are members one of another. But we are also members of Christ and is that apparent to the outsider coming in? Will he feel he is joining us or joining Jesus for an hour or so on a Sunday morning? Is church a pleasant alternative to the sports field or the shopping centre, depending on your temperament, or is it a place where you experience the *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*?

March 3rd

Acts 5 vv 17-26

The apostles were a stubborn lot. You might have thought that, having got out of prison once, they would take some time off preaching in the Temple, take a country holiday or something, but they were back the next morning preaching the same Gospel, risking their *health and safety*. The early Church didn't give in in the face of persecution and neither do Christians today in, just for example, Zimbabwe, China or Burma. To know God is to have eternal life. To know Jesus is worth more than any deprivation, pain or suffering.

March 4th

Acts 5 vv 27-32

Peter had no choice but to obey God rather than man. The message was clear – Christ crucified, risen from the dead, salvation in Him. If Peter was crucified (as he eventually was about 30 years after these events) he knew he had eternal life. To deny Christ would mean eternal death – though Peter of all people knew that denial could be repented of and receive forgiveness. It was (and is) imperative to preach Jesus. We Christians participate in His Death and Resurrection. This is Good News to be proclaimed to the whole world. The persecutors need to hear the message as much as the persecuted. The persecuted don't have to fear *them which can destroy the body, but are not able to kill the soul*, but the persecutors should *fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell*. (Matthew 10 v28). [It has been pointed out that the *him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell* could mean either God or the Devil!]

March 5th

Acts 5 vv 33-39

Gamaliel was a good man and a Pharisee. Many of the Pharisees were good men and some of them joined the Church. Gamaliel is much respected by Jews right down to the present age. I don't think there's any evidence that he became a Christian, but God used Gamaliel's wisdom and moderation to temper the persecution of the early Church. There had been other people before Jesus who were claimed as messiahs, but nothing came of their revolutions. Time would tell whether the Jesus Movement was of God. Wait humbly and see. This "Gamaliel Principle" is a good one for the Church today with its differences of view. Remain in charity. Wait humbly and see.

One of the characteristics of punishment, especially corporal punishment, is the shame involved. When we are punished it is usually because we have transgressed the rules of our society. We are ashamed that we've been found out. We're ashamed to be punished. But it was quite the opposite for the apostles. They weren't ashamed of the Gospel. The authorities ought to have been ashamed of trying to stop them preaching. The point of punishment is retribution (that we suffer in proportion to the wrong we've done), reformation (to make us better people) and deterrence (to deter us from re-offending and to deter other people from doing whatever we did). There was no retribution in beating the apostles. They hadn't done anything wrong! I have serious doubts that corporal punishment ever reforms. Even if it can, there was no need for reformation here. They hadn't done anything wrong. In terms of deterrence, the beating might have shamed the apostles and made them afraid to preach anymore. They weren't ashamed, however. They had no reason to be. They weren't afraid either. So they carried on preaching. Persecution signally failed to deter others. People were so impressed by a faith that people were prepared to die for, that they came along to find out more about it. That is the origin of the saying, *The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.*

It might be worth saying a bit about punishment, given the rapid changes we have seen in the criminal justice system in recent years. We shouldn't forget about retribution. You can only punish someone who's done something wrong. That means you need just laws, that reflect absolute moral standards, not just the whims of lawmakers. (Is it moral to punish a person for painting a listed building a colour the conservation officer doesn't like) You can only punish in proportion to the wrong the person has done. So you can't impose big penalties to deter people from committing minor offences (towing away for briefly overstaying your time at a parking meter?) Neither ought you to impose indeterminate sentences so that a person can be kept in prison after he has served his time because you still don't trust him. (Logically on that basis you could lock up someone who hasn't yet committed any crime on the grounds you think he might!) There may not be much shame involved if what you are punishing someone for what is not regarded as wrong in his community (like taking soft drugs or carrying a knife for defence). Shame is probably a more effective deterrent than fear. So we are in difficulties when whole "communities" (travellers, ethnic groups, inhabitants of inner city estates, anti-capitalism protestors) reject the values of society as a whole. If punished they are more likely to see themselves as martyrs than criminals. Recidivism rates suggest that we fail almost completely in terms of reforming criminals. Pray for law makers and law enforcers and those responsible for punishment.

