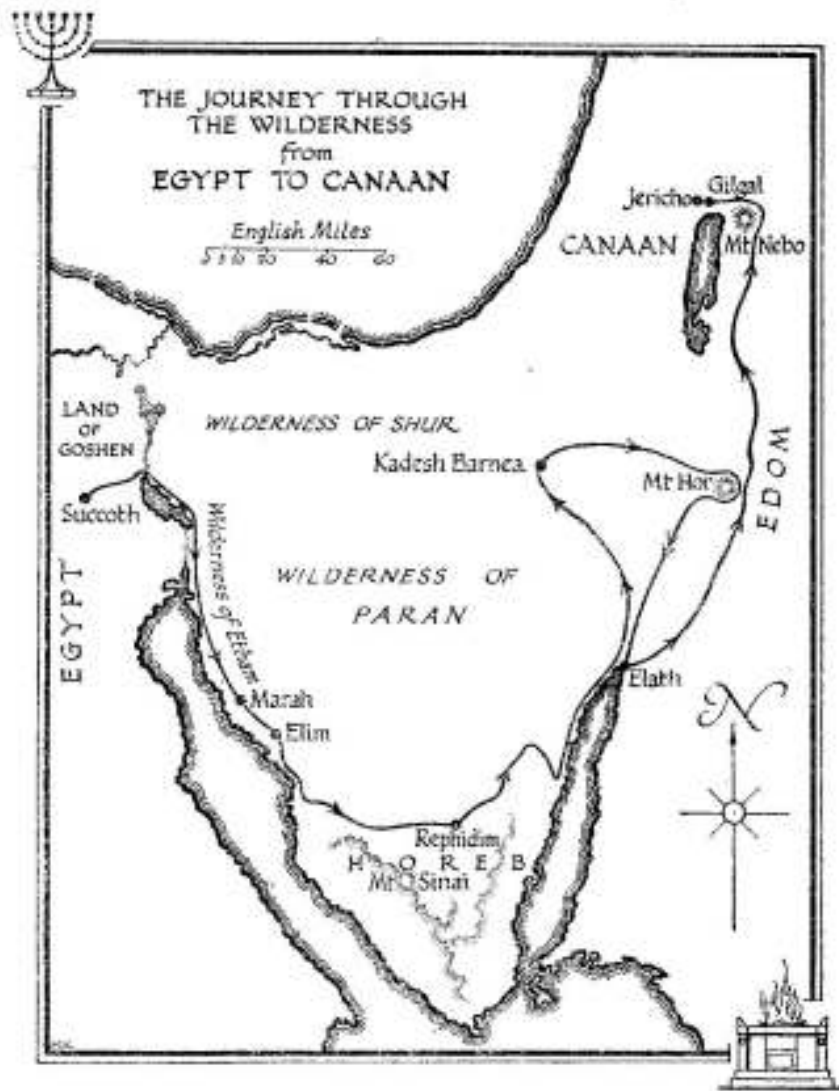


The Wilderness Years



Bible Notes January-March 2016

January 1st (The Circumcision of Christ)

Psalm 115

New beginnings. This quarter we are going to look at what happened immediately after Israel escaped from slavery in Egypt. It's a part of the Bible we possibly do not know as well as we ought to. In fact, it's where people often give up when they've decided to read the Bible cover to cover. There are some very good stories, but there is also a great deal of detail about things - the Ark of the Covenant and the things that went with it, all the laws regulating daily life in ancient Israel - probably more detail than many of us have the patience for. There is also a lot of gore and some episodes are very hard to understand. Why did God do this? Why did He command that? On the other hand, this is Holy Scripture and, therefore, as St Paul says, *given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.* These wilderness years are formative years for the people of God. They make a new beginning with the Exodus. They are delivered from slavery and death by the blood of the lamb. It is as though they were baptised in the Red Sea. The New Testament takes these stories as basic and there is a good deal in the New Testament we can't possibly understand if we don't know them. Today is the day Jesus was circumcised in accordance with the Law.

Almighty God, who madest thy blessed Son to be circumcised, and made obedient to the law for man; Grant us the true Circumcision of the Spirit: that, our hearts, and all our members, being mortified from all worldly and carnal lusts, we may in all things obey thy blessed will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

January 2nd

Exodus 15 vv 1-21

This is the song Moses and Miriam sang when, after ten plagues, the Israelites had finally been set free from 400 years of Egyptian slavery and escaped through the Red Sea. It is the formative event for Israel and celebrated, at God's command, annually in the Passover Festival. The death and resurrection of Jesus are in this passover context. The formative event for the Church is rooted in the redemption of the Hebrew slaves. This story has inspired and encouraged many oppressed peoples enslaved on earth. It is the story of our liberation from slavery to sin, the world and the devil. The angel of death has passed over those with the Blood of the Lamb on their hearts. We are free and no pharaoh or devil can re-enslave us.

January 3rd

Exodus 15 vv 22-27

We are free, but there is a long way to go before we are in the Promised Land. The road is a desert road. It may be a hard road. We thirst on the journey. Yet God is with us. He meets all our needs. What is required of us is that we *diligently hearken unto the voice of the LORD our God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes.* The only way we can do these things is by the grace which He supplies. We have access to this grace through prayer and Sacrament, through Christian fellowship and God's Holy Word.

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all men; [*particularly to those who desire now to offer up their praises and thanksgivings for thy late mercies vouchsafed unto them.] We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, and that we shew forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives; by giving up ourselves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with thee and the Holy Ghost be all honour and glory, world without end.

Amen.

January 4th

Exodus 16 vv 1-3

One of the great themes of these wilderness years is the murmuring in the wilderness. The Israelites never stop complaining! Considering what they have seen and experienced, it seems astonishing that they are not more thankful and less critical. But, how often is this true of Christian congregations? Instead of being thankful for all the wonderful things we have received, we always seem to be looking for things to murmur about. If we have the privilege of singing God's praises and He graciously accepts our worship, does it really matter if we don't like the tune the organist is playing?

January 5th

Exodus 16 vv 4&5

God's immediate answer to Moses draws attention to the Sabbath. That might seem odd to us practical materialists. The people were hungry. Give them bread. Never mind about days of holy rest. There were far more important matters to attend to. They can keep the Sabbath when they've finished their work. Only work never is finished. There is always something else to be done. Moreover mundane work is not what we exist for. There's more to being human than feeding your face or even the face of your family. Moses explains much later (Deuteronomy 8³) that the reason God fed them with the manna was *that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.*

January 6th (The Epiphany)

Matthew 4 vv 1-11

Jesus, after His Baptism, spends forty days and forty nights, fasting in the wilderness, just as the Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness following their baptism in the Red Sea. The devil tempts Jesus with hunger, with magic and with power. You need to eat. You can manipulate the world, God even, to your own personal desires. You can achieve whatever you want if only you will worship the devil. Jesus responds by quoting Scripture. You can only worship God. You can only trust in God. The Word of God is more precious than anything that earth has to offer. The devil's way, the way of the world, appears to be common sense. The way of faith, the path of self-denial looks like a mug's game. What you need is bread. What you need is to be in control. What you need is personal power. It's a broad way and there are many that go that way, but it is the road that leads to destruction. It is God's way that leads to life, the narrow way, the way few find. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the Bread of Life and the Word of God. Today, the wise men come to Bethlehem (which means house of bread) to worship the Bread of Life and the Word of God with costly gifts signifying Who Jesus is and what we are called to be.

O GOD, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles; Mercifully grant that we, who know thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of thy glorious Godhead; through* Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

January 7th

Exodus 16 vv 6-8

Your murmurings are not against us but against the LORD.

A big issue during the wilderness years is the question of authority. Who is in charge? Obviously, Moses is their leader, but on whose authority does he act, his own authority or God's authority? The question of authority is always important both in Church and state. We need authority figures to lead us, to guide us, to correct us and to protect us. On the other hand, power corrupts and very often the people who most enjoy exercising authority are the very people who should never be trusted with power. The idea that authority comes from God is a useful one. It reminds the earthly leader, king, president, prime minister, magistrate, teacher, parent, policeman, bishop, priest, whatever that he or she is answerable to God for the way he or she exercises authority. It also gives us a very powerful reason for obeying. On the other hand, a powerful person who believes that he is exercising power on behalf of God can very easily turn into a tyrant – inquisitors, witch finders, ayatollahs. Generally speaking, authority is to be obeyed as God-given, but just occasionally it isn't and the good person has to refuse, even at the cost of martyrdom.

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

Amen.

January 8th

Exodus 16 vv 9-14

That must have been something – to see the glory of the LORD. I wondered whether they were meant to be overawed and afraid or were they to recognise that in His loving Presence all their needs would be met? These two thoughts are two sides of the same coin. It is one. God is awesome. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. We are His people and He is our God. We are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand. *Our help is in Name of the Lord Who hath made heaven and earth.*

January 9th

Exodus 16 vv 15-18

He that gathered much had nothing over, and he that gathered little had no lack. God meets our needs. We can trust Him. He knows what we need before we ask Him. *Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.* It's back to the two ways we thought about on the 5th. What ought our priorities to be? Are we laying up treasure on earth or treasure in heaven? *For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.* Those words of Jesus stick in my memory because they were one of the texts on our free will offering envelopes at St Matthew's when I was a child. St Paul takes up our Exodus text *He that gathered much had nothing over, and he that gathered little had no lack* in II Corinthians when he is encouraging the Corinthian Christians to be generous in their giving. We don't have to cling on to material things. In the end, though don't matter. God meets our real needs. We can afford to be generous. *It is better to give than to receive.*

How wonderful the work of your hands, O Lord. As a mother tenderly gathers her children, you embraced a people as your own. When they turned away and rebelled your love remained steadfast. From them you raised up Jesus our Saviour born of Mary to be the living bread in whom all our hungers are satisfied. He offered his life for sinners, and with a love stronger than death he opened wide his arms on the cross. On the night before he died, he came to supper with his friends, and taking bread,...