March 7th

Acts 6 v1

One of the frustrating things about reading these early chapters of Acts is that the early Church seems so much better than we are nowadays. But they were human, facing human problems in the same world that we live in. They believed in the same God. They had the same problems and the same resources for dealing with them as we have. Having decided to pool all their possessions and share, there were likely to be ructions about fairness. Widows were often poor. Their husbands had probably been their sole support and there were few paid occupations a woman could take up, especially as she got older. So widows more than most depended on the community to provide for them. [This still causes trouble much later on in other cities to which the Church will spread. Shouldn't young widows provide for themselves? Shouldn't older widows be looked after by their families if they have them, rather than relying on the wider community? These are much the same questions as we are asking today about welfare and welfare dependency. Surveys show that most of us think there should be welfare to support people who can't support themselves, but most of us don't think that the taxpayer should be supporting the idle, the feckless and the irresponsible. How you distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving poor (if you can and should) is quite another question.] Anyway, as so often happens, correctly or not, the widows decided that they weren't all getting fair shares and they divided on racial lines. They were all Jews, but some were Greek-speaking from the Diaspora and some were Aramaic-speaking who'd lived in the Holy Land all their lives.

March 8th

Acts 6 v2

A lot of clergy feel the same way as the apostles. There's a problem with the church roof or a disagreement about memorial stones or someone has been offended about something and everybody looks to the minister, who thinks "Why should I leave the Word of God to climb ladders, read and reread the churchyard regulations or apologise to someone I don't even understand what they're upset about?" Those who handle the Word must be the ultimate leaders of the Church founded on the Word made flesh, but they should be allowed to delegate other matters such as these to people better able to handle them.

March 9th

Acts 6 vv 3&4

It is tempting to think that prayer and the ministry of the word were spiritual matters requiring men who were called by the Holy Spirit and ordained by the laying on of hands with prayer, but that waiting at tables was a menial occupation that just anyone could do. In fact the servants (Greek deacons, δῆκονοι) were also chosen as full of the Holy Spirit. Everything we do for God is a ministry, whether preaching or waiting at table. So whatever we do, we consecrate to Him. We do our best. We value what other people do – the man who unblocks the drains as much as the bishop. Every member ministry (or lay ministry or shared ministry) doesn't mean getting as many people as possible dressing up like clergyman and having a seat at the front of the church and a special rôle in the liturgy. It doesn't necessarily mean authorising lay people to be readers, pastoral assistants or evangelists (though it might). It does mean everybody contributing as much as he or she can with the talents and opportunities God has given and it means valuing everybody's contribution for what it is. It is just as important for those waiting at tables to make sure that everyone enjoys her dinner as it is for the apostles to preach a good sermon.

March 10th

Acts 6 vv 5&6

Judging by the names, the servants were largely Greek speaking Jews, presumably who would be trusted by the Greek speakers. The word "deacon" is not used here, though this episode is often thought to be the origin of the order of deacons (or diaconate.) The word deacon means servant and there were deacons in the early Church from the beginning. Later on, they were responsible for alms and taking Communion to sick people unable to get to the Church's celebration of the Eucharist. Later on still deacons have a particular rôle in public worship. In the New Testament we also meet deaconesses. Whether they had exactly the same function as male deacons is debatable. After the New Testament, many centuries went by with only male deacons. In Victorian times, the Church of England started appointing deaconesses, who were definitely not the same as male deacons. The latter were clergy. Deaconesses were not. Then, in 1980, women were ordained as deacons with the intention that they should be the same as the men and the order of deaconesses has been allowed to lapse.