January 10th (Epiphany 1)

Exodus 16 vv 19-21

Some of them thought they knew best. They wanted to store up some of the manna. Maybe they didn't believe it would come the next day. Perhaps they thought they might like a lie in tomorrow. They might even have thought of cornering the market and selling it. Whatever they thought, they didn't know best. *The just shall live by faith.*

O LORD, we beseech thee mercifully to receive the prayers of thy people who call upon thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

January 11th

Exodus 16 vv 22-31

So we're back to trusting God for the Sabbath rest. It is a difficult subject. We can think of all kinds of things which need to be done every day of the week. Some of us can remember the tyranny of the Victorian Sunday, when you weren't allowed to enjoy yourself. We are aware that Jesus fell foul of the Pharisees because He would not accept their rigid definitions of what it was permissible to do on the Sabbath. On the other hand, He didn't abolish the Sabbath. He said that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. We know that S Paul teaches us not to allow ourselves to be judged by Sabbath observance. So what do C21 western Christians do about the Sabbath?

Rev'd Colin Morris had an interesting article in the *Methodist Recorder* about the decline of churches in post war Britain. Why should it be? Growing prosperity and changing attitudes, more opportunities and increasingly busy lives squeeze out church attendance. Changing roles, especially of women, mean that people have other priorities. He suggests three categories of Christian in C21 Britain. Type A are those of us who are very involved in the life of our churches. We'd feel deprived if we were not. Type B generally still believe, but are no longer committed to organised religion. They go to work or shop or take their children to football practice on Sundays. They move and don't join a new church. They don't move but fall out with their old church. But they still say they are Christians. That sounds fine, but, as the generations pass, they and their families forget the bible stories. They don't know any prayers or hymns. The churches of course can do less and less as people stay away and congregations age and shrink. Type C don't believe but join churches because they love the music and the liturgy or join us for our charitable work and social programmes or political radicalism.

It seems to me that the more we dilute the Sabbath, the more Christians will go from being type A to type B. They and their families will gradually forget the faith and the churches will wither and die. There won't even be a church for the type c to dip their toes in. So we have to have a model of Sunday observance that works for us and for other people, taking the Sabbath seriously, but sensibly.

January 12th

Exodus 16 vv 32-36

To put this in its Christian context:

Lord, enthroned in heavenly splendour
first-begotten from the dead,
thou alone, our strong defender,
liftest up thy people's head.
Alleluia,
Jesu, true and living bread.

Though the lowliest form doth veil thee
As of old in Bethlehem,
Here as there thine angels hail thee,
Branch and Flower of Jesse's Stem.
Alleluia,
We in worship join with them.

January 13th

Exodus 17 vv 1-7

Life-imparting heavenly Manna,
Stricken Rock with streaming side,
Heaven and earth with loud hosanna
Worship thee, the Lamb who died,
Alleluia,
Risen, ascended, glorified.

Jesus is the Bread of Life and the Water of Life. He is also the Rock. S Paul thinks of this rock which Moses struck in the wilderness to provide streams of living water as a "type" of Christ. When Jesus died on the cross, from His streaming side there flowed the Blood which washes us clean of our sin and the water which signifies the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life.

Paschal Lamb, thine offering finished~
Once for all when thou wast slain,
In its fulness undiminished
Shall for evermore remain,
Alleluia,
Cleansing souls from every stain.

January 14th

Exodus 17 vv 8-16

This story illustrates the importance of continuing in prayer. So long as Moses' arms were raised in prayer, holding the staff which he used to perform various signs and wonders, Israel prevailed. We uphold the work of the people of God in prayer. We pray for one another. We pray for our clergy. We pray for the local Church, the Church in England, the Church worldwide. If there is to be revival, it will be underpinned by prayer. I sometimes wonder if there is some way we should be praying differently to bring about revival here? A prayer group? More people committed to praying for the local Church in their own homes? More specific prayers in our public worship, but then we'd have to agree on what we are praying for.

I'm not comfortable with praying for victory in battle. If, however, it is right to fight (and sometimes it is) then it is right to pray to win. It would never be right to do something that we didn't think we could ask God to bless with success. Knowing, we can only depend on God, we might well be very hesitant to start a war. *Give peace in our time, O Lord. Because there is none other that fighteth for us, but only thou, O God.*

January 15th

Exodus 18 vv 1-12

You remember that Moses was brought up in Pharaoh's palace, having been drawn from the bulrushes by the princess. He was nursed by his mother because his sister Miriam had offered their mother's services to the Egyptian princess. Presumably, Moses was brought up by his mother to know to which people he belonged and who was their God, the one, true God. As a young man, Moses intervened and killed an Egyptian who was striking a Hebrew. When the next day, he tried to break up a fight between two Hebrews, one of them said, *Who made thee a prince and a judge over us? Intendest thou to kill me, as thou killest the Egyptian?* Moses' leadership over the Israelites was always subject to challenge. They ought to have been grateful to someone trying to bring them peace and order. Instead, they constantly questioned and rejected his authority. It's not just the ancient Israelites who refuse to accept authority when authority is what the people of God needs if it is to enjoy peace and order. Anyway, Moses leaves Egypt, becomes a shepherd for Jethro, priest of Midian, and marries one of his daughters. Then the Burning Bush and the Exodus. Now reunion.

January 16th

Exodus 18 vv 13-27

This passage is often used at seminars on Christian leadership. The presumed problem is the vicar who tries to do everything, wears himself out and finishes up doing nothing properly. The answer, it is alleged from this passage, is to delegate. But see what is going on here. Moses is still the one who acts as a mediator between the people and God. He retains overall responsibility and reserves the most important matters to his own judgment. The captains are acting under Moses' authority and are answerable to him. They are Moses' delegates, not ministers in their own right.

I'm not sure that this is an entirely healthy model for a Christian Church. Jesus is our only mediator and advocate. In Him, all Christians relate directly to the Father. Christian congregations do not relate to God through the vicar! The responsibility for doing God's work in a parish rests on all Christians in that parish. It is not the vicar's responsibility, to be delegated to others who do God's work under the vicar. Neither is it necessarily that the vicar reserves the most important or the most difficult matters to his own judgment.

I find that at clergy gatherings it is often taken for granted these days that team ministry is the way forward and that team ministry (a team of more or less equals, diverse, reflecting the culture they minister to, men and women) is the biblical model. Actually, it certainly isn't the biblical model. The only team anything like this in the Bible is Paul and his companions, but they certainly weren't equals. Paul was definitely the boss and the leader. They were almost all Jewish. There were certainly women among them, but Paul's letters make it quite clear that he didn't believe that women should normally have the same roles as men. Elsewhere in the Bible, the usual pattern is a single charismatic leader, normally male. Sometimes there is an assistant or a companion, but, more often than not, the companion is definitely second fiddle and sometimes completely misunderstands what the leader is trying to do. The twelve apostles definitely didn't understand what Jesus was about until after His Crucifixion, Resurrection & Ascension.

I believe that the vicar of a parish has a distinctive leadership role as part of the shared responsibility of the whole people of God. For that he is called, trained and given the grace received at the laying on of hands.

January 17th

Exodus 19 vv 1-6

How I bare you on eagle's wings, and brought you unto myself.

The LORD is speaking of the miracle of the Exodus. The Israelites are special to Him. He has done so much for them. But how much more has He done for us? When we think about Jesus and His Death on the Cross, isn't that much more precious than ten plagues and passing through the waters of the Red Sea? How much He must love us! The Israelites were a special people, a holy nation, but now God calls His people (Jews and Gentiles) out of all nations. He has brought us unto Himself by the offering of Himself on the Cross of Calvary. Isn't that much more astonishing than the story of Exodus, amazing as that is? So what does it say about you and me and our relationship with God?

January 18th

Exodus 19 vv 1-6

And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.

The people of God in the Old Testament (the Israelites) are kings and priests. Kings usually are wealthy and enjoy great power. With wealth and power go responsibility, responsibility to God and responsibility for other people. Priests have access to God. They mediate between God and humanity, praying for people, offering sacrifice on their behalf, pronouncing God's Word of blessing, of judgment, of mercy. Yet the system isn't perfect in the OT. The Israelites still need a professional priesthood, to mediate between them and God. The NT applies this text *a kingdom of priests* to all Christian people. Because Jesus accomplishes and fulfils the whole vocation of the professional priesthood, all those who are baptised into His Body, the Church, are kings and priests. We all have access to the Father in Jesus. We all have a share in the ministry of praying for one another and for the world. We enjoy all the riches of grace which God pours out on His people by the Holy Spirit. We have the power of God because we are in Him and He in us. We offer ourselves as a living sacrifice. We proclaim God's Word of blessing, of judgment, of mercy, of consolation. This is the ministry of priests and kings. This is the ministry of Christ. This is our ministry as Christian people, the ministry of the whole people of God. We are all different. We have different resources, talents and opportunities, but we all have our own part in the ministry of the Church. The ordained ministry is part of that and we clergy have our distinctive role, but as part of the whole people of God.

January 19th

Exodus 19 vv 7-9

All that the LORD hath spoken we will do.

How could we do less?

O LORD, we beseech thee mercifully to receive the prayers of thy people who call upon thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

January 20th

Exodus 19 vv 10-25

So, how do we see God? That could be a dangerous question. We shall see in the next chapter that we mustn't make any images. Anything we can imagine about God must fall so far short of the reality that it must be a falsehood. We are told that Jesus is the image of God. We are also told that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. So, to know Jesus is to know God and to know God is to have eternal life. But, one very popular image of Jesus is *Gentle Jesus, meek and mild*. That is a true image. Jesus is like that. But it is not the whole truth about Jesus, only a little bit of it. It won't do if we only see God in terms of *Gentle Jesus, meek and mild*. There is the Jesus Who quells the storm, the Jesus Who casts out demons, the Jesus Who heals, the Jesus Who teaches, the Jesus Who rebukes the hypocrites, the Jesus Who dies on the Cross. There is Jesus the King, Jesus the priest, Jesus the sacrifice. There is Jesus reigning at the Right Hand of God, Jesus the Intercessor, Jesus the conquering hero, Jesus the Redeemer. There is an infinity of truth about Jesus, an infinity of truth about God. The God of Exodus 19 is difficult for people brought up on *Gentle Jesus, meek and mild*. However, Exodus 19 is also an authentic aspect of God. If we lose our sense of awe, our sense of fear, even, we misunderstand God to a huge degree. After all, the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord. Luke 5⁸.