March 11th

Acts 6 v7

If you read the New Testament at a superficial level, you get the impression that the Jews were always the adversaries of the Church. Also that the Pharisees and the Sadducees (the priests) led the opposition to Jesus and the persecution of His followers. This has sometimes been an excuse for anti-Semitism. When you think about it, however, Jesus was a Jew and so were all the first Christians. Christians ought to honour Jews and to celebrate our shared heritage in the Old Testament. I do believe that we should pray for the conversion of the Jews and be prepared to witness to them that Jesus fulfils all the promises of God for Jews and Gentiles. Nevertheless we should be both humble and charitable in our dealings with Jewish people. There should be no persecution or prejudice if we are true to the teachings of Jesus.

As you read Acts carefully, you see that many Pharisees and Sadducees were converted and joined the Christian Church.

March 12th

Acts 6 v8

God bursts out of our organisational constraints. The apostles and the rest of them thought that they were appointing seven dinner gentlemen. At least one of them, however, turned out to be a great preacher, filled with the Holy Spirit and the first martyr. God is so much more wonderful and powerful than we can imagine. There is an old joke that the Church of England wouldn't be ready for Christ's Second Coming until we had had time to set up a committee to draw up an appropriate order of service for the occasion! We do need committees and rules and officers for the normal smooth running of the Church and the efficient carrying out of our mission, but we must not try to confine the Holy Spirit in our bureaucratic structures. When God is working outside the proper channels, we'd better be working with Him outside them too.

March 13th

Acts 6 v9

My evangelical friends used to say that you knew you were doing well in God's work when you encountered the most difficulties. Their theory was that when the Church was doing well the Devil was getting worried and would step in to cause trouble. On the other hand, they would argue, if everything seemed to be going smoothly, in the Church or in your personal life, that was an indication that you weren't making much impact and the Devil wasn't bothered about you. He could come back and devour you after he'd fought the really important battles against God's Church.

March 14th

Acts 6 v10

I've just been telling the children the story of David and Goliath. The big point in the story is that the shepherd boy defeated the warrior giant because he had faith in God. It has also been pointed out that David was a lot smarter than Goliath. By using his sling, he was able to knock Goliath out before the big man got close enough to use his sword or his fists. If we go along with a great deal of contemporary discourse, we might assume that faith and intelligence don't go together. Intellectual atheists suggest that only stupid and weak people believe and some Christians speak as if they thought faith was something you held on to despite logic, reason or even common sense. This is rubbish. Faith and wisdom go together very closely. David saw clearly because he had faith. Because he had faith, he was brave. Being brave, he didn't panic and act irrationally. Trusting in God, he expected right to triumph over might and he wisely acted accordingly. Likewise Stephen, because he had faith, used his intellect and his knowledge to stand up for Jesus and his opponents couldn't gainsay him.

March 15th

Acts 6 vv 11-15

As with Jesus, they were reduced to employing false witnesses. They make the same charge – that he intends to destroy the Temple. Not true, though the Temple was made redundant by the Crucifixion. If we are faithful to Jesus, no-one can honestly lay anything to our charge, but they may well use dishonest means to undermine us. Stephen kept focussed on Jesus and his face was like the face of an angel. So, keep focussed on Jesus, whatever they throw at you.

March 16th

Acts 7 vv 1-5

Stephen explains Jesus in the light of the Old Testament. Everything that has just happened to Jesus and everything that Jesus has accomplished for the Salvation of the whole of Creation is God's eternal plan and the Hebrew Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament) bear witness to Him. Stephen starts with God making Himself known to Abraham in Mesopotamia. Already we see that God's activity is not confined to the Holy Land. He appears to Abraham in Gentile territory. Moreover, Abraham's name means *father of many nations*. He is not just the father of the Jews. He is also the father of the Arabs. But more to the point, Abraham is the father of all who have faith. God promises to Abraham that in his seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed. The word "seed" isn't plural. Its primary significance, Paul will teach, is not the Jewish people, but Jesus Himself. It is in Jesus, through faith in His Name, that people of all nations will be blessed. Faith means trusting God and acting on our belief in Him. Abraham shows his faith by believing the promise in his "seed" even though he and his wife are childless and apparently too old to have children. Yet, for all that, Abraham didn't possess any land in Canaan, the Promised Land. He was a wandering nomad. So there was much more to look forward to when God's promises were fulfilled. The Jews having a home in Palestine is a very long way from exhausting the promises of God to Abraham. The implication (the mystery which is divulged in Christ) is that the promises foretell a home in heaven for people of all nations who have faith in Jesus. Stephen's opponents' interpretation of their own Scriptures is far too narrow. We have to guard ourselves against the same error.