January 20th

Exodus 20 v1

And God spake all these words, saying,

How do we value the Ten Commandments? Are they human laws? Apparently not. *And God spake all these words, saying.* They are God's laws. Were they meant merely for ancient Israel or were they intended for the Christian Church as well? Were they in fact intended for the whole of humanity to obey? The second and third questions are harder to answer than the first. The Ten Commandments are certainly God's commandments, but to whom does He mean them to apply? We know that we are not under the law but under grace. We also know that if we love we have fulfilled the Law. What we are is fundamental, not what we do. What we are, we are by the grace of God. Yet the sign that we are justified by grace through faith, the sign that we are people of love, is that we act like it. The examples in the NT of what it means to live the Christian life come down pretty much to obeying the commandments, generally speaking, these Ten Commandments. They are taken for granted in the NT. So, as a Christian king of what he intended should be a Christian kingdom, Alfred put the Ten Commandments at the head of English Law. They were required knowledge for confirmation candidates. They were always to be read as part of the 1662 Communion service. But then they tended to be replaced by the Summary of the Law (Love God & neighbour) and then often omitted altogether. Was this in fact a watering down of God's demands on us? Or was it a recognition that we are not under law but under grace? Should a multicultural society treat the Ten Commandments as the basis of its legal framework? What do you think? I think that the Ten Commandments (read in context) are meant for Christians as well as Jews. Since the Gospel is for people of every race and language, I believe that we should contend for the observance of the Ten Commandments even in a multicultural society. It is intrinsic to our Christian culture to bear witness of the Truth of God.

The fact that Jesus summarises the Law in the two love commands doesn't mean that we'll be good enough for God if we just do what makes us feel warm in side. To love God and one's neighbour is to sacrifice oneself for them.

January 21st

Exodus 20 vv 2&3

This commandment clashes with the demands of a tolerant, multicultural, diverse society. How can we say that our God is the only God? How can we say that everybody ought to worship and that the only God anyone should worship is our God? Surely, religion is a matter of personal choice. There are myriads of ideas about God and many of them may be valid or maybe none of them. Who are we to say that the others are wrong? There is no shame in being an atheist. Agnosticism might well be the most honest religion as nobody can truly know for certain whether there is a God and, if there is, what God might be like. What surely matters above all things is that we all share human values (or British values at least) and that we respect difference. Religion is an optional extra for those who find it meaningful. We no longer do our duty to God and the Queen. Our duty is to the Queen. God is our personal choice.

That isn't biblical religion. If God, then God is the most important. Not only is God the most important, everything else must be seen in the light of God. If God, worship is a duty, not a personal choice. If God is as He is revealed in Jesus, then any alleged revelation of God which contradicts Jesus is false. Not to worship is to be less than human. To worship anything less than God is to worship a lie. You become what you worship. If God, the first commandment is inevitable.

January 22nd

Exodus 20 vv 4-6

Any image of God is false because we cannot imagine God. What you worship is what you live your life for. What you worship is what you become. The person who truly worships becomes like God, like Jesus, pure love and love is the fulfilling of the Law – including the Ten Commandments. If you base your own life and the life of your household on worshipping false gods, instead of worshipping the One Who made us, worshipping what He has created or even what human beings have made, material things, you will deprive your children of the knowledge of Him Whom to know is eternal life. As generation succeeds generation, progressively knowing less of God, humanity will lapse further and further from the truth and there will be consequences for the way we behave towards one another.

January 23rd

Exodus 20 v7

Why do we pray *Hallowed be thy Name*? Obviously because Jesus us told us to, but why did He tell us to? Knowing someone's name gives you some sort of handle on him. Some people might attempt to use God's Name in magic. We might claim to be speaking or acting in the Name of God, when in fact we are speaking or acting on our own behalf. A good name is worth more than rubies. Honouring the name is honouring the person, his reputation. Putting your name to something is a guarantee of integrity – as when you sign a cheque or a contract. An anonymous letter is naturally suspect. If you carry someone's name, you belong to his family, his team, his organisation. It is important that you live up to the name that you bear and that you don't bring disgrace on it. To honour God's Name is to honour God and *vice versa*.

January 24th

Exodus 20 vv 8-11

There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. (Hebrews 4⁹)

The Sabbath is a foretaste of heaven. It is living by the values of the Kingdom of God here on earth – worship, freedom from servile work, sharing this freedom to enjoy God and one another with your whole household and with all the people for whom you are responsible, even with the animals you care for. The Sabbath is renewal of creation as it was perfected on the seventh day and an earnest of the final consummation when our redemption is complete in Christ.

January 25th (Conversion of S Paul)

Exodus 20 v12

Like me, Paul was an unmarried man who placed an extremely high value on family life. He reminds the Ephesians that this is the first commandment with a promise attached. He celebrates the fact that Timothy's faith goes back to the way he was brought up by his grandmother and mother. Marriage and family life are gifts from God and, while the single life too has its important place in God's Providence for us, families are the basis of all human societies. We need to be cautious about the twin pressures on the family of, on the one hand, an increasing emphasis on personal independence and individual freedom, and, on the other, of the growing tendency of the state to take over every aspect of the way we live. We are increasingly treated as individuals in relation to the state, rather than as members one of another.

January 26th

Exodus 20 v13

Thou shalt not kill or Thou shalt do no murder?

It can be translated either way. Presumably, it isn't an absolute ban on killing. Animals are killed in the bible both for food and as sacrifices. David is proud of having killed the wild animals which attempted to ravage his sheep. Capital punishment is enjoined in some circumstances. There are many wars in which killing naturally occurs. While I do not believe that capital punishment is justified in a modern society with proper prisons and appropriate alternative penalties and while I believe that war is always the very last resort for a Christian nation, the Bible obviously does not mean to prohibit all killing. On the other hand, *Thou shalt do no murder* is a bit of a tautology. Murder is defined as unlawful killing. It wouldn't mean much to say it is against the law to kill unlawfully. The best way of looking at it is to say that this commandment prohibits the taking of innocent life. So it doesn't, in itself, prohibit capital punishment or war. It certainly doesn't prohibit killing animals, though even animal life is respected in the bible. Normally, individuals wouldn't decide for themselves that another human being was not innocent and that therefore he could be killed. A state would have laws. Courts would have to decide guilt or innocence and pass appropriate sentences. Only a properly constituted authority, the state, could declare war. Exceptions might be killing in self defence (though Jesus said, *Turn the other cheek*) or to save somebody else from a vicious attack in the street or, possibly, if there were a just revolution against the state you happened to be living in – though that is a whole other subject. There are different opinions as to whether this commandment covers suicide and abortion. The latter depends on whether you believe that the foetus or embryo is an unborn child. If it is, its life is sacred no matter if it is handicapped or the mother doesn't want it. Suicide probably is forbidden by this commandment, but many suicides happen when the balance of the subject's mind is disturbed and he or she is not therefore responsible for his or her actions. The only suicide I can think of in the Bible is Ahithophel in II Samuel 17²³. There is no comment there about the morality or otherwise of what he does. He probably thought that he was for the chop anyway, having joined Absalom in rebelling against King David, only to find that Absalom would reject his advice and adopt a course of action which would lead to defeat.

January 27th

Exodus 20 v14

Until a hundred or so years ago, the problem besetting most human societies was maintaining the population in the face of hunger, disease and war. Before the Welfare State, most people had only the family to depend on. So the rules, the cultural norms, were designed to encourage people to form stable families and to have babies. Single people were expected to marry and have children. Contraception and abortion were frowned on. Homosexuality was taboo. So was (and is) incest. These latter challenged the integrity of what was regarded as the normal family and, in the first case, couldn't produce children, and, in the second, carried an increased risk of producing unhealthy children. On the other side of it, children need looking after, generally by both parents. So sex before and outside of lifelong heterosexual marriage was firmly discouraged. All this was supported by the long-standing Christian teaching that marriage is a lifelong relationship between a man and a woman, for the purposes of procreation, the proper direction of our physical desires and to care for one another.

It could now be argued that overpopulation is the problem and we need fewer children to be born. Moreover, the state is always there to act as parent of last resort. There is no reason not to have sex within anyone you like, provided you take precautions. Many of the old prohibitions and restrictions are no longer necessary. Anyone can have sex, married or not. Gay, bisexual, transgender are all legitimate expressions of personality. Feminism sits uneasily with traditional marriage, with its expectation that women will devote much of their time and energy to pregnancy and childcare. In fact, some feminists expressed surprise that homosexuals wanted to marry because they had always regarded marriage as an instrument of oppression. Maybe. I strongly suspect that we have lost more than we have gained. Strong families create better people than selfish individualism.

January 28th

Exodus 20 v15

If this isn't a tautology, stating merely that you can't take what the law says you can't take, then it should be broadened to cover taking from somebody else legally, but unethically, like big companies do by exploiting the naivety or loyalty of their customers or by imposing barely comprehensible terms and conditions. A legal rip off is still morally theft.

January 29th

Exodus 20 v16

Jesus said that the devil is the father of lies. Some lies might be justifiable, like misleading the Gestapo regarding the whereabouts of the Jewish children. At the other end of the scale, pretending to enjoy the cake which the slightly confused old lady made with pepper instead of mixed spice. Mostly, though, lies are against other people. Originally, the commandment might have meant perjury before a court. It applies, however, equally to malicious gossip, boasting that you can do what you can't do, a politician getting elected by failing to mention what he really intends to do, a businessman persuading us to believe that his product is better than it actually is, blaming somebody else for what we have done wrong. Dishonesty, basically, is sordid whether on the part of individuals, commercial organisations, local or central government.

January 30th (Martyrdom of King Charles I)

Exodus 20 v 17

This really needs no comment. It is so obvious. It is also so obvious that our very materialistic society cannot take it seriously. We might ask ourselves why St Paul calls covetousness idolatry (Colossians 3⁵)? Presumably it is about what you live your life for, what you worship, vain possessions or the one, true God?

January 31st

Exodus 20 vv 18-23

Taking the Ten Commandments out of context, as we usually do, it is easy to lose the sense of the narrative they are part of. These are the words of the awful, fearful God, Who is love. It's easy for me to forget that. I casually wander into church two or three times a day. I say my prayers, read the bible, preach, preside at the Eucharist and other services. Sometimes I am filled with a sense of awe or love. But it is also too easy to be inattentive, to be thinking of something else, maybe to be thinking of something else which isn't particularly holy. Sometimes I'm in a hurry. Sometimes I'm in a good mood. Sometimes I'm in a bad mood. I might be tired, hungry or dying for a cup of tea. Maybe somebody has upset me or I'm worried about something. And I come casually into the Presence of the living God and read the service more or less attentively. I should be more conscious of Him with Whom we have to do.