March 17th

Acts 7 vv 6-15

The word "seed" is now used collectively of the people of Israel. God prophesied that Abraham's descendants would be slaves in Egypt and that their descendants would return to settle the Promised Land. It follows that the whole story of Joseph and his brothers is part of God's eternal plan. The brothers mistreat Joseph, but this is God's way of saving His people from the famine and bringing them into Egypt. All the characters in the Bible story make their own choices, for which they are responsible, but what happens is all in God's plan.

Jacob (Israel) was taken back to Canaan to be buried as a mark that Canaan was the real homeland of his people, the Israelites. But they continued to live in Egypt and prosper until the Egyptians came to be afraid of them and decided to enslave them and to try to keep down their numbers by having the boy babies killed.

After the Second World War, we encouraged people to immigrate into Britain from the West Indies to take on a lot of the jobs which needed doing when there was a great need for reconstruction after the war and many of our young men had been killed. Twenty years later, Asians from one part of the former British Empire found themselves under threat of persecution in another part - African countries also newly independent from Britain. They had a strong moral case for being allowed to make their homes here. Since then, immigration has continued with families wanting to join those already here, people escaping persecution, people trying to escape poverty, unskilled people needed to do jobs British people won't do anymore and highly skilled people needed because there aren't enough British people with the right qualifications. Living in one of the most prosperous countries in the world in a parliamentary democracy under the rule of law, we cannot be surprised that a lot of people want to live here and I can't help feeling it is selfish to try to keep them away. But there are all sorts of questions about multiculturalism and social cohesion. Can we all live together? Do we all want to live together? In some ways, we are faced with the same problem as the ancient Egyptians with the Hebrews. What impact do all these "foreigners" have on us? Can we trust them? History comes down very much on the side of the Hebrews. So I take it that we won't want to come down on the side of the Egyptians. I don't claim to know the answers, but I do think there are certain principles I would stick up for in all the confusion and argument about immigration.

There is no alternative to treating all people with compassion.

Whilst respecting other people's culture and right to practice their religion, we will still practice the Christian faith openly and in public. Christianity is not the same thing as white English culture. We share our faith with other races but we will also acknowledge that there are ways of being Christian without being English and that not everything English is Christian.

March 19th

Acts 7 vv 30&31

Stephen is still using the story of Israel – the story which was bread and butter to his hearers – to demonstrate how God acts in history. Moses was saved from being drowned as a baby. He tried to stand up for the Hebrews, but finished up both rejected by his own people and a fugitive from Egyptian justice. He settled down in a foreign land, married and became a shepherd. Everybody in the story made choices – some good, some bad. They were responsible for the choices they made. But everything was in God's Hands. Moses' life story brought him to Mount Sinai, the place where he would encounter God in a unique way and take on his key rôle in salvation history.

March 20th

Acts 7 vv 32-34

Moses stands on holy ground. He encounters God and receives his instructions. This is the God Who is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is the God of Moses' people. He is the God of the promises. Moses can trust God. But, although Stephen doesn't mention it, this is also the place where God makes known His Holy Name, יהוה. This is the Name which is too holy to pronounce, but it derives from the Hebrew verb "to be". God is the One Who is. God is the One Who causes everything else that is to be. It wouldn't make sense if such a God were only the God of the Jews. He must be God of everything, God of all nations. Salvation is indeed of the Jews, but it cannot be confined to the Jews. Salvation must be for the whole of creation because that is the Nature of God, the universal Creator.