February 1st

Exodus 21 v1 or 21 v1 – 23 v13

This is one of those points at which people give up on their idea of reading the whole of the Bible right through. What are we to make of all these laws? Some of them seem to have universal value and, adjusting for context, we would want to keep them today. Others would appear only to apply in a society very different from ours. Some seem quite strange, cruel even. Some don't apply now that Jesus has fulfilled all the sacrifices by His death on Calvary. So what do we make of them all? The official C of E answer is contained in VIIth Article of Religion. *Although the Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the Civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral.*

2nd February (Candlemas)

Exodus 23 vv 14-19

Sometimes, when there is a good attendance at a special service, someone will say, "Why don't we have a special service every week, Vicar?" There are two answers to that. One is that every service is special, every Sunday is special, indeed every day can be special if approached in the right spirit. The alternative answer is that, if everything is special, nothing is special. Special is just ordinary. Obviously, the Israelites ought to have lived their whole lives thankful for their deliverance from slavery in Egypt and for the way God provides for our needs by sending the harvest, but, equally obviously, it would be very easy for these things to be taken for granted and not taken seriously. So God gave them particular times of the year in which they were supposed to remember, celebrate and act upon these great truths. Most Christians, in the same way, remember particular events in the life of Jesus and in the history of our salvation at particular times of year. Our worship revolves around the two great feasts of Christmas and Easter. Today is the last day of Christmas. There are, Christians, however, a minority, who believe that we should still celebrate the biblical feasts which God gave to Israel. It was when I was in a fellowship with Christians like that that I learned to celebrate the Passover. Some other Christians just treat Sunday as the holy day and every week is the same for them. Quite rightly, they want every day to be holy. I think we can learn from all three groups of Christians. Every day is holy if we walk with God. It is good sometimes to concentrate on and celebrate God's mighty works in both testaments.

3rd February

Exodus 23 vv 20-33

God promises to be with His people on their pilgrimage to the Promised Land. He will send his angel. There is a thought that there are angels specially commissioned to look after nations and churches and individual people. It is a comforting thought. Some people think that this angel is Jesus Himself. Angel means messenger. Jesus is God's messenger, He is the Word made flesh. In whatever way He does it, God cares for His people. This is true of ancient Israel and their inheritance in the Promised Land. It is true of the Church with our inheritance in Heaven. What is required of God's people under both covenants is that they serve Him faithfully. Reading the Bible in the Light of Christ, I don't think we are to conclude that we Christians ought to destroy our enemies. On the contrary, our calling is to pray for them. It is true, however, that we must not compromise with sin, the world and the devil. We are either for Christ or we are against Him. We cannot serve two masters.

4th February

Exodus 24 vv 1-8

Drink this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.

Here is something we do every Sunday, or perhaps more often than that. It is impossible to understand what it means without the Old Testament context. Yet its roots are in a part of the Old Testament with which we are possibly unfamiliar. It is a difficult passage for a modern audience and therefore it is not often taught, read out loud in church or included in daily reading schemes such as this. It confuses us and makes us uncomfortable. We are not used to the idea of sacrifice. All that blood slopping about just seems messy. We don't see how our relationship with God is effected (sic) by the shedding of blood. Not having this scriptural background, we fail to appreciate the significance of Jesus and what He accomplished by dying on the Cross. We tend to feel that His Death is just an unfortunate end to a good life, maybe an example to us of truly self-giving love, maybe an indication of the depths of human wickedness in torturing an innocent man to death, but not actually changing anything, not making any difference to our relationship with God. We don't then sufficiently value Holy Communion or our membership of His Body the Church. We are weak Christians and our churches are weak, because we don't believe the Bible.

5th February

Exodus 24 vv 9-18

The second commandment forbids us to make any images of God. We cannot imagine what God is like. So any image is a lie. But what idea of God can we have? This passage tells us a very little of what Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the seventy elders were permitted to perceive. Later writers would suggest that even they could not have seen God the Father even to this degree. No-one can see God and live. God says, *Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me and live.* Jesus Himself said, *No man hath seen God at any time.* These later writers suggested that people in the Old Testament who had visions of God must actually have had visions of God, the Son, Jesus, Who is, after all, *the image of the invisible God*, the only image which is not a lie. Before God, the appropriate response is awe, even fear. Yes, love, because God is love, but God's love is an all-consuming love. It includes justice as well as mercy, judgement as well as consolation. It is an unconditional love which demands absolute surrender in its arms. *Be ye holy as I also am holy.* God is passionate and demands passion in return. *For our God is a consuming fire.*

6th February

Exodus 25 vv 1-9

I want to draw on two aspects of this. The first is that the people give willingly of all these precious things and of their labour in the service of God. As I remarked in a sermon recently, this gives them cause for celebration. *It is more blessed to give than to receive.* They experience the satisfaction of working together as one people for a common purpose. By the grace of God and working together in His Name, they achieve something amazingly worthwhile. There would be no shortage of money in our collection plate nor any shortage of volunteers to do jobs in the Church if people only realised these truths.

Secondly, the tabernacle – the place of worship they are about to build – is based on the pattern God shows Moses on Mt Sinai. The place of worship reflects the reality of heaven. Centuries later, Solomon's Temple will be based on the same pattern. So are our traditional church buildings – only more roughly so. We are to think of Christ entering the heavenly holy of holies as both priest and victim to open the way for all believers to enter with Him into the very Presence of God, washed clean and sanctified by His Blood. Holy Communion opens our hearts to this heavenly reality.

7th February

Exodus 25 vv 10-22

The Ark of the Covenant is the place in which the omnipresent Deity interacts with His people. It symbolises His Presence with them. It was portable. They were on a journey. When they rested, it resided in the holy of holies. It was only approached once in the year on the day of Atonement by the high priest who had to make sacrifice on his own behalf as well as that of the people. God is awe-inspiring. God is fearful. His holiness is beyond our comprehension. We are utterly unworthy to enter into His Presence.

Jesus doesn't diminish the holiness of God. He doesn't domesticate God. He doesn't lower the standard of holiness required. On the contrary, He Himself fulfils all the Law's demands on our behalf. We are holy in Him, washed in His Blood, cleansed in the waters of Baptism, bathed in His Spirit.

The offering of animal sacrifices in the Tabernacle or the Temple, surrounded by magnificent carvings and tapestries, bathed in the light of lamps reflected in gold ornaments and glistening jewels, music and incense filling the air, must indeed have been awe-inspiring, but how much more awe-inspiring is the cruel death on the Cross of God made man, a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. We should be no less fearful than they were, though our fears are assuaged by His love.

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

8th February

Exodus 28 vv 1-8

I'm not going to try to cover all the details of what God instructed the people to provide for worship, but please read it all if you would like to. Today we come to the priestly vestments. The priests were special because they entered into the Presence of God. Jesus is our high priest. All we Christians are kings and priests. Our special clothing in which to enter the Kingdom of God is not fine linen, but righteousness. *Endue thy ministers with righteousness.*

9th February

Exodus 28 vv 9-21

I usually wear vestments to celebrate Holy Communion – an amice, which is a head-covering, an alb, a white garment to signify purity, a girdle, remembering that Christ was bound and flogged, a stole, representing Christ's yoke, which we bear, and a chasuble, an embroidered, coloured garment, reminiscent both of what a smart Roman would have worn at the time of the early church and of the ephod which the Aaronic high priests wore. For Morning and Evening Prayer, I wear the robes of a scholar. The presiding minister is marked out by the special clothes which he wears. Is this a good thing? All Christians are called to be kings and priests. Only Christ has access to the Father on His own merits. Everybody who believes in Him has access to God by Christ's merits and by His alone. On the other hand, the Church has experienced the need for ordained ministers from New Testament times onwards. The function of the ordained Christian ministry is not to minister on behalf of Christian people, but to facilitate the ministry of all the baptised. I note that here the priest carries with him the names of the children of Israel. When we Christian priests (ordained and lay) enter the Presence of God in worship, we take with us all who need our prayers and return with God's Word to them.

10th February (Ash Wednesday)

Exodus 29 vv 1-28

Setting people apart to serve God. In the Christian Church, we do this by the laying on of hands with prayer. This is what happens in an ordination service. We make a big thing of ordinations and rightly so. It is a tremendous privilege to be set apart for the ministry of presiding at worship, preaching, teaching, pastoral work, evangelism and all the other things ordained ministers do. It almost demands an absolute commitment. In fact, an ordination is like a wedding. One receives everything from God and one promises to give everything to Him. Like marriage, it is a life-long, irrevocable, total commitment. The Christian minister is consecrated to God. The sacrifices and rituals which went with the consecration of Aaron and his descendants are no longer necessary, because it is Christ Who sanctifies by His one sacrifice of Himself on the Cross. This does not, however, mean that the commitment is any less or that the demand for holiness is in any way diminished from the Old Testament to the New. Quite the reverse. And, if we take seriously the priesthood of all believers, this is what is required of the baptised, not just of the ordained.

11th February

Exodus 30 vv 1-10

There is a joke among liturgical scholars that, at the Reformation, some Protestants based their worship on whatever they found in the Bible, whereas others based their worship on what was in the Bible unless the Roman Catholics also used it. So incense. Very controversial. Another joke points out that there are only two odours in the next life – incense or sulphur. So you had better decide which you would prefer. Some people say they cannot bear the smell. Brussels bureaucrats mutter about air quality regulations. For many Protestants, incense is an emblem of everything they think worst in Roman Catholicism. Yet incense is intensely biblical and, for some people, an extremely fitting offering in worship. Traditional Anglo-Catholics in the Church of England tend to use incense. So do some new expressions of Church, congregations of young adults experimenting with multimedia presentations. Certainly, the traditional English protestant service can be very one dimensional, like a lecture hall or classroom, with everybody sitting facing the same way in a plain building mostly listening to the guy at the front. Can this appeal to young people brought up on devices and interactive whiteboards? To be honest, I don't know. What I do know is this. The way we conduct our public worship is first of all to the glory of God. Then it is about helping other people to worship Him too. It is not about pleasing ourselves and pandering to our own prejudices. It is not about pleasing the clergy and pandering to their prejudices. How do we open ourselves to the Will of God so that we may discern how He wants us to worship and how we can help others to come to the knowledge of Him, Whom to know is to have eternal life?