March 21st

Acts 7 vv 35&36

The Jews rejected Moses but he became their saviour. Stephen's hearers know that perfectly well. Jesus came to His own and His own received Him not – that is the people of Nazareth (including His own family sometimes), the Jewish people and their leaders, the human race in general. Jesus came to His own and we rejected Him but he became our Saviour. On 21st March 1556 they burnt at the stake Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury and author of our most of our prayer book whose 350th anniversary we celebrate this year. The human race doesn't learn, but God uses those we reject to save us!

March 22nd

Acts 7 v37

We've referred to this earlier in these notes. Moses had a unique rôle in revealing God's Word to the people of Israel. He promised that God would send a prophet to continue to impart His Word to His people after his own death. All the Old Testament prophets (and the New Testament prophets and prophets working within the Church throughout the ages) are aspects of the fulfilment of this prophecy. But the absolute complete fulfilment of Moses' promise that God would send a prophet to make known His Word is Jesus, the Word made flesh. Stephen is not asking his hearers to give up their belief in Moses and switch their allegiance to Jesus. He is exhorting them to recognise that everything they find in Moses and the prophets is fulfilled in Jesus and to believe in Jesus. Remember both Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. He did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfil them.

March 23rd

Acts 7 v38

Until Jesus, no-one had had such a revelation of God as Moses had. After the children of Israel escaped through the Red Sea, they congregated at Mount Sinai. Moses spent forty days and forty nights in the presence of God. His vision of Heaven inspired the Ark of the Covenant, the Tabernacle and (later) the Temple. He had this vision of where God dwells. Moses also received the system of sacrifices which reconciled man to God and man to man and proclaimed God's saving acts from generation to generation. Moses received from God the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law. The priesthood was established in Moses' family. To date, this was the most wonderful manifestation of God ever. And it was all *types and shadows*. It is in Jesus that the fulness of God dwells bodily. He is the archetypal high priest. He is every sacrifice that is ever needed. He is the personification of the moral law. Jesus doesn't abolish Moses. He transcends him to an infinite degree. Moses is the preparation for Jesus. So it is through the Old Testament that we begin to comprehend the New. Hence the Communion hymn.

Therefore we, before him bending, This great Sacrament revere:
Types and shadows have their ending, For the newer rite is here.
Faith, our outward sense befriending, Makes our inward vision clear.

March 24th

Acts 7 vv 39-43

Even while Moses was meeting with God on Mt Sinai, the people apostatised. They lost their faith that God was with them and they got Aaron (Moses brother!) to make them a golden calf to worship instead of the living God. They worshipped what they had made instead of the One Who had made them with predictable consequences. They became selfish, unfaithful, dishonest and violent and came under the harsh judgment of God. This was true of the chosen people – as Stephen's hearers knew very well. It is true of the whole human race. The only remedy is Christ, what God has done in Jesus. So Jesus is good news for the whole of humanity – Jew and Gentile alike. Stephen's tormentors had no right to deny Jesus to their own people, the Jews, nor to attempt to prevent the Gospel from being shared with the Gentiles.

March 25th (The Annunciation)

Acts 7 vv 44-50

Thought for the Day this morning was still on about the Occupy London encampment on the steps of St Paul's. A lot has been made of Jesus casting the money changers out of the Temple, because it was meant to be a house of prayer. There are two different lessons which can be derived from that episode. You could say it shows that Jesus is against commerce exploiting the poor, specifically that the Church ought not to be mixed up with selfish, greedy, rich people whose incompetence and dishonesty has brought suffering on ordinary people, which they don't seem to want to share themselves as they cling on to their grotesque bonuses and their inflated salaries (which they have the effrontery to refer to as "compensation" as though they were above mere mortals who work for wages). On the other hand, you could deduce that the camp ought to be removed so that people can get into this house of prayer. It is perfectly possible to believe both interpretations. Nobody should be excluded (including the rich and the sinful). The Church should not be afraid to remind everybody that we all come under the judgment of God – including the rich and powerful. The speaker, however, was more concerned to use this episode as an opportunity to review the importance of buildings for our faith. God isn't confined to any religious building how ever magnificent. Heaven and earth cannot contain Him. Yet His fulness dwelt bodily in Jesus. He dwells in the hearts of the faithful. He is to be found everywhere.