12th February

Exodus 30 vv 11-16

You remember that, when the children of Israel gathered the manna, those who gathered much had none over and those who gathered little had enough. In the same way, this offering is the same for everyone – rich and poor alike. Everybody stands before God on the same basis. The rich can't purchase for themselves the best places. The poor don't come in for nothing. It's the same price for everyone and that price is the Blood of Jesus.

13th February

Exodus 30 vv 17-21

In some churches, it is the custom to make the sign of the cross in holy water as you go in. The thought is the same. When we enter the House of God, we must be clean, pure, holy. As the Old Testament well knew however, ritual cleanliness is nothing like enough. The point is not to go through all these rituals and to offer all these sacrifices. The point is *to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God*. Only then is it possible to take part in worship in a manner which pleases God. Sincere worship requires sincere repentance from the sins which divide us from God. Using holy water as you come into church may remind you of this or it may become an empty ritual. Saying the General Confession in our services may be an expression of our repentance or it may become an empty ritual. *God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and in truth*. Ideally, we prepare for worship by acknowledging our sins to God before we even come to the service. We certainly must also forgive those who have sinned against us before we presume to come into God's Presence. It is also good to have read beforehand and thought about the readings and to think about the prayers and thanksgivings one will offer. Psalm 51 is very thought-provoking. The sacrifices are acceptable after our repentance and God's response to it as He restores us.

HAVE mercy upon me, O God, after thy great goodness: according to the multitude of thy mercies do away mine offences. Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness: and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my faults: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified in thy saying, and clear when thou art judged. Behold, I was shapen in wickedness: and in sin hath my mother conceived me. But lo, thou requirest truth in the inward parts: and shalt make me to understand wisdom secretly. Thou shalt purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: thou shalt wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Thou shalt make me hear of joy and gladness: that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice. Turn thy face from my sins: and put out all my misdeeds. Make me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence: and take not thy holy Spirit from me. O give me the comfort of thy help again: and stablish me with thy free Spirit. Then shall I teach thy ways unto the wicked: and sinners shall be converted unto thee. Deliver me from blood-guiltiness, O God, thou that art the God of my health: and my tongue shall sing of thy righteousness. Thou shalt open my lips, O Lord: and my mouth shall shew thy praise. For thou desirest no sacrifice, else would I give it thee: but thou delightest not in burnt-offerings. The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, shalt thou not despise. O be favourable and gracious unto Sion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem. Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifice of righteousness, with the burnt-offerings and oblations: then shall they offer young bullocks upon thine altar.

14th February

Exodus 30 vv 22-38

Christian churches are consecrated – set apart for holy things. Again this raises questions. If churches are holy places, is the rest of the world not holy? Is it appropriate to use church buildings for ordinary, mundane things like jumble sales and meetings? Is there a proper way to behave in church, speaking softly or not at all, walking around reverently, acknowledging the altar? Is it worse to swear or gossip in church than in other places? Again, I have mixed feelings. I don't like the thought that we should feel free to behave worse outside of church than inside it any more than I like the thought that we can behave worse on weekdays than on Sundays. Our whole lives, time and space, ought to be consecrated to God if we are baptised in His Name. On the other hand, if we treat nowhere as especially holy and no time as especially holy, we tend to treat nothing at all as holy. You don't have to come to church in order to be a Christian, we are told time and again, but a nation which lost the habit of churchgoing a few decades ago seems now to have lost its sense of being a Christian nation at all. Moreover, if we treat holy buildings and holy days as in no way special, perhaps we devalue them to the point where it is not worth coming. People seeking God value coming into a place where God has been worshipped and prayer offered for many years, even centuries. They value a place which is quiet and where they will not be distracted by the mundane, a place in which the architecture, the arrangement of the furniture and the decorations are calculated to turn the mind to holy things. All this is lost, if churches are "reordered" for the comfort of a modern congregation and for secular uses without regard to the need for sacred space or if people behave in church just as they would in a community hall. People who don't care for religion might be more comfortable in church buildings which are not self-consciously holy, but I believe that people genuinely seeking God are more likely to find Him in a place where He is honoured.

15th February

Exodus 31 vv 1-11

This passage is a good antidote to clericalism. God gives these men His Holy Spirit so that they may have the skills to build the Tabernacle and its furnishing. He does not give them the Holy Spirit in order for them to become priests, prophets, preachers or pastors; He gives them the Spirit in order that they may become craftsman. There are many tasks in God's Church apart from the clerical ones and God supplies His Spirit for them all.

16th February

Exodus 32 vv 1-15

How quickly we lose faith! Moses had been gone less than six weeks, but it was enough for the Israelites, despite everything they had seen, to give up on God. They wanted gods they could see and touch, gods they could control. People seldom reflect that the gods we make, the gods we control are hardly in a position to help us. *Our help is in the Name of the LORD, who has made heaven and earth.* That only makes sense to us, however, when we have the grace to let go and let God.

17th February

Exodus 32 vv 16-24

And there came out this calf.

This always makes me smile. Aaron is accepting no responsibility whatever for what came out of the fire. But he asked them to give them their gold. Someone must have made the mould of a calf. Aaron was the one who went along with the crowd. At some stage, we do have to take personal responsibility for actions. Maybe we had a rough childhood. Maybe we are tired or unwell. Maybe we are under pressure from other people. In the end, however, it is up to us to the best we can with what we've got.

18th February

Exodus 32 v 25

Pagan religion very often was defiled by sexual immorality. Worshippers got drunk or used drugs. There were temple prostitutes, both male and female. There would be feasting, drinking and music. There would be sacrifice, including, sometimes, human sacrifice. There would be very little teaching about justice and mercy. Worship was a self-indulgence which did nothing to make the participants better people, rather the reverse. Israelite worship was to be infinitely better than that – joyful and enthusiastic, certainly, but also rational and ethical, forming the people of God into holy people, holy because God is holy, just and merciful because God is merciful. This is the nature of Christian worship too. Caught up in contemplation of the holiness of God, we ourselves are sanctified. It is surely this contrast between what true worship of the living God is and what pagan worship is that required Moses to put down this return to paganism with such savagery. Human beings cannot help but worship something but to worship anything other than God is devastatingly destructive both to ourselves and to the people we relate to.

19th February

Exodus 32 vv 26-35

This isn't one of my favourite biblical passages. It isn't an idea of God with which I am comfortable that all these people should be killed because they worshipped a false image of God. But I cannot get out of it. It is part of the Bible. It is God's Word. God's Word judges me. I don't judge God's Word. God is not Father Christmas – a nice old gentleman in the sky who, in theory, might withhold presents from naughty children but who always, in practice, gives them nice things on Christmas day. Disobeying God is much more serious than childish naughtiness. A God of justice cannot simply overlook sin. Sin has to be dealt with, if not by punishing the sinner (which the God of love is loath to do) then by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, which involved an extremely painful and very real death.

20th February

Exodus 33 vv 1-11

We now have a dilemma. Without God, the people are stuck. Without Him, they can't go on to the Promised Land. Despite what they sometimes say, a return to Egypt would be undesirable, even if it were practical. If they stay where they are, they starve in the desert. They need God to be with them. Yet God is holy and they quite definitely are not holy. They made and worshipped the golden calf. This is our dilemma, too. We can't live without God. Life is meaningless if the material world is all there is. We create false gods, meaningless goals, which cannot and do not satisfy. Yet God is holy and we are not holy. We hold back from offering our lives to Him. We do not have sufficient faith to abandon ourselves to His love. So we are stuck. It is only because God takes the initiative, because He sends Jesus that our sins can be forgiven and we can know God Whom to know is eternal life.

21st February

Exodus 33 vv 12-23

Moses knows that he can't accomplish anything without God. He wants an assurance of God's Presence with him, but God says, *Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me and live.* Moses is shown something of God. We are shown much more of God in Jesus, but infinitely less now than we shall know of Him we see Him face to face and are made like Him. For now, like Moses, we need these tokens of His Presence: Holy Communion, Scripture, Christian fellowship Prayer – however the Sovereign Lord chooses to make Himself known to us.

22nd February

Exodus 34 vv 1-10

So God renews the tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were written. We do need to take these commandments seriously! He does make His Presence known to Moses. Moses complains quite rightly that he has a very difficult task to bring the Israelites to the Promised Land, *for it is a stiff-necked people*. On the other hand, sins forgiven, they are the LORD's inheritance. And so with us. There are times when the Church is impossible. We despair of the Church. We are a stiff-necked people. Yet God pardons our iniquity and sin. We are His inheritance. It is He Who will bring us to His Kingdom, just as it was He Who would bring the children of Israel to the Promised Land. We ought not to despair of the Church or to feel utterly overwhelmed by the task confronting us. *I will do marvels*, says the LORD.

February 23rd

Exodus 34 vv 11-17

The Israelites are not to compromise with the Canaanites. They are not to adopt their worship, to follow their customs or to intermarry. If they do, they will become like them. They will certainly not love the LORD their God with all their hearts, nor their neighbours as themselves. So, what do we learn from this? Should we try to refrain from mixing with non-Christians? Should we try not to socialise with them or do business with them? Should we refuse to participate in interfaith services? What about Christian children in school being introduced to the food and rituals of other religions? Should they refuse to partake? What about yoga, transcendental meditation and Hallowe'en? Horoscopes and séances? Should Christians refuse to marry non-Christians? If we didn't mix with non-Christian people, we couldn't share our faith with them or care for them in their needs or play our part in transforming society. Leaven, salt and light are quite useless if the leaven is kept wrapped up in a damp cloth, the salt stays in the cellar and the light is hidden under a bushel. On the other hand, your faith and your marriage are the two most important things in your life. You are in trouble if they pull in opposite directions. If we want to keep in with non-Christian friends, we might skip church to spend time with them, get involved with conversations and activities which aren't really right. At work, the values of the workplace might not come up to Christian standards. At one end of the scale, popular paganism like horoscopes and Hallowe'en are probably harmless, but at the other, they may be demonic.