March 26th

Acts 7 vv 51-53

The constant theme of the Old Testament is that the people were never worthy of God's goodness. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Noah got drunk after the Flood. The people of Babel tried to build a tower that would reach up to heaven. Abraham and Isaac denied their wives because they were afraid of being killed by powerful people who wanted to take them from them. Jacob tricked Esau. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. The Israelites made the golden calf while Moses was in God's presence on Mt Sinai. Whenever the Israelites prospered, they forgot about God and worshipped what they themselves had made – mere idols, nothing. David committed adultery. Jonah tried to run away to Tarshish. And this was just the chosen people! What do you think was going on in the rest of the world all this time? The Bible is realistic about the human condition. We are so far mired in wickedness that only God can help us and yet, consistently, we reject Him. Look at the way we are allowing God to be pushed out of public life in modern Britain. So Stephen isn't surprised that the Jews of his own generation rejected the Gospel. It's what human beings do, but it doesn't stop God loving us and some of us do repent and turn to Christ. *But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.*

March 27th

Acts 7 vv 54-56

I've just come back from a talk on why people leave churches. The basic thesis was that actually quite a lot of people do join churches. Think about it. But they may not stay long and also longer-standing members leave. So our numbers don't grow. In fact they tend over all to decline. We discussed some of the reasons why people leave church. Obviously some die or move away. Some become housebound and then it is very sad if they are forgotten and church members don't keep in touch. Many, however, leave because they feel unappreciated or because they aren't getting what they want out of the church, or they don't like somebody or something in the church, or other things in their lives have higher priority than church. We discussed how we might make them feel better about church and make them want to stay. I wondered, however, if we weren't coming at this the wrong way. It's all very me, me, me. **I don't feel loved sufficiently. I don't get enough attention. I didn't get my way. I've got better things to do with my time.** If we try to give people what they are demanding in order to keep in them in the church, are we in fact encouraging them to be selfish? It is not healthy to be selfish and no-one becomes a better Christian by making demands of God or of other people. *Whosoever will come after me, let him **deny himself**, and take up his cross and follow me.* Surely, we worship God in His Church because it is our duty to Him and to the Church and to the world. If we do what is right, we become better people, but if we make demands on God and other people and spend our lives looking after our own personal well-being (even our own personal "spirituality") we are bound to fail. As a Church, charged with building one another up into the full stature of Christ, perhaps we ought not to be pandering to one another's weaknesses, but inspiring one another to a vision of God like Stephen's here – a vision which is so intense that we would be ready to die a martyr's death for Jesus, not a selfish "spirituality" which if it is unfilled will suffer us to leave the Church. When I was a teenager I loved the church I went to. When I first went to college, my new church was very different and I wasn't sure that I wanted to keep going. I had to ask myself whether I truly loved Jesus or just one particular church which happened to suit me? As I love Jesus, I stuck with the new church and profited enormously by its ministry and it helped to make me the minister I am now.

March 28th

Acts 7 vv 57&58

They cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears.

Christian faith is reasonable. Jesus is the divine Word or Logos (Λογος). He is reason. It is rational to believe. I want to emphasise this because so many people seem to think that reason is contrary to faith. Humanist intellectuals think that people of faith must be stupid or wilfully irrational and many Christians seem to think that they have to cling on to their faith despite its being irrational. “You have to believe six impossible things before breakfast.”

This is nonsense. In fact it is hard to see where reason comes from if there is no God. If the human brain evolved by chance and the survival of the fittest, the way we think about the world is just the way that happened to enable our ancestors to survive long enough to reproduce. The way we think about the world might correspond to reality, but it might just be a useful illusion. Our science, our mathematics, our art, our beliefs about justice may amount to nothing more than a mechanism for survival and correspond to no ultimate reality at all. In fact some post-modernists query whether there is such a thing as ultimate reality. Something might be true for you. Something else might be true for me. But there is no ultimate Truth, they would argue, to which all right-thinking people ought to subscribe. Indeed there can be no such thing as right-thinking, because there is no ultimate Right. You see how destructive irrationality turns out to be? Yet I strongly suspect that this kind of irrationality is logically inevitable once people stop believing in a God Who gives meaning to everything.