February 24th

Exodus 34 vv 29-35

This is one of my favourite passages and the background to II Corinthians 3. When Moses was in the Presence of God, he was transformed, transfigured? Something of the glory of God shone in Moses' face. It was more than the Israelites could bear. The glory of God without any imperfection, the glory which never fades, shines in the face of Jesus Christ. When we gaze on Jesus, when we think on Him, when we come into His presence, we too are transformed, transfigured. We are made more like Him. We become conduits of His grace. Unlike Moses coming down from Sinai, this glory is permanent, eternal. It is not something to be veiled as Moses put on a veil, because the Holy Spirit reveals the glory of Christ crucified. It is not a law of bondage, but rather of perfect liberty. It is not the letter which kills, but the Spirit that gives life. The New Testament does not domesticate God. What we have is infinitely more wonderful than what Moses had and we should be no less in awe than the Israelites were at the same time as we are filled with that all-consuming love.

February 25th

Exodus 35 vv 4-35

When I arrived in this parish in 1987, you were near to completing the work on the restoration of St John's Church. There had been a lot of hard work involved, both actual physical work and fund-raising to pay the professionals. There was a parish wide paper collection in which all local residents were asked to put out their waste paper for picking up by the church and recycling. A local builder made available his premises and vehicles and, sometimes, his workmen. It was a tremendous enterprise, which eventually bore fruit in the restoration of the building for the service of God and the people of Halling. It is an inspiring experience to work together on a great and good project, something which can lead to both personal growth on the part of those involved and a growth in the number of those who take part. When we give of our time and talents unstintingly, we do ourselves good. When we work together with other people, we feel better. We also achieve more. Apparently it has been calculated that ten men pulling on a rope exert twelve times the force one man could produce. It's this positive approach to working unstintingly together that produces both personal growth and growth for our Church.

February 26th

Exodus 40 vv 1-16

Angel voices, ever singing, round thy throne of light,
angel harps, for ever ringing, rest not day or night;
Thousands only live to bless Thee, and confess Thee
Lord of might.

Thou who art beyond the farthest mortal eye can scan,
can it be that thou regardest songs of sinful man?
Can we know that thou art near us and wilt hear us?
Yea, we can.

Yea, we know that thou rejoicest o'er each work of thine;
thou didst ears and hands and voices for thy praise design;
craftsman's art and music's measure
for thy pleasure
all combine.

In thy house, great God, we offer of thine own to thee;
and for thine acceptance proffer, all unworthily,
hearts and minds and hands and voices, in our choicest
psalmody.

Honor, glory, might and merit, thine shall ever be,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, blessed Trinity!
Of the best that thou hast given earth and heaven
render thee.

February 27th

Exodus 40 vv 17-38

The construction and decoration of the Tabernacle were in themselves an act of worship. The Tabernacle reflects the reality of Heaven. At the Tabernacle, God's people experience His glory. The Tabernacle is there with them when they rest and their accompaniment when they journey. These are the truths in the light of which we offer what we offer in worship, in the light of which we experience heaven on earth, in the light of which we know the Presence of God in Jesus Christ with us on life's journey and our ultimate goal – home at last.

February 28th

Leviticus 13 vv 1-17

I've left out the first twelve chapters of Leviticus which detail the sacrifices and distinguish between the clean and the unclean. They are probably not appropriate for these daily studies, though they are the background to the way Jesus is understood in the New Testament and how we understand what He accomplished in fulfilling all the Law's demands by His life and death and resurrection. This chapter and what follows is the background to the stories in the Gospels about Jesus cleansing the lepers. The disease doctors now call leprosy is Hansen's disease, which was almost certainly not prevalent in the Middle East in biblical times. What the Bible means by leprosy is a whole range of skin complaints (and, indeed, disfiguring moulds and rots which could affect buildings or garments). There is a fear of contagion here, but it is much more than that. I remember visiting in a large hospital. The skin ward seemed to be the one where the patients were most depressed. They felt unclean and some visitors treated them as if they were unclean. There is a revulsion about sores, boils, ulcers, weeping wounds. In biblical times, these would disqualify people from normal relationships and from taking part in worship. This is why it matters so much that Jesus touched the lepers and made them clean. He makes us clean of the sin which defiles us and makes us unacceptable to God. He sets us an example not to treat anyone as unclean. When people were still terrified of and disgusted by AIDs, Princess Diana touched AIDs patients. In doing that, she was following the example of Jesus.

February 29th

Leviticus 16 vv 1-28

Again, this is probably utterly strange to us. It is the ritual carried out once a year on the Day of Atonement. It is the only day when anyone ever enters the holy of holies. Only the high priest enters. It is the only day on which the Name of God is ever pronounced out loud. The high priest cannot enter the Presence of God without making sacrifice for his own sins. He can then offer for the sins of all the people. The scapegoat takes completely away the sins of the people of Israel so that they may again be at one with Him. Utterly strange to us, because we no longer need all this ritual. Jesus has fulfilled it all for us. He is holy of holies. He is the altar. He is the high priest, the sacrifice for sin and the scapegoat that takes away all our sins so that we may be at one with God.

March 1st

Leviticus 16 vv 29-34

God is infinitely holy. There can be no trace of sin in His Presence. God is love. Those who are less than love cannot see His face and live. *The wages of sin is death.* Hence all these offerings for sin and the annual ritual of the Day of Atonement. Aaron's successors as high priest made these offerings year after year, down through the centuries. As human beings, they could indeed sympathise with the temptations faced by humanity, but they could never make a perfect offering (because they were themselves imperfect), a sacrifice which would deal with sin once for all and for ever. Jesus is fully human, like we are. He experienced the same temptations as we do. He can indeed sympathise with our every weakness. But He alone is without sin. The sacrifice He makes, the sacrifice of Himself, is the perfect sacrifice which atones for all sin for ever.

Once, only once, and once for all, his precious life he gave;
before the cross in faith we fall, and own it strong to save.

"One offering, single and complete," with lips and hearts we say;
but what he never can repeat he shows forth day by day.

For as the priest of Aaron's line within the holiest stood,
and sprinkled all the mercy shrine with sacrificial blood;

So he, who once atonement wrought, our Priest of endless power,
presents himself for those he bought in that dark noontide hour.

His manhood pleads where now it lives on heaven's eternal throne,
and where in mystic rite he gives its presence to his own.

And so we show thy death, O Lord, till thou again appear,
and feel, when we approach thy board, we have an altar here.

All glory to the Father be, all glory to the Son,
all glory, Holy Ghost, to thee, while endless ages run.

March 2nd

Leviticus 17 vv 8&9

Religion is a dangerous thing. Look at Islamic state. Human beings are naturally religious. We all worship something and what we worship we become. Unless we are to become evil, we must worship what is good alone and God alone is good. If we worship false gods, we worship a lie and the father of lies is the devil. This is why the Israelites were not to offer sacrifices privately without the knowledge of the proper authorities. They might be sacrificing to devils. Only Jesus reveals Who God truly is; only in the Holy Spirit can we worship in spirit and in truth. It is dangerous to cultivate our own personal spirituality, selfishly seeking out what we believe will meet our own needs. Authentic worship is the worship of the Church of God, to which we belong if we have faith in Jesus.

March 3rd

Leviticus 17 vv 10-16

This is why Jehovah's witnesses won't accept blood transfusions, though they are missing the point. This passage isn't about blood transfusions which no-one had thought of when God gave these commandments to Moses. The point is that blood symbolises life. Life is the gift of God. Therefore, nothing should be killed carelessly or indifferently. Even animal life is precious. It is allowed to kill animals for food or for their skins or even in self defence, but killing should be carried out reverently. Every time an animal is killed for food, in some sense it is a sacrifice. That is why in the OT the blood was poured out as an offering of the life back to God. It has nothing to do with blood transfusions, but it is relevant to the way we treat animals today. Kosher slaughter is meant to spare the food animal pain and fear. Some people argue that we have better ways of doing it now, using electronic stunning before killing. If they are right (and it's not proved), personally I would support stunning before killing. I'm nervous, however, of secular campaigns to outlaw religious practices. How far will the secularists go in their campaign against religion?

March 4th

Leviticus 18 vv 1-30

The people of God were not to be defiled by adopting the customs of the pagans. I guess we'd still be revolted by most of this list of things they were forbidden to do. But what about v22, gay sex? Where does that fit? See note on 1st February and make up your own mind.

March 5th

Leviticus 19 vv 1-18

This section culminates in what Jesus identifies as the second commandment, *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*. He says that it is like the first one *Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart*. The one follows from the other. God gives the reason for these commandments, saying, I am the LORD. It is because God is Who He says He is, because we are the people who are called by His Name that we must be people who love. As we worship the one true God, we are conformed to His likeness. Note, however, that loyalty to the one true God and our duty to our neighbour follow the one from the other. The fatherhood of God is the reason for the brotherhood of man. Note also that love is expressed not just as a warm feeling towards other people, nor simply by saying, *I love you*. Real love is acting a loving way towards other people – being honest, treating your employees fairly, paying your tradesmen on time, taking care of the disabled, acting fairly, refraining from gossip, making sure you leave something for the poor. It isn't merely loving in word; it is loving in deed.

March 6th

Leviticus 19 v19

Now we're back in the region of the strange and it contains a caveat for us. The Israelites, as the people of God, had to preserve their distinctiveness from the gentiles so that they would not compromise with them on matters of belief and therefore of behaviour. A school uniform identifies you as belonging to a particular school. Hopefully, you are proud to wear it and try to live up to what your school stands for. [Of course it also identifies you as not belonging to another school and it might get you into fights on the school bus. Hopefully, one of the values of your school is not getting in fights!] In the same way, the people of God in the OT didn't wear garments of mixed fabrics. It symbolised the fact that they did not mix with the pagans, the people who worshipped false gods, cheated in business, oppressed the poor, etc.. If you applied this literally today, you wouldn't wear polyester/cotton, which would be absurd. We live in a very different world. Jews and gentiles together make up the people of God. We don't need to be ritually holy, separate, clean. Christ has fulfilled all that for us. Our distinctiveness is in the way we act. If we accept that, we cannot just read off the prohibition on homosexuality (18²²) and assume it necessarily applies in our very different context. It very probably does, but we can't be so sure.