Of course you could argue that the rational creatures have a better chance of surviving because the Universe is ultimately rational, but, then, why should it be rational? The most likely explanation is that the Universe was created by a rational Mind, analogous to ours, though infinitely greater than our minds, and that is the reason the way human beings see and understand things turns out to be the way things are.

It is Stephen's opponents who shout loudest and refuse to listen to reason.

March 29th

Acts 7 vv 59&60

When Jesus was crucified, He said *Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*. He also said, *Into thy hands, I commend my spirit*. So Stephen died just like Jesus, forgiving his persecutors and commending himself to God. We cannot do better than to imitate Jesus in the way we live and the way we die. Christians have always been called to pray for those who persecute them. One of the petitions in the Prayer Book Litany – which was the first service to be published in English and was appointed to be said three times a week in the 1662 Prayer Book – includes the petition *That it may please thee to forgive our enemies, persecutors, and slanderers, and to turn their hearts, We beseech thee, O Lord*. We also pray in the Litany, *In all time of our tribulation; in all time of our wealth; in the hour of our death; and at the day of judgment. Good Lord, deliver us*. We don't really suffer persecution, just a little bit of ridicule and some mild opposition. Many Christians in the world today, however, are persecuted, including in our link Diocese of Harare in Zimbabwe. St Paul says that we are one Body with Christians worldwide. So we share in their rejoicing and we share in their suffering. We may not think to pray for our persecutors, but the Church has her persecutors today. We may not think about our need of God in our wealth as well as in tribulation and at the hour of our death and on the Day of Judgment, but we do need God in everything and for everything. Sometimes using set prayers like the Litany and other published prayers reminds us to pray in ways that we might otherwise have forgotten about.

2012 is the 350th anniversary of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and I expect we shall hear a lot about it. I received a Prayer Book Society bookmark which reminds us that the Book of Common Prayer is

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There are many more modern service books which also offer tremendous resources for prayer and worship, but I should be sorry to lose the BCP altogether.

March 30th

Acts 8 vv 1&2

Stephen was the first martyr, but his martyrdom seems to have set off a determined persecution of the Church. Thinking back to what those evangelicals said about the Devil, maybe he was getting worried. Thousands of people were being baptised. No matter what the authorities did, people just carried on preaching the Gospel. There were signs and wonders. They were meeting daily for prayer and the breaking of bread. The Church was being built up by the apostles' dynamic teaching of the Word of God – to which people were eagerly listening. No wonder the Devil was getting worried and Christ's enemies commenced a vicious persecution. But the blood of the martyrs proved to be the seed of the Church. The more the authorities gave Christians the opportunity to demonstrate their love for Jesus by embracing martyrdom, the more people in the world realised just how great the Love of Jesus is. What can we do to make the Church in England today more like that Church in Acts? They didn't cancel their services for *health and safety* reasons or keep their faith to themselves for fear of causing offence or drop out of church activities because they were too busy with the things of this world or offer less in the collection plate than what they spent on entertainment. What should we do?

March 31st

Acts 8 vv 3&4

We certainly finish on a note of hope. The immediate effect of the persecution is that the Jerusalem Church scatters and people take their new found faith to other places and share it with people wherever they go. One of the leading persecutors is this young man Saul. But you and I know that he too will be converted and that he will become Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles – one of the most effective missionaries and evangelists ever. It all works out because God is in charge, just as much now as then, which is why we are here today as Christians and why even we can help to accomplish His purposes. To end with the words of Graham Kendrick:

Though we are weak, His grace is everything we
need;

We're made of clay but this treasure is within.

He turns our weaknesses into His opportunities,

So that the glory goes to Him. Rejoice! Rejoice...