March 7th

Leviticus 25 vv 1-7

Probably at school, you studied the Agrarian Revolution – people like Jethro Tull and Turnip Townsend, who transformed agriculture in England in C18, making possible a tremendous improvement in food production, preparing for the subsequent Industrial Revolution which required many people to leave working on the land and to go into the factories. You may remember the enclosure of fields (which had been open and divided into strips), the rotation of crops, the scientific use of fertiliser and mechanisation, and the importance of a fallow year or a feed crop for animals such as clover. This improves soil fertility and inhibits the build up of pests in the soil. It is therefore sound agricultural practice to rest the land every so many years, but it would also have had a ritual significance – the sabbath year, like the sabbath day a mark of the people of God who are distinct from those who exploit every hour of every day in the selfish pursuit of their own prosperity because God's people know that they can trust the heavenly Father Who knows their needs before they ask Him and can therefore seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. It ought not to be lost on us that those who relentlessly plant the same crop year after year, putting nothing back, only concerned to profit as much as they can, as fast as they can, soon discover that their crops diminish every year. It is the farmers who are not greedy, who put something back, who in the long run run the most productive farms.

March 8th

Leviticus 25 vv 8-17

You might also remember from school that the other side of enclosures was very often that tenants, strip farmers were displaced from the land and, having no other means of support, starved. The immediate effect was that the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. In the long term, everyone prospered because food became cheaper and more plentiful, especially after the repeal of the Corn Laws, enabling corn to be imported from overseas – though that too had a depressing effect on British agriculture and the rural poor. The ancient Hebrews were (at least in theory) all in it together. They were brothers. The Jubilee Year cleared debts. Slaves were set free. Land which had had to be mortgaged was returned to the family. So, at least in the longer term, the poor would not continue to get poorer and the rich get richer. We are still trying to find the best way to protect the poor without incentivising irresponsibility.

March 9th

Numbers 6 vv 1-12

Traditionally, Christian monks took lifelong vows. They were separated from the world and devoted their lives to prayer and worship and (depending on the order) study, preaching and pastoral care. This would be seen as their vocation, the way in which they would mature spiritually into the people God intended them to be and also the means by which they would do the good works God had prepared for them to walk in. It is important here to make the point that all the baptised should mature into the people God means them to be and to do all the good works He has prepared for them to walk in, whatever their calling. Monks and nuns accept a particular discipline. I believe that in some Buddhist countries all men are expected to spend some time in a monastery. They don't take lifelong vows but accept monastic discipline for a period during which they develop spiritually. The Nazarite vow seems to be something like this. A man would make vows to God to live in a certain way for a particular period. This would be a spiritual discipline and, during that period, he would not shave, cut his hair or touch strong drink. The Bible doesn't record much about people taking these vows and those who are mentioned seem to have been life-long Nazarites – Samson, John the Baptist. St Paul had probably taken a temporary Nazarite vow in Acts 18 v18. It is an interesting thought that Christians might take time out for the Lord, maybe a few days on retreat, maybe a gap year in a religious community or performing some kind of Christian service.

March 10th

Numbers 6 vv 22-27

This is where the famous Aaronic blessing comes from. We quite often use it at Christian services. God puts His Name on His people and blesses them.

Jesus is the Name exalted over every other name;
in this Name, whene'er assaulted, we can put our foes to shame;
strength to them who else had halted, eyes to blind, and feet to lame.

Therefore we in love adoring, this most blessed Name revere;
holy Jesus, thee imploring so to write it in us here,
that hereafter, heavenward soaring, we may sing with angels there.

March 11th

Numbers 11 vv 1-9

The murmuring in the Wilderness is a recurring theme. No matter what God does for them, the people are never satisfied. As here, the results are generally that God is angry and punishment follows. Modern Christians are uncomfortable with the notion of a wrathful God Who punishes. Isn't the God of Jesus more like Father Christmas? It's worth pointing out that, while in the OT, people die in punishment for their sins, it is only in the NT that we read about everlasting punishment for sinners in the next life as well as in this one. What is more it is Jesus Who warns that, at the Last Judgment, He will tell the wicked, *Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels...And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.* (Matthew 25). I don't think we can claim to treat matters of faith seriously if we just ignore these warnings or assume that we complacent, modern, western Christians obviously know God better than Jesus and the biblical authors. The response to these stories about murmuring, I think, is not simply to deny that murmuring provokes God's wrath and indignation. It is better to be positive and to live by St Paul's injunction to be thankful in all things (I Thessalonians 5¹⁸). Don't think, *I can get away with moaning because God will put up with anything.* Think, *I really do have a lot to be thankful for. Praise the Lord!*

March 12th

Numbers 11 vv 10-15

It is a great privilege to be a minister of religion and surveys show that clergy normally come out near the top of job satisfaction tables. That probably does reflect reality, though the recorded satisfaction level may be inflated by the fact that many of us clergy are ashamed to admit it when we feel down. Be that as it may, while there is much joy in ministry, there can be a tremendous amount of pressure. When St Paul lists the ordeals he's been through (prison, being beaten, shipwreck, being robbed, tired, hungry, thirsty and cold) he doesn't forget to add, *Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of the churches.* Ministers do turn to God for support and God does sustain us. We ought also to be able to rely on the support of our congregations (which generally we can) – their prayers, their friendship, their sharing the tasks of ministry, their understanding that the vicar cannot meet all their needs, their reasonableness in the conduct of church affairs.

March 13th

Numbers 11vv 16&17

One of the reasons that ministers of religion become overstressed is that they very easily become one man bands. They have a specific vocation within the Church. They have particular God-given talents and insights. They have been recognised by the Church and received training. They have received the grace of orders in the laying on of hands with prayer. They are special. They may see themselves as special and as therefore above needing any human support. Other people may see ministers as special and think that they therefore can bear a heavier burden than other people without any support. Some people resent the specialness of ministers. In meetings, some people may believe that the minister's vote is just one vote among many and that, if he is outvoted, he should accept the democratically expressed wish of God's people. Other people might think that his calling, education and ordination give him a responsibility to make certain decisions and to overrule any opposition, however well supported. The truth lies somewhere between. The minister does have an authority which should be respected, but he is not God and all the baptised have their own parts to play. Others work with the minister. They too are called and endowed with God's Holy Spirit – here 70 elders, in the modern Church, churchwardens, readers, etc.

March 14th

Numbers 11 vv 18-23

It is interesting that these important principles of ministry come up in the context of an argument about the very mundane subject of food. Interestingly, in Acts 6 something similar happens when seven deacons (including St Stephen) are appointed because a dispute about the allocation of rations threatens to divert the apostles from their main task of preaching the Gospel. Like these seventy elders, the seven deacons are men who are recognised to be trustworthy and they are filled with the Holy Ghost.

I think there are two lessons here. One is that patterns of ministry emerge in response to need. It isn't the other way round, that we draw up some master plan in Church HQ and impose it on the people of God whatever the situation on the ground. We have to be flexible, open to the Spirit and the Spirit may make His ways known to us through what local people tell us or through practicalities. He may close one door in order to encourage us to take another.

March 15th

Numbers 11 vv 24-30

What the OT means by prophesying in this context is probably much the same thing as what the NT means by speaking in tongues. It is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. The interesting thing is that when Joshua complains that Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp, having failed to join the others at the tabernacle, Moses says, *would God that all the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit upon them*. When St Paul discusses spiritual gifts in I Corinthians, it becomes clear that the Lord does pour out His Spirit on all His people. All Christians have the Holy Spirit. It is by Him that we acknowledge Jesus as Lord and address God as Father. We all have different gifts, depending on our part in the Church, the Body of Christ. St Paul describes speaking in tongues as the least of the gifts. The greatest is love.

March 16th

Numbers 11 vv 31-35

The nurturers get their meat. Much good it does them. They would have done better to have been thankful for the manna.

March 17th (St Patrick)

Numbers 12 vv 1-16

The Israelites were not supposed to marry out for fear that foreign wives would draw them away from serving the LORD with all their hearts. Presumably, this is why Aaron and Miriam query Moses marrying an Ethiopian. We are not told anything more about this. What we are told is that Moses' authority is to be respected. I don't think that we can promise unconditional obedience to any human being. We have to keep our critical faculties about us. On the other hand, authority is God-given (in Church and state) and we need to be circumspect and humble in challenging it. Moses was especially close to God, closer than the prophets, perhaps closer than anyone except Jesus.

I might have left out this difficult passage were it not for v 7 *Moses is faithful in God's house*. This is taken up in Hebrews, where it is pointed out that, whereas Moses was faithful in God's house, it is Jesus Who built the house, and that He, therefore, is worthy of infinitely greater honour than Moses.

March 18th

Numbers 13 vv 1-20

Years ago we had a preacher at Halling who subsequently became a bishop. I really enjoyed his message because he told us not to be sucked into the current trend for devising plans and strategies for the Church's mission. He pointed out that, apart from a general movement towards Jerusalem, there doesn't seem to be any plan in Jesus' mission during the three years from His Baptism to His Death. He responded to the needs that were presented to Him. I am fond of pointing out that He Himself told us to give no thought for the morrow and that St James warns us against being overconfident about what we shall be doing next year. *For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.* (James 4¹⁵). Plans and strategies can be straightjackets, blinding us to what we could do and setting us up to fail as we attempt to do what we can't do.* We certainly should respond to the needs and opportunities that present. We certainly should not be overconfident. Man proposes. God disposes. This can be taken too far, however. We ought to have an idea of the general direction in which we are travelling. Jesus was going up to Jerusalem to die for the sins of the world. He did send his disciples before Him to prepare the way, just as John the Baptist (and the OT prophets) had prepared the way before He was manifested to Israel. Moses sends these spies into the Promised Land.

[*I do wonder about diocesan and national church strategies based on synodical government and projected budgets, when seats on synods go unfilled because people aren't interested and actual income is considerably less than the sums budgeted for.]

March 19th

Numbers 13 vv 21-29

Making their home in Canaan would be highly desirable. God has promised it to them as their inheritance. All they have to do is take it. Yet they are scared. It is too daunting. It can't be done. They don't trust God to fulfil His promises. They can't do it in their own strength. So they chicken out. How many church meetings are like this? Such and such would be very desirable, but we just can't manage it – building up our congregations, extending our pastoral care, projects in the community, even paying our bills. We can do none of these things in our own strength, but we can do all things if we are working with God, to Whom nothing is impossible. So the first thing to do is to pray for grace to determine God's Will for us.

March 20th

Numbers 13 vv 30-33

I've been at meetings where I've believed I was playing Caleb's part – trying to persuade disillusioned Christians that they can achieve something which is highly desirable, but which they think is impossible. Sometimes I've been wrong and the project I have advocated has proved impossible. In which case, it was clearly not God's Will, unless of course the only reason it was impossible was because God's people lacked faith. I've also been in the position of the other spies, pointing out to the visionary that what he is suggesting probably won't succeed. Again, sometimes I've been right and sometimes I've been wrong. The point is to seek to discern the Will of God. This we do prayerfully with open bibles, ready to listen to God and to other people, thinking and planning rationally and faithfully. This is the spirit (Spirit) in which we should come to church meetings. What is God's Will for the Church in Cuxton and Halling? Nothing is impossible to Him.

March 21st (Thomas Cranmer)

Numbers 14 vv 1-10

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us your gift of faith that, forsaking what lies behind and reaching out to that which is before, we may run the way of your commandments and win the crown of everlasting joy; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Trinity 18 CW

March 22nd

Numbers 14 vv 11-25

The wages of sin is death. The Israelites proved faithless. The natural consequence was that they should die in the wilderness. They wouldn't go on. Going back made no sense. Moses, however, pleaded with God for them. He doesn't try to make out that the Israelites deserve a second chance. They don't. He relies on the nature of God. It is the nature of God to be both just and merciful. Justice and mercy are aspects of love. It was God Who delivered them from Egypt, not because they deserved it, but because He loved them and because He had promised. It is to His glory to keep His promise. We might be uncomfortable with all this, but these truths translate into what it means to be a Christian. We shall not get to Heaven because we deserve to, but simply because God loves us, because it is His Nature to deliver us from sin and death. What is required of us is faith.

March 23rd

Numbers 14 vv 26-45

They still don't get it. They wouldn't go up into the Promised Land when God told them to. Now He tells them not to, they decide they will give it a go. They still haven't got the point. It wasn't whether they would enter the Promised Land that was crucial; far more important was the question would they obey God? Discernment again. Having faith, being open to the Will of God for our lives, being prepared to obey Him. These are the things that matter. If we walk with God, He will protect us on the journey and He will bring us home. If we refuse to trust Him, if we rebel, if we disobey His commandments, the journey will be rough and we might never get there.

March 24th (Maundy Thursday)

Numbers 21 vv 4-6

Bread features prominently in the story of the Exodus. On the night the first born are slain, they slaughter and eat the Passover Lamb. They also eat unleavened bread that day and throughout the following week. For the whole forty years in the wilderness they are fed on the manna. Jesus is the Lamb of God. Christ our passover Lamb has been sacrificed for us. Let us keep the feast. Jesus was born in Bethlehem (House of bread). He feeds the multitudes in the wilderness (twice) with bread and fish, miraculously multiplied when He gives thanks for it, breaks it and shares it. He is the bread of life: *he that cometh unto me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.* On Maundy Thursday, when He gives us His new commandment, that we should love one another as He loves us, He institutes the Holy Communion, using the elements of bread and wine to nourish us with His Body and Blood, proclaiming His Death until He comes again, His Blood, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. This is foretaste of the marriage supper of the Lamb. *Blessed are they which are called unto the supper of the Lamb.*

I can't help feeling sometimes that those who won't come to Holy Communion are as stubborn as the Israelites who came to despise the manna.
PTO for hymn.

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

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

Why are its bounties all in vain before unwilling hearts displayed?
Was not for them the Victim slain? Are they forbid the children's bread?

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

March 25th (Good Friday)

Numbers 21 vv 7-9

Perhaps not an especially well known bible story but it is taken up in what is perhaps the best known of all bible verses – which you should also read today – John 3 vv 14-17. The snake on the pole stands for Christ on the Cross Whom to know is to receive eternal life. I think it is appropriate that today's hymn is usually sung to the same tune as yesterday's hymn (Rockingham).

When I survey the wondrous cross On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss, And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to His blood.

See from His head, His hands, His feet, Sorrow and love flow mingled
down! Did e'er such love and sorrow meet, Or thorns compose so rich
a crown?

His dying crimson, like a robe, Spreads o'er His body on the tree;
Then I am dead to all the globe, And all the globe is dead to me.

Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.

March 26th (Holy Saturday)

Deuteronomy 1 vv 1-8

Today is a quiet day for us. Jesus is dead and buried. His friends are grieving and anxious about what is to become of them. They are sorrowful and perplexed. This is the day we believe, as it says in the Creed, *He descended into hell*. Jesus really has experienced everything that it is to be human. There is nowhere beyond the reach of His love. It is worth observing today as quiet day.

It is also a day to think about Baptism. When we are baptised, we die to sin; we are buried with Christ to the end that we may rise with Him. Today is a quiet day, a day of anticipation of the joy which is to come.

The Book of Deuteronomy is Moses' last words to the children of Israel when they are on the verge of entering the Promised Land. The forty years wandering in the wilderness are nearly over. They anticipate the fulfilment of the promise. The issue is, will they, will we live up to what God has done for us?

Grant, O Lord, that as we are baptized into the death of thy blessed Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, so by continual mortifying our corrupt affections we may be buried with him; and that, through the grave, and gate of death, we may pass to our joyful resurrection; for his merits, who died, and was buried, and rose again for us, thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

March 27th (Easter Day)

Deuteronomy 6 vv 1-5

Today is the greatest festival of the Christian year. Christ is risen. We are risen. He has overcome the power of death. He has taken on Himself the sins of the whole world and suffered for them. Now He enters His inheritance as the Son of God. He opens the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. He pours out upon us His Holy Spirit so that we may be the children of God, co-heirs with Christ, knowing God as Abba, Father. To know God is to have eternal life. We have eternal life here and now because we know God in Jesus Christ. We are citizens of Heaven. We are co-heirs with Christ. We know that we shall come into our inheritance when our life on earth is over and the veil is finally taken away and we shall dwell for ever in the Presence of God. This is God's Promise to us. It is so

much better, infinitely greater, than His Promise to Israel that they would inherit the Promised Land. The Israelites were called and commanded to love God wholeheartedly and unconditionally. Nothing less can be expected of us.

Alleluia, alleluia! Hearts to Heaven and voices raise:
Sing to God a hymn of gladness, sing to God a hymn of praise.
He, who on the cross a Victim, for the world's salvation bled,
Jesus Christ, the King of glory, now is risen from the dead.

Now the iron bars are broken, Christ from death to life is born,
Glorious life, and life immortal, on the holy Easter morn.
Christ has triumphed, and we conquer by His mighty enterprise:
We with Him to life eternal by His resurrection rise.

Christ is risen, Christ, the first fruits of the holy harvest field,
Which will all its full abundance at His second coming yield:
Then the golden ears of harvest will their heads before Him wave,
Ripened by His glorious sunshine from the furrows of the grave.

Christ is risen, we are risen! Shed upon us heavenly grace,
Rain and dew and gleams of glory from the brightness of Thy face;
That we, with our hearts in Heaven, here on earth may fruitful be,
And by angel hands be gathered, and be ever, Lord, with Thee.

Alleluia, alleluia! Glory be to God on high;
Alleluia! to the Saviour who has gained the victory;
Alleluia! to the Spirit, fount of love and sanctity:
Alleluia, alleluia! to the Triune Majesty.

March 28th (Easter Monday)

Deuteronomy 6 vv 16-25

Today is the day we usually hold our Easter Egg hunt. It is one of the occasions on which we can expect a good turnout of children. The eggs, themselves, are of course symbols of the Resurrection, though I'm not sure that we always remember that. What we do need to remember is the importance of telling our children the Christian story. Fewer and fewer children go to Sunday School. In an increasingly secular and multicultural society, state schools can't really be expected to nurture our children in the Christian faith. There are so many things to do on Sundays other than going to Church. We're afraid of boring our children with too much religion. We're afraid of making them stand out from their friends. But if we don't tell them the story, who will? And if they don't know the story, how can they be saved? So pray with your children and grandchildren. Tell them the bible stories. Pray for them and try to encourage them to pray themselves, to read the Bible and to commit to the Church.

March 29th

Deuteronomy 10 vv 12-22

This is all so wonderful: Who God is, what He has done for Israel and why – not because they in any way deserve it, but because He loves them and because He has promised. The only appropriate response is to worship, to praise, to give thanks, to model their lives on the life of God, to act as the people of the One Who is just and merciful, to obey His commandments, His perfect Law of love, to be holy because He is holy. How much more is all this true for us Christians who have received so much better promises.

Almighty God, who through thine only-begotten Son Jesus Christ hast overcome death, and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life: We humbly beseech thee, that as by thy special grace preventing us thou dost put into our minds good desires, so by thy continual help we may bring the same to good effect; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

("Prevent" here has its original meaning of "go before". I could have used a more modern form, but then we should have missed an opportunity to learn something we might not have known.)

March 30th

Deuteronomy 26 vv 1-11

The Israelites were to remember what God had done for them. They were to remember what they were before He redeemed them – slaves. They were to remember that they were saved by His grace, not in accordance with what they deserved. They were to offer to Him the firstfruits of what He had given them. They were to share God's gifts with all who needed them. And they were to rejoice before Him. It is obvious that the same ordinance applies to us: to remember what God has done for us, especially in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; to consider what we would be without Him (slaves to sin and the fear of death); to remember that it is all of God's grace not of our deserving; to offer to Him the firstfruits (not the leftovers) of our time, talents and money; to share; to rejoice in the Lord always. All this we do in Holy Communion.

Almighty and everliving God, we most heartily thank thee, for that thou dost vouchsafe to feed us, who have duly received these holy mysteries, with the spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ; and dost assure us thereby of thy favour and goodness towards us; and that we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people; and are also heirs through hope of thy everlasting kingdom, by the merits of the most precious death and passion of thy dear Son. And we most humbly beseech thee, O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, world without end. **Amen.**

March 31st

Deuteronomy 34 vv 1-12

Even Moses wasn't worthy of the Promised Land. Only Jesus is worthy to receive God's promises. In Him, however, everyone of faith is made worthy. His righteousness is imparted to all of us. In Him, through Him and by Him, we enter into the Presence, our praises ascend from earth to heaven and finally we too shall ascend as He is ascended. *And he buried him.* There is a story that God buried Moses. (We're not told of anyone else being on the mountain where he died.) Nobody knows where his tomb is. There is no cult of a dead Moses. Enoch walked with God. Elijah was taken up in a flaming chariot. All OT types of Christ, but it is He alone Who ascends on 40th day and opens the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers.