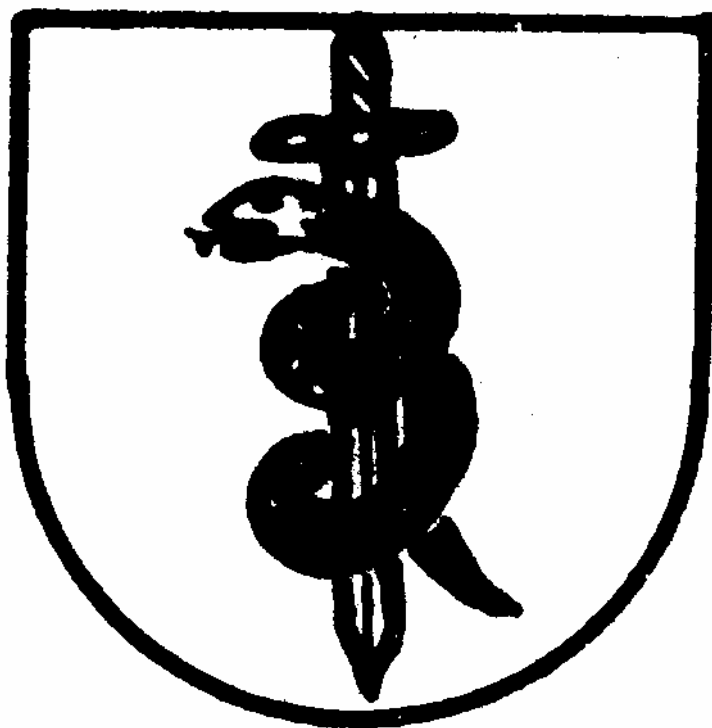


The Gospel According to St John



Bible Notes January – March 2006

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50p

January 1st (Naming of Jesus)

John 1 vv 1-4

We have heard these verses again and again over Christmas. They are sublime. They encapsulate the Christian Gospel. Indeed there is a tradition that priests recite the beginning of St John's Gospel as part of their devotions after celebrating the Eucharist. These words are just so marvellous.

Who is Jesus? A great man? Yes, the greatest man whoever lived. But He is much more even than this. He was with God and He was God. He was at the beginning. Everything was made through Him. He is the life of the world and its light.

The Christian story does not begin on Christmas Day – or even at the Annunciation to Mary. God is Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – in all eternity. That means that Jesus is when time begins. He is there at the creation of the Universe. He is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit, worshipped in Heaven by the angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim and whatever else there may be in all creation.

Jesus is God's Word spoken when God said "Let there be light!" He is God's Word to Moses and the prophets. It is absolutely stunning that the Jesus we know and love is God's Word made flesh.

January 2nd

John 1 v5

The Authorised Version of the Bible reads here *and the darkness comprehended it not*. Some newer versions have *the darkness did not understand it* others have *the darkness did not overcome it*.

"Comprehended" means either "understood" or "overcome" – as does John's Greek. (John often uses ambiguous words with more than one possible meaning, both of which are likely to be correct). Jesus is both the life of the world and its light. The world evidently doesn't understand Him – or our churches would be full. Neither can it overcome Him – or there would be no Christians in the world at all.

January 3rd

John 1 vv 6-14

God has given the world plenty of signs. The world itself, the Holy Scriptures, the lives of good men and women, our own consciences, they are all witnesses. They all point us towards ultimate reality, the reality which is God, God in Christ, the Word made flesh. John the Baptist was a supreme example of such a witness, preparing the way for Jesus. The world ought to recognise Jesus. The world was made by Him. You and I are made in His image. Yet the world won't receive Him. People want to go their own selfish way with no time for God. The greater the love He shows them, the more guilty they feel and the more guilty they feel, the more violently they reject Him. Paradoxically, it could be that the reason that we are not persecuted in this country today is because we do not love our neighbours enough. They treat us with indifference because we treat them with indifference.

Yet some people are not indifferent. Some people do not actively reject Him. Some people receive Jesus into their hearts and they fulfil their human destiny. They become what they were created to be, the children of God.

January 4th

John 1 vv 15-18

It is all about knowing God. There are basically two possible explanations for the way things are. Either there is no explanation in which case things just are and there is ultimately no meaning or purpose. Or else the entire Universe is the product of a rational mind infinitely greater than the Cosmos and everything in it. In that case, meaning and purpose cohere in that mind and that mind is God. If our lives are to have meaning and purpose, they can only do so insofar as they can communicate with the mind of God, if our minds can be so aligned with God that we are in communion with Him. This happens in prayer and meditation, in reading the Scriptures and participating in the Sacraments and in many other ways. The point is that the initiative is God's. He reaches out to us in love. He makes His love for us known in so many ways. Our part is to respond, by reaching out too, by welcoming Him into our hearts. Supremely, God makes Himself known through Jesus.

January 5th

John 1 vv 19-28

The Jews had certain ideas about how God would intervene in the world. They read their Scriptures (the books we call the Old Testament). They had their traditions. They themselves thought about the world in their own generation. Yet they missed the Messiah when he came. They questioned John the Baptist. They tried to fit John and Jesus with their reading of the Bible. Was Jesus or John the Elijah whom they expected to return to herald the Messiah? John explains himself in terms of the same Scriptures. He is the one foretold by Isaiah as the one who would prepare the way of the LORD. For those who can see it, John is the promised Elijah and Jesus is the coming LORD, but neither John nor Jesus is what they expect.

The point in our reading this is not that we can feel superior to the Pharisees. We have to ask ourselves whether we are sufficiently open in our reading of the Bible and our understanding of our traditions to recognise what God is doing today, how Jesus comes to us and how He makes Himself known in the world.

January 6th (Epiphany)

John 1 vv 29-34

Epiphany is making Christ known. In the story of the wise men, Jesus is made known to the Gentiles. Here John makes Christ known as the Lamb of God. God revealed Jesus to John at His Baptism. John saw the Holy Spirit come down on Jesus and he knew that Jesus was the One Who baptises with the Holy Spirit.

We Christians are a lot like John the Baptist. God has made Jesus known to us. That is why we can call Jesus “Lord” and God “Father”. We have to prepare the way for Jesus in the world. We bear witness to Who He is, what He has done, what He will do, what He means to us. We act as facilitators, opening the way for people to come to Christ and for Christ to find a welcome in their hearts.

What Seek Ye?

John drew the attention of two of his disciples to Jesus. One of these was Andrew and he fetched his brother Simon. Simon found his true calling when he came to Jesus. He became Peter, the rock on which Christ would build His Church. The people whom John directed to Jesus were seeking something. Maybe they did not know what it was they were seeking, but they knew something was missing in their lives and they found the answer in Jesus.

People today have very full lives - full diaries, full houses, full stomachs. Do they sense a need? Do they realise that something essential is missing? If they realise they are lacking in the spiritual department, where do they turn? To Jesus and His Church? If they encounter Jesus and still do not accept Him into their lives, that is their responsibility? If they do not encounter Jesus in the Church, maybe that is our responsibility and we should be asking, Why not? All too often, churches downplay the spiritual, perhaps believing that the way to reach the world is to become more worldly. On the contrary, when people come into a Church they ought to feel inspired, awed even, by the sense of the presence of God. It may be that only a few you will stay, but those few will be the children of God.

Philip tried to bring his friend Nathanael to Jesus, but Nathanael was prejudiced. He knew that nothing good came out of Nazareth. So he could not recognise that Jesus was a good thing. People today have many prejudices about Christ and His Church – old-fashioned, boring, irrelevant, killjoy, hypocritical. Even if they recognise the need for a spiritual dimension in their lives, they won't try the Church. We can only reply as Philip did to Nathanael, *Come and see*. If they are sufficiently open to give it a try, they might be surprised as Nathanael was. If their prejudices are confirmed by the experience, we had better ask ourselves what we have done to Jesus. If, however, they expect us to be perfect before they will join us, they are being unreasonable.

January 9th

John 2 vv 1-12

This is a very well known story, but it raises quite a lot of questions and points. Why did Jesus at first refuse to help? Why did He apparently change His mind? Why make so much wine? They had already drunk the original supply! Certainly it appears that Jesus did not mandate His followers to be teetotal!

Let's start with the fact that Jesus was there enjoying the party. Jesus did not consider Himself above the enjoyments of ordinary, worldly people, nor separate Himself from them. People got to know Jesus, because He went about among them. He became their friend.

Some Christians probably are called to lives of solitary prayer or membership of enclosed orders. It is also true that we have to be careful that we don't give in to pressure from non-Christian friends and peer groups to gossip, fiddle our tax returns, get drunk, take drugs and join in saloon bar condemnations of gypsies and asylum seekers. Most of us, however, are, I am sure, called to be like Jesus, a friend to everyone and anyone. We are not friends but patronising do-gooders if we only turn up when people need help and can't enjoy a laugh and a joke with them. Christians, like everybody else and with everybody else, ought to eat in the works canteen, join social clubs and sports clubs, go to the theatre and cinema and whatever else you enjoy. You may find yourself having to know where to draw the line. You might think that some entertainment – striptease, prize fighting, plays with strong language or an anti-Christian message – is unsuitable. You might find some forms of employment unacceptable – concentration camp guard, usurious money lender. Where you draw the line might depend on the people you are with and the circumstances. Eric Liddle refused to run in the Olympic Games on a Sunday. That would have been for his own personal glory and it would have been a very public statement that pressure to succeed in the world's eyes mattered more than keeping Sunday as a day of rest and worship. Later in his life, however, Liddle happily played football on Sundays with some poor Chinese boys. That was sport on a humble scale for the benefit of ordinary people, not an international multi-million pound industry.

There is a danger in the modern Church that we have so many meetings (not in Cuxton and Halling if I can help it!) and so many church socials, that our most committed members hardly have time for their families, let alone friends outside the Church. Don't get me wrong. Church socials are an important part of our fellowship and we can invite friends outside the Church to come. But it is a danger to watch.

January 10th

John 2 vv 1-12

To continue. Miracles are not granted to order to avoid social embarrassment. Jesus did not come to perform miracles. He came to point people to God. Miracles are signs of Who He is and of the task God sent Him to perform. I believe that we can and should pray in all situations. I ask God's help in minor things and major. God knows all about me. He loves me. He is omnipotent and omniscient. I can and do bring all my worries to Him. So should you. If, however, we start demanding miracles to cope with all our problems, we may well get the same answer as Mary got.

And finally. The point of this story is Who Jesus is and what He does. He transforms us as He transformed water into wine. He gives in abundance. His gift to us is more than we can ask or conceive. That is why this is the first sign at Cana in Galilee and why His disciples then believed in Him.

January 11th

John 2 vv 13-25

Two angles. God must be treated with reverence. Human beings need time and space to pray. Turning the Temple into a market dishonoured God and it deprived people of their space to pray.

Do we respect God? Worship is often seen as a life-style choice. We come to services that we enjoy or that we find fulfil our needs. Surely the point of worship is to please God, not ourselves. Human-centred worship readily slips into no worship, no space or time to pray. If we come to church to please ourselves, we stop coming when something else pleases us better. If people come to our church, instead of encountering God, they encounter only us.

January 12th

John 3 vv 1-13

This is another instance of John using language ambiguously. “Born again” could just as well be translated “born from above”. In Jesus we make a fresh start, a divine start. God calls us to Himself. He washes us clean. He makes us anew. We are crucified and risen with Christ. We are His children. We live after the Spirit, rather than the flesh.

Jesus says all this is hard to understand. It can only be worked out by living a faithful Christian life. It is very wonderful, but nothing like as marvellous as the wonders of Heaven, which Jesus cannot tell us about now, because we could not begin to understand Him.

January 13th

John 3 vv 14-21

What Jesus says here is based on Numbers 21 vv 4-9. God’s pilgrim people had lost faith. They were grumbling and complaining as they so often did. There are no doubt lessons for us in this story. The way can be hard, but, if we put our trust in God, we ought not to be discouraged. We should certainly not be constantly complaining and undermining one another and our leadership on our difficult journey. Anyway, God sent serpents among the Israelites. He gave them something to complain about! Then, only then, they turned to Him and repented and God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. Those bitten by the snakes could look at it and then they were cured.

Jesus compares Himself to the snake on the pole. He will be lifted up on the Cross and anyone who turns to Him is spared the bitter pains of death. He is lifted up to draw everyone to Himself.

God’s purpose is that people should be saved in Jesus. If they are not, it is their own fault for rejecting Him. They were invited to come to the Light, but couldn’t face it. They knew there were dark spots in their lives, but preferred to keep them dark, rather than face the Light, repent and be made clean.

January 14th

John 3 vv 22-36

John the Baptist was good. Many people followed him as his disciples. There have been many extremely good Christian leaders, bishops, evangelists, parish priests etc. Their followers may have revered them. They themselves may have come to think of themselves more highly than they ought. Christians are not immune to the cult of celebrity.

Moreover, some of John's disciples had become comfortable in that role. They did not want to move on. They were reluctant to become Christ's disciples. Sometimes we find it hard to join a new church if we move house. Or we resist change in our own church. We are comfortable with what we are used to. We know it is good. We may not be able to see that God has something much better for us as we journey on.

John said, "He must increase, but I must decrease." That is something every Christian should say, including our leaders.

January 15th

John 4 vv 1-15

We think of showing love for people by doing something good for them. Jesus shows His love for the Samaritan woman by accepting her doing something for Him. He does not feel humiliated to accept a gift. He does not feel compromised by receiving something from someone of the wrong race and gender, from a person who will turn out to have a colourful and complicated personal life. We might see such a person as a charity case. Jesus accepted her as a fellow human being.

Jesus accepts everybody, no matter what. Such love is liberating power. It sets free, cleanses, refreshes. It brings life and joy in all its fullness. It is spiritual, not carnal. It is a life-giving stream. Such generous, open love is the very nature of Jesus Himself. He is the water of life and He is a spring welling up in all those who receive Him, bubbling up with life to share with the whole world.

January 16th

John 4 vv 16-26

Jesus knows all about us – our sins, weaknesses and failures, as well as the face we might like to present to the world and even to ourselves. There is no point in hiding any corner of our life from Him and there is no need to try. He understands. He forgives. He will cleanse us and set us free if only we will allow Him to. He did not come to condemn us, but so that we might have life. This does not mean that He is complacent about our unlovely characteristics. He cares about them deeply and wants to set us free from them, but we have to invite Him into our lives and accept the healing which He freely offers.

When we are so far aligned with the mind of God, we worship Him as He longs for us to do; we worship Him in spirit and in truth. Such worship is not tied to Jerusalem or Gerazim or any other place. It is not confined to any particular time. It is not ultimately dependent on forms of words, musical style, appropriate posture. All these things have their place in aligning our minds with His, but what matters is love.

January 17th

John 4 vv 27-42

God declares Himself to the world in Jesus. The disciples probably did not think that their mission extended to the Samaritans. They had gone into the village to buy food, but apparently had done nothing to tell the villagers about Jesus. Instead they were rather shocked that Jesus was talking to this woman. She went and told her fellow villagers, however. Then they came and saw Jesus for themselves. She was excited by Jesus and so she wanted to tell everyone about Him. Are we excited by Jesus? Do we feel impelled to share the Good News with everyone – those we think likely to join our church and those we think would never become Christians in a million years.

January 18th

John 4 vv 43-54

Jesus at first dismisses the request for a miracle. Miracles are not available on demand. Prayer ought to grow out of faith. We ought not to be asking for signs in order that we can believe – though God does help us when our faith is very weak. Even though the nobleman gets it wrong, Jesus still heals his son.

January 19th

John 5 vv 1-16

Miracle stories in John generally lead to teaching about Who Jesus is and what He has come for. They also help to explain what happens to Jesus. Some few believe, but many reject Him and decide to get rid of Him. This man was obviously very much in need of healing. He had been waiting 38 years! Instead of thanking God that this poor man at last could walk, they focussed in on the fact that the healing had been carried out on the Sabbath. They could not understand how the man was healed or Who Jesus was. So they latched on to what they did understand. It was wrong to work on the Sabbath. Therefore, they thought, Jesus could not be a good man. So they need not allow themselves to be troubled by His message. We need to open to the possibilities of Jesus.

January 20th

John 5 vv 17-31

What they are missing is that Jesus, Son of Mary, is the Son of God. Jesus and God the Father are so intimately linked that what Jesus says is the Word of God, what He does is what God does. Ultimately, He has authority over life and death. He is the Judge of the whole human race. To believe in Him is to have eternal life. To reject Him is to condemn yourself, separating yourself from the Source of all life, condemning yourself therefore to death.

January 21st

John 5 vv 32-47

Jesus is God's Love to the world made flesh. So why are people so adamant against receiving Him? What evidence might convince them that Jesus is the Son of God and that they should give their lives to Him? There are good people, like John the Baptist, who bear witness of Jesus by what they say and do. We should be witnesses like that. Gospel miracles, modern day answers to prayer are evidence in favour of Jesus. Maybe we should be less shy about sharing our experience of God in prayer. God Himself is a witness. The whole world bears witness to God's glory, which is the glory of Jesus. We should not be afraid of what Science discovers. All truth bears witness to Jesus. The Bible – Old and New Testament – bears witness to Jesus. Hopefully we read it and encourage other people to read it. We support organisations

like the Gideons and the Bible Society who seek to make the Scriptures more available. For all this, many, maybe the majority, will reject Him, but to those who receive Him, He gives the power to become the children of God.

January 22nd

John 6 vv 1-21

These stories are pretty well known. John brings out certain points. It was Passover. The people were thinking about liberation from their oppressors. They were thinking about the unleavened bread eaten at the Passover meal and the manna the Israelites ate in the wilderness. They see the miracle, but they are unable to interpret its meaning. They want to make Jesus king in an earthly sense. So He dismisses the crowd and His disciples. Walking on the water reminds us of crossing the Red Sea. The words *It is I* are reminiscent of God's Word to Moses at the Burning Bush, *I am what I am*. This whole story is charged with thoughts of redemption and salvation, a much more wonderful deliverance than the Exodus. Moses set free from earthly slavery. Jesus sets us free from sin and death.

January 23rd

John 6 vv 22-51

Jesus tries to lift their sights. What ultimately matters is not this world, with its careers, mortgages, examinations, romances, pastimes etc., but the world of eternity, where all the best of this world - love, beauty, truth etc - have their consummation, and where the dross of this world perishes. What matters more than passing GCSEs and working for Marks and Spencer, getting on the property ladder, keeping fit, and prowling the night club for a date is to do the work of God. What is the work of God? It is to believe in Jesus. If we believe in Jesus, everything else falls into its right place. We can only do this if it is given to us by God. So we need to pray to God to make Jesus fully known to us. Only then can we know not only that we have to put Jesus first but also why.

January 24th

John 6 vv 52-71

Evidently, there is very powerful Eucharistic imagery at work here. This chapter is not all about the Eucharist, but it is written to be read by

a church in which the principal expression of their life as Christians is participation in the Sunday Eucharist, the Lord's people gathered round the Lord's table on the Lord's day. As the Body of Christ, the Church is nourished by the Body of Christ which it receives together in the Eucharistic Bread, a Communion with God, with other Christians sharing in the same service and with all other Christians in heaven and earth. This is why, while prayer services, preaching services, mission services and praise services, are all wonderful things with their proper place in the life of the Christian community, none of them can replace the Sunday Eucharist as the principal act in which all Christians ought to participate at least every Sunday – the day on which the Lord was raised from the dead and manifested Himself to His disciples in the breaking of bread.

January 25th (Conversion of St Paul)

John 7 vv 1-13

These verses are a bit of a mystery. Does Jesus mislead the other members of His family? Did He change His mind? It seems that even the people he had grown up with did not receive Him. They did not grasp Who He was. It reads almost as a challenge. Prove yourself by performing some miracles.

Paul recognised that things were coming to light that had previously been hidden. There is a right time for the counsels of God to be disclosed. He preached in season and out of season, but always with an eye to see where the Spirit was leading, when it was God's will to speak, what to say and to whom.

How do we convert this parish? Maybe we should be waiting on God, recognising where He is creating opportunities for us. He does, you know, and sometimes I think we miss them because we are too fixed in our own ideas about what ought to be done.

January 26th

John 7 vv 14-17

Why do we listen to some people and not others? Reputation counts for a lot. So does appearance. So, maybe, do qualifications and letters after names. These things might lead us instinctively to respect

potential leaders. They are short cuts to recognising authority. They can also deceive. We can be conned by a sharp man in a smart suit backed by testimonials from allegedly satisfied customers and overlook a Jesus Who has no qualifications, a mixed reputation and no comeliness that we should desire Him. In the end we have to take responsibility for what we believe. Does what the preacher is saying resonate with what we already know of God – the Bible, our own personal experience and rationality, the accumulated wisdom of the Church?

January 27th

John 7 vv 18-36

They don't know what to make of Jesus. Surely a bad man couldn't work miracles, they think, but would a good man work on the Sabbath? Do their own leaders really know that Jesus is someone special? What Jesus says sounds very simple, but they can't understand it. Spiritually, they are blind. Jesus points out that they have not grasped the message of the Old Testament. Even on a relatively trivial point like the precise detail of keeping the Sabbath. The OT itself recognises that there are times when work must be done on the Sabbath. Another point is that they think they know where He comes from – Bethlehem. That is true enough, but the important point about Jesus is that He comes from Heaven. They wonder what He means when He says He will go away and come back. Well, He will die and rise again. He will ascend into Heaven and then there will be the Second Coming. It is simple enough, but unintelligible to the unspiritual. That is why we have to pray for discernment.

January 28th

John 7 vv 37-39

When you see me mix a little water with the Communion wine, it isn't to make it go further or to dilute the alcohol. Water and blood flowed out of Jesus when He was crucified. The water signifies the life-giving Holy Spirit. God's Holy Spirit becomes available to us through the Crucifixion. The Blood makes us clean, holy, a temple meet for the Holy Spirit. This Spirit within us effervesces with life and joy. We are born again. The flesh is crucified with Christ. We are members of His Body. This is the Spirit in Whom we live.

January 29th

John 7 vv 40-53

Typically, Jesus brings division. You are either for Him or you are against Him. We tend to aim for consensus, to downplay differences. It is certainly true that we should respect other people's views. We should certainly not persecute them. We should be willing to work with people of all faiths and none where the purpose is good. But, in the end, you are either for Christ or against Him and there is a place where a stand has to be taken.

Some people accept Jesus. Some reject Him through prejudice. What is commended is an open mind and a fair hearing.

January 30th

John 8 vv 1-11

This story is not found in the oldest manuscripts of John and is sometimes found elsewhere in the New Testament. It does, however, ring so true of Jesus. He reaches out to forgive the sinner and allow her a fresh start whereas those who think themselves righteous are reduced to slinking shamefully away. So which one are you in the story? The guilty person who desperately needs forgiveness? The self-satisfied person eager to condemn the guilty? Or, are you like Jesus, unsinning and longing to restore those whose lives are totally mucked up?

January 31st

John 8 vv 12-20

I am the Light of the World.

That was a wonderful saying of Jesus. Think for a moment of what it means, of all that it could mean. But did the religious leaders allow themselves to consider it? No. They got into a technical argument about the quantity of witnesses required. Talk about missing the wood for the trees. Perhaps we should have times in our church programmes when we pause everything and just concentrate on God. We do actually have such times. They are called services. But how often do we get so caught up in the technicalities of putting them on that we lose sight of the sublime reality they are about? That is probably more a problem for the clergy than it is for the laity! One reason the clergy like weekday services and 8.00s is that for us it can be easier to concentrate on God than it is at a busy Sunday celebration.

I am the Light of the World.

We need light to see things the way they really are. The Pharisees thought they saw, but they did not. The things they missed are that Jesus is from God. God is in Him. What Jesus does is God's work. The way to God is through Jesus. If we believe in Him, we do God's work. The Crucifixion will reveal the truth about Jesus. His power is made perfect in human weakness. The point about Abraham is not to have him as your great, great, great grandfather, but to share his faith and to act on that faith as Abraham did. Freedom is freedom from sin, from the frailty of the flesh, from the fear of death. That is only available through Jesus, but it is freely available to absolutely everyone who comes to Him in faith. Those who think Jesus is evil show up themselves to be evil. That is why they cannot recognise the Light when He comes. Jesus comes into the world later than Abraham, but Jesus is the eternal Son of God. *Before Abraham was, I am.* Like Yahweh at the Burning Bush, Jesus is the One Who is.

February 2nd (Candlemas)

John 9 vv 1-7

There is a connection between sin and suffering. They are both disorders (diseases if you like) of a world which has rebelled against its creator. Sometimes the connection is obvious. We suffer as the victims of theft or violent assault. Slightly more subtly, we realize that criminals' own lives are ruined by their lives of crime. People get ill through taking drugs or promiscuity. They in turn become a threat or a burden to other people. War produces obvious casualties. A good deal of the world's suffering – poverty, epidemics etc – arises as a result of war, greed on the part of the powerful or sheer indifference. Even natural disasters have the worst effects in places where people have been left to live in ignorance and poverty because other people have not cared enough. An unhealthy mind can produce an unhealthy body.

But the connection is by no means direct. The people who suffer most are often not the worst sinners. It is wrong to add guilt to the burdens of a sick or troubled person. If they have done wrong there is always forgiveness. This may or may not be accompanied by physical healing.

Some of the greatest saints have suffered most. What everybody needs from us is love and understanding, not indifference or condemnation.

February 3rd

John 9 vv 8-27

What a lot of arguing and shifting of responsibility. They cannot deny the miracle, the sign, yet they cannot accept that Jesus is the Son of God. They bully the man. They bully his parents, who also duck responsibility in the face of the Pharisees' threats. They dispute whether the person who can now see is the same man. Anything but accept the Truth. What excuses and prevarications do people come up with today for not accepting Jesus and following Him?

February 4th

John 9 vv 28-41

They now claim to be Moses' disciples as they claimed to be Abraham's children in the last chapter. But just as Abraham rejoiced to see Christ's day, so, we have already been told, Moses is a witness for Jesus. He is if you read the Old Testament with a mind that is open to spiritual things. The marvellous thing – but it is very much the theme of the Gospel – is that the learned and self-righteous are quite unable to know Jesus (Whom to know is eternal life) but this apparently ignorant blind man is the one who can actually see in the sense that matters.

February 5th

John 10 vv 1-18

It is a beautiful picture of Jesus – the Good Shepherd. There is that sense of an individual relationship. He knows us individually. He knows us by name. We know Him as our friend and protector. He keeps us safe. We see how much He loves us in that He lays down His life for the sheep. His giving of Himself brings us abundant life. And this is Christ's free choice and He does it as God's well-beloved Son!

February 6th

John 10 vv 19-21

The presence of Jesus makes us question the whole basis of our existence. If Jesus is, then lives based on self are worthless. Just by being Jesus, He turns our world upside down. Human beings are repelled by Christianity. Yet we are also attracted, fascinated. On the superficial level of the flesh, fallen humanity, Christ is a threat to

everything that makes us tick, but at the deeper level of the spirit, He is all in all. He is what we ought to be. He can make us what He is. *One deep calleth unto another.* As men say flippantly of women, “We can’t live with Him and we can’t live without Him.” So the Jews were divided for and against. The contemporary English just try to ignore Him.

February 7th

John 10 vv 22-42

Years ago, I was on the committee of a youth club and there was a tremendous debate about whether it should be just for the children of church families or whether anyone should be allowed to join. I was the only one who wanted the club opened up to everyone and spoke long and loudly before being outvoted. Some months later I had left the area and ran into a committee member who told me that unfortunately the club now had been opened up to everyone and that my opposition to an open club had proved in vain! People totally misunderstand you. They hear what you are saying but do not take in what you mean. They remember encounters the way they want to remember them. This was specially true of people’s encounters with Jesus. They heard all His teaching and still maintained that He had not said whether He was the Christ. A lot of the trouble was that their idea of “Christ” was very different from His. To them the Christ was an earthly king backed by God in a war of liberation. For Jesus, Christ is one with the Father, come to bring life in all its fullness, eternal and spiritual, rather than fleshly and temporary.

February 8th

John 11 vv 1-17

Bethany is near Jerusalem. It had become dangerous for Jesus to enter that area. He knew that, when His time came, He would journey to Jerusalem to meet His Death, but the disciples did not understand this. He was obviously a great friend to the family of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. He had enormous compassion for their sorrow and He understood the disciples’ fears, but He knew what He was doing in first delaying, allowing Lazarus to die, and then travelling to Judaea where He would be in danger. Do we trust that Jesus knows what He is doing in our lives, when we are sad or fearful cannot see what He is doing?

February 9th

John 11 vv 18-27

What is reality? Martha believed that Lazarus was dead and that he would rise again in the distant future on the last day. That belief was not much comfort to her. She wanted her brother now. Jesus told her that He Himself is the resurrection and the life and that no-one who lives in Him can die. As Christians, we believe that we have eternal life here and now. We rejoice in Christ now. When we die on earth, we believe that our life is consummated. We enter joys greater than we can even imagine so long as we are on earth. Yet we still feel death and we still feel the pain of bereavement when our loved ones die.

February 10th

John 11 vv 28-38

If thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.

We do wonder why good people die young, why people suffer from terrible diseases or horrific accidents. Is it that Jesus is absent? Or is it that He Who opened the eyes of the blind 2,000 years ago cannot or will not help us now? It would be a very different world if there were no pain and if we could put off death by simply asking God to give us a bit longer. Would it be a better world? That is very hard to say. There would be no room for faith or fortitude. Jesus is not absent. Neither is He impotent. There must be very good reasons why He does not answer our prayers in the way we think best. Whatever those reasons, we know that He loves us and He sympathises with us. It says, *Jesus wept!*

February 11th

John 11 vv 39-46

When I went to the Caravaggio Exhibition at the National Gallery I was appalled by his depiction of this scene. Lazarus was seen struggling out of the grave not much more than an animated corpse. The point of the story of Lazarus is that it prefigures the Resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is the Lord of life. He says to Lazarus, "Come forth!" and he does. Christ is the victor over death and hell. There is no doubt about that.

February 12th

John 11 vv 47-57

Human beings! Jesus performs a wonderful miracle, the triumph of life over death, of good over evil, and they (we) can only see Him as a threat. For fear that people will follow Jesus and that that will undermine their power, they decide that Jesus will have to be killed. But the foolishness of God outsmarts the wisdom of human beings. That very execution will be the means that Jesus will use to achieve what He came to do, to gather together the scattered children of God. *If I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men unto me.*

February 13th

John 12 vv 1-11

There are three accounts of women anointing Jesus in the Gospel. Some people think one or two events have been told in three different ways by the evangelists. Others think there were three distinct events. I think, If it happened once it could have happened three times! Anyway, it is obviously a very important story. It prepares Jesus for burial. It consecrates His Death and it consecrates humble service offered to Him.

February 14th

John 12 vv 12-19

Perceive ye how ye prevail nothing? The world has gone after him. There are times when the whole world seems to have gone after Jesus. When the Roman Emperor Constantine was converted in the fourth century, Christians felt that they had decisively won out over paganism. The Jewish leaders on Palm Sunday thought they had lost. We see full churches when there is a war on, when there is national mourning or thanksgiving. There are periods in history when it is fashionable to go to Church and quite risky to claim not to be a Christian. At such times, we think we have cracked it. The world at last belongs to God. Then disappointment, shock even. The crowds that shouted “Hosanna!” cry “Crucify!”; allegedly Christian emperors connive plot and murder to remain in power; Victorian high moral purpose gives way to Edwardian loucheness. The people who regarded Dunkirk 1940 as a miracle ignore the Church in the “never had it so good” ‘fifties. The congregations who backed in to celebrate Christmas are gone by the New Year.

Sometimes this is actually good for the Church. If our ideas of success get too close to those of the world – popular acclaim, money, power – we have lost sight of the King Whose Glory is the Cross.

February 15th

John 12 vv 20-32

Jesus' earthly mission was mainly to Jews, but a lot of people travelled freely in the Roman Empire. The Roman roads were famous. They did something to reduce piracy on the high seas. Jerusalem would have many visitors, Jews from all over the Mediterranean world and gentiles too. People have heard of Jesus and wish to see Him. So these gentiles ask to see Jesus. Their asking opens the way for Jesus to explain that His time has come. This is what He came for and it is all in the purposes of God. Jesus will be lifted up on the Cross for the salvation of the entire human race.

February 16th

John 12 vv 33-50

They are still trying to make sense of Who Jesus is. How can God's Messiah die a criminal's death? Surely He will reign for ever? Jesus calls Himself the "Son of Man", but what does that mean? In the Old Testament the phrase "Son of Man" sometimes just means a human being and sometimes it means the special human being who represents all God's people. I think Jesus uses the phrase in both senses. Some believe and some can't or won't. Some who believe are too embarrassed to admit it. They are too worried about what other people might think. Jesus was very publicly crucified. Surely we shouldn't be ashamed before the public to admit to being His followers. He doesn't condemn those who reject Him. They condemn themselves.

February 17th

John 13 vv 1-17

If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.

The Maundy Thursday story is well enough own. The central point is obvious. *If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet.* Jesus sets us an example of service, humble service to one another within the Church and humble service to the world. The point is whether we follow His example,

because, astonishingly enough, it is only in this sort of service that we find perfect freedom.

February 18th

John 13 vv 18-30

Some people believe that everything that happens is pre-determined. Every event is caused by something else and, if you knew all the causes, you could predict all the effects. Religious people who think like this believe that God knows all the causes and therefore can predict all the effects. He knows what is going to happen, even the choices we will make. There is, on this view, no difficulty in believing that God set up the arrangements for the Crucifixion knowing that Judas would be betray Jesus.

Other people worry that this makes us robots. If all our actions are pre-determined we have no real choices. If we have no choice about what we do, we have no responsibility. It is not fair to blame us or commend our actions. We simply have no choice. In that case, Judas could have refused to betray Jesus and Mary could have refused to be His mother.

There are powerful reasons for believing both that everything is determined and that we have free choices and the future is open. Both views are found in the Bible and I do not believe there is any way of reconciling the two apparently contradictory but necessarily true propositions!

February 19th

John 13 vv 31-38

Judas has set in motion the events leading up to the Crucifixion. This is the glory of Jesus. His perfect love for God means perfect obedience even to death. His perfect love for us means dying even for those Who hate Him. It is in this way that He comes into His Kingdom. Again He sets us an example, to love one another as He loves us. It is this love that identifies us as Christians, as citizens of Heaven. To love unto death is the only way to follow Christ. It is the most effective way of spreading the Gospel and bringing the Kingdom, but Peter is too premature, too quick, too over-confident in Himself. Let go and let God.

February 20th

John 14 vv 1-6

The disciples must have been troubled by this time. They knew that the authorities were out to get Jesus and, presumably, his disciples as well. Jesus had said some strange things and acted in strange ways. He had washed their feet. He had introduced a new ritual into the Passover. "Take, eat. This is My Body." What was going on? Now He tells them not to worry. Trusting God and trusting Jesus are one and the same. What He is about to do will win for His followers eternal life, homes in the mansions of His Father's House. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Eternal life is to know God. In Jesus we do know God, He in us and we in Him. He is the Truth, the only thing worth believing. We accompany Him on the Way. He accompanies us. He is the Way. Take up your cross. He who loses his life will gain eternal life, but he who hangs on to his life will lose it.

February 22nd

John 14 vv 7-11

It is in John's Gospel that the identity of Jesus and God is made so clear. This closeness of Father and Son is implicit in the synoptic (the other three) Gospels, but it is really brought home to us in John. Jesus certainly is fully human. He really is a man, but He is in no way different from God. This is where Christianity differs from those religions based on the teachings of a prophet or a sage. Perhaps all human beings have some insight into God. Certainly, some human beings are especially receptive to His Word and some of them have been great teachers and preachers, explaining something of the nature of God and what He wants from us and what He has in store for us. God speaks to us through many people and the insights of the greatest of them are recorded in the Bible. In Jesus, however, God uniquely makes Himself known in the world. In Him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

February 23rd

John 14 vv 12-14

There are various misleading ways of reading these verses. Some charismatics take them to mean that you and I ought to be able to do more wonderful miracles than Jesus. Some other people have thought that they mean that anything you ask God for, He will give you. What

they are really about is the nature of the Church as the Body of Christ. You remember Jesus' words to Peter at the foot-washing to the effect that those who had washed were already clean. This is a reference to Baptism, the Sacrament in which we become members of the Body of Christ. The Last Supper is the inauguration of the Christian Eucharist, the meal in which Christ's Body receives Christ's Body in order to become Christ's Body more completely. As Christ's Body we are the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. His power works in us and through us. He have inherited Christ's apostolic mission. It is therefore in Him and with Him and through Him that we perform His works in the world.

February 24th

John 14 vv 15-26

These words are just so wonderful. As Christians we are caught up into the Being of the Trinity. We are in God as Christ is in the Father. The Holy Spirit is identical with Christ as Christ is identical with the Father. Having the Spirit, we have Jesus, and having Jesus, we have God. We are in God and He in us. God is love. So if we are completely permeated by God, we must love too. We must love as Jesus loves. This is His Commandment. There is a virtuous circle in which we love more and therefore experience more of God and therefore love more and there is a vicious circle in which we love less and therefore lose God and therefore love even less. Only Jesus can break that circle.

February 25th

John 14 vv 27-31

The death of a loved one is always a devastating event for those who are left. It must be particularly devastating when a loved one dies cruelly or when he is executed as a criminal, especially if he is innocent. Yet, on the eve of His Crucifixion, Jesus tells His closest friends to rejoice. He is giving them peace. He is overcoming the world. He is going to the Father. We shouldn't be afraid to die and we shouldn't be afraid for our loved ones who have died in the Lord.

February 26th

John 15 vv 1-6

Without me ye can do nothing.

We thought about the closeness of our relationship with Jesus in terms of a shepherd and his sheep. Now we have an even more intimate image. We are joined with Christ as the branches are joined to the vine. Without the sap, they die. Drawing on the sap, they can be extremely fruitful. We are meant to be fruitful and deserve to be cut out if we are not. We can only be fruitful if we keep close to Jesus.

February 27th

John 15 vv 7-15

Our union with Christ is effected and deepened by love, His love for us and ours for Him. It is the sort of love that lays down its life for its friends. We are His friends. His love for us calls for a response from us, that we should love Him in the same way. If we love Him, we love one another. That is one fruit that will last. Another is joy. Love and life and joy are inextricably mingled. The one is the consequence of the other and they all depend on closeness to Christ.

February 28th

John 15 v16

Ye have not chosen me.

I think it is so important that C21 Church grasps this point. We do not choose Jesus. We do not take Him and drop Him just as we please. We are not doing Him a favour by coming to Church and getting involved with Christian work. He has chosen us. He is the One doing us a favour. It is a privilege to be allowed to come into God's presence and worship Him. It is a privilege to be sent out by God to do His work in the world. It is only if we can have this sense of wonder that God has chosen us that we can have the humility to offer back our lives to Him without reservation and it is only by so offering our lives on His altar that we can receive them back transformed into what we truly are.

March 1st (Ash Wednesday)

John 15 vv 17-21

The Church is different from the world. That ought to be clear. Our priorities are God, other people, self. The world's are the other way round. That really ought to be clear from the way we live! It might bring persecution; it might bring converts; but it will make a difference.

March 2nd

John 15 vv 22-27

There does seem to be a paradox that those who had never heard the Good News are better off than those who have heard and rejected it. Those who reject Him condemn themselves. Since, however, Jesus is the only hope for the world, it is imperative that we proclaim Him.

March 3rd

John 16 vv 1-4

Of course all the first Christians were Jews. It is possible to see Jesus as a reforming Rabbi. Paul saw his mission to the gentiles as the natural fulfilment of the Hebrew Scriptures. Early Christians worshipped in the synagogue and temple as well as meeting for the breaking of bread in their own houses. Jesus preached almost exclusively to Jews and Paul's great hope was for the conversion of Israel. It took time for Christianity to become a separate religion from Judaism and it is a terrible scandal that Jews and Christians came to persecute one another. One step in this process was when the Jews expelled Christians from the synagogues. Jesus explains that people (Jews as well as gentiles) treat us the way they do because of their reaction to Jesus. If they receive Him, they receive us. If they reject Him, they reject us and to reject Jesus is to reject God. He tells us in advance so that we know we can trust Him.

Does this mean that sincere members of other religions cannot be saved? I think the implication of Romans is that they will be judged according to their conscience. People who are cruel and filled with hate obviously do not know God whatever religion they claim to follow. People who are filled with reverence for God and love for other people are surely accepted by Him even if they do not know the Name of Jesus? Perhaps I am right. Perhaps I am wrong here. Our task is to do what Jesus told us and bear witness to Him and leave God to judge other people.

March 4th

John 16 vv 5-11

We were told in Sunday School that it is better to have the Holy Spirit with us wherever we are in the world than to have Jesus on earth in the flesh, able to be in only one place at a time.

March 5th

John 16 vv 12-15

In the early Church some people felt that doctrines like the Holy Trinity and some of the things we say in the Creed go beyond what we find in the Bible. They were worried that the Church was making statements about what Christians ought to believe beyond what the Bible lays down. Most Christians, however, saw these developments as being the fulfilment of Christ's words here. The Holy Spirit of the Risen Christ was working in the Church, revealing what Jesus had not fully revealed on earth. It is very important to note two points. One is that official teaching like the Creeds has to be firmly rooted in the Bible. The Church cannot contradict the Bible or invent new teaching. What the Creeds do is to make explicit what is already implicit in Scripture. Moreover, the language of faith (the Creeds, the doxologies, the extravagant praises of Jesus in the official service books) grows out of worship. The Church prays: *Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost* because it is our experience of God that He is the *Holy, Blessed and Glorious Trinity, three persons and one God*. "Orthodoxy" is defined in most dictionaries as "Right belief", but a better definition is "right glory". *Doxa* (δοξα) in New Testament Greek means "glory".

One has to be very careful in the development of doctrine. The Bible is the foundation. Our own individual experience of God and use of our God-given reason is part of the process. The Church's corporate experience of God and reasoning together is another part of the process, which respects the tradition (what the Church has already received from God) and our contemporary deliberations. Nothing is certain except God, but all these elements have to be humbly considered when we are presuming to claim to know what Christians ought to believe and how they ought to behave.

March 6th

John 16 vv 12-15

I'm taking another look at these verses from the individual perspective. Evangelicals place too much emphasis on the individual's relationship with God at the expense of the New Testament teaching that the Church is corporate. Catholics emphasise the corporate at the expense of the

individual. We must not lose sight either of the fact that Christ's Spirit is in us as individuals (We have an individual relationship with God our Father and Jesus is our personal Saviour) nor that we are part of a Body, the Body of Christ, made up of millions of Christians on earth and in Heaven, and we are all one in that same Spirit.

March 7th

John 16 vv 16-22

Jesus leaves His disciples twice. The immediate reference is to the Crucifixion. He will die and His disciples will be sad. His cruel enemies will rejoice. On Easter Sunday morning, He will return. He will be known in individual experience of the risen Christ, in the breaking of bread, in the Scriptures expounded in the light of the Cross and in the fellowship of the Church. The disciples will rejoice and His enemies will be dismayed. At the Ascension, however, He will again leave this earth and there are two more returns to think about. He will return in the person of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and He will return at the end of the world to judge the living and the dead.

We live in the middle of all this. His work is finished in the Crucifixion. He is present with us and He is in Heaven. We have signs of His presence in religious experience, shared faith, word and sacrament, the work of the Holy Spirit. We await the consummation when we shall see Him as He is.

March 8th

John 16 vv 23&24

Prayer is being aligned with God. We speak to Him as our Father. We know that He knows what we need before we ask it. We also know that He knows far better than we do what is good for us, our friends and families, the Church and the world. But we come to Him in prayer as an expression of faith. We seek to discern His Will so that we can align our prayers with those of Jesus and so that all that we think and say and do is in line with the Holy Spirit. If our lives are in line with God, then we are working with the grain of creation and our joy is complete. That will only happen when we get to Heaven, but we are working towards it and we can begin to enjoy it here and now.

March 9th

John 16 vv 25-33

What Jesus has to reveal is far beyond our understanding. He is *God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God*. He has had to limit what He has told the people and even the apostles because they cannot do more than begin to understand. Even so, the Gospel story is a story of people misunderstanding Jesus. They will understand more when they have witnessed the Crucifixion and Resurrection, more still when they have received the Holy Spirit, but they will not see Him as He is until they arrive in Heaven. We are privileged to know as much of God as we know now, but we will still get things wrong, we will still struggle, we will still doubt. In the world we will have tribulations, but He has overcome the world.

March 10th

John 17 v1

This could be my favourite chapter in the whole Bible. I used to use it at the final devotional preparation for Confirmation candidates, but I am afraid I often had the sense that it did not mean as much to them as it means to me. They seemed not to understand it. This chapter seems to me, however, to tell us all about Jesus and therefore all about what it means to be a Christian – which is, after all, to be like Jesus.

March 11th

John 17 vv 1-3

As the Son of God, God the Son, the second person of the blessed Trinity, Jesus has all the glory of God. Yet He lays that aside to become human. Glory is the nature of God and the nature of God is love. Therefore there is nothing more glorious than love and there is nothing more loving than to lay down your life for your friends. The glory of Jesus is supremely the Cross. All that Jesus does is because God is love and because He so loved the world. God's love longs for you and me, for all human beings, to reciprocate by loving Him in all eternity. Eternal love and eternal life are one and the same thing. Eternity depends on knowing God and Jesus has supremely made God known by His Life, Death and Resurrection and by the gift of the Holy Spirit. All He needs is our "Yes!".

March 12th

John 17 vv 4-6

Jesus has glorified God by obeying Him in every detail of His life. Perfect obedience sounds like mindless slavery and so it would be if we offered it to, or had it imposed on us, by a human being. But what God commands is what we would choose to do anyway if we were rational creatures. God's command is that we love Him with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves. That is what we were made for. God's commandments effectively amount to instructing us to be fully human. God tells us what to do in order to achieve our potential. That is why we can describe His service as perfect freedom. Jesus the Man had perfect freedom because He was perfectly aligned with God. Therefore God glorifies Jesus and this glory is witnessed and shared by those out of the world who have received Him.

March 13th

John 17 vv 7-9

The coming of Jesus creates a division, a schism. Are you for Him or against Him? Do you receive Him or refuse Him? Those people who receive Him constitute His Body, the Church. They share His glory in lives offered in loving service to God. They have eternal life. Those who reject Him constitute the world. They have made their choice. At this point, Jesus consecrates His Church. The world takes its chances.

March 14th

John 17 v 10

This is one of those verses where I can only invite you to pause and wonder. What a status we have as Christians! How is it that we can be so half-hearted, treating our meeting together for worship with other Christians, even the Holy Communion service itself, as something of little importance, less important than a lie in, a day out or catching up on our chores? Public worship is not the be all and end all of living as a Christian, but it is the foundation. Apart from how frequently we come to Church, there is also the question of what we do the rest of the time. Do we live all the time as those who belong to Jesus? Worship is a 24/7 thing. Two or three (or 200 or 300) coming together in His Name to share His Body and Blood at least every Lord's Day is an essential part of it and so are lives lived in love for God and other people throughout the week: at home, at school or work, on holiday, shopping, whatever.

March 15th

John 17 vv 11-13

I believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

We sometimes use this prayer of Jesus that His Church should be one at ecumenical occasions, but He is not praying here that the Baptists and the Anglicans and the Roman Catholics will get back together again, desirable as that would be. A Church split into denominations talking about institutional reunion is not on the agenda at the Last Supper! The Church is essentially one because God is one and because Christ is one, because Jesus is one with God and we are one with God, Father and Holy Spirit. We are therefore one and Christians ought to be united in love as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are united in love and as you and I are united with God (He in me and I in Him) in love. We are to love other Christians as Christ loves us! That is why quarrels and disunity in the any church are such a scandal. If we do not love one another, we must repent. How we resolve sincere differences of opinion while still loving one another is a difficulty which has only too often defeated the Church through the ages. Hence the excommunications, schisms and walk outs that have disfigured Christian history down to the present day. May our prayers join with His, that we may be one.

God keeps us as His own flock. May His joy be fulfilled in us.

March 16th

John 17 vv 14-16

We are distinct from the world because we have the Word of God. Because of this the world may persecute us and Jesus prays that God will look after us. He does not, however, pray that we may be removed from the world. God so loved the world that He sent His Son into the world and Jesus sends us. We, His Church, we Christians, have to complete His work of making God known to the world.

Now it is a dilemma for all of us and perhaps especially for Christian parents of Christian children. If we mix with non-Christians we may risk persecution. We also risk being contaminated by their worldly values – the pursuit of money, gossip, materialism, promiscuity, alcohol. But, if we do not mix with the world, we may fall into the sin

of thinking ourselves superior to other people, we may be ignorant about things we ought to know and – most importantly – how can we reach out with God’s love to the world unless we are willing to make genuine friendships with worldly people?

March 17th

John 17 v17

Jesus is the Word made flesh. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. The Truth sets us free. The Truth sets us apart for God, ie the Truth makes us holy, consecrates, sanctifies us. Obedience to the Truth is perfect freedom. It is to be holy, to be God’s child, to be Christ-like. It is our vocation as Christian people.

March 18th

John 17 v 18

Ponder:

As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world!

March 19th

John 17 vv 19-21

This is very important. What Jesus is saying to the apostles at the Last Supper, His prayer for them, is not only for them. Jesus is speaking to, praying for, consecrating the whole Church throughout the world in every generation. We are essentially one. The Word has been passed on. We have received it. We live by the Word and through the Word. It is our responsibility to share the Word. We are one. We have eternal life. We are full of Christ’s joy. John 17 is not just for John and the apostles or for the New Testament Church. It is for all Christians and that includes you and me. That is why I used to use this chapter in Confirmation preparation. Confirmation is the completion of the rite of Baptism. We are baptised into His Body. This chapter is what it implies to be a baptised person.

Our preaching, teaching, pastoral care, prayer life, administration of the sacraments, the purpose of all these things is to make this a reality – that every baptised person should be a John 17 person.

March 20th

John 17 vv 22-26

These words are so amazing. The glory of Jesus is self-sacrificial love. Its supreme expression on earth is the Cross. This is the love He has for us and the love He inspires us to share. What the glory of love may be in Heaven we can only begin to imagine. It is evidently beyond our understanding. That we know is our eternal destiny. We live in that love now and the sublime experience of worshipping God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit here on earth is a foretaste of the glory which is to come.

That sublime experience of worship is both what goes on at the altar, when we offer our love to God, and what happens when we behave lovingly to the people we meet. If we do not experience joy in worship or joy in caring for other people, the fault is in us and we ought to ask God to open our eyes to reality so that we can see things as they really are and repent of the sins that hold us back.

[We need a note here. Those of us planning and leading worship (including clergy, choristers, lesson readers, sidemen etc) have two tasks. We have to offer the very highest quality to God and we have to create an atmosphere in which people coming to our Church have such a sense of God that they are lost in wonder, love and praise. Given the limitations of human beings, some things we do, we don't do very well and we all have our preferences. It is very easy to complain about the quality of what is on offer in church. "We can't hear." "It's too old-fashioned." "It's too happy, clappy." "The sermons are controversial." "The sermons are anodyne." "These old buildings are cold and uncomfortable." "I don't feel these new buildings are proper churches." I don't want to suggest that all complaints are mischievous or that they should not be treated seriously. It is, however, possible that we have too negative an attitude. We can get something out of, and (more importantly) contribute to, whatever worship is sincerely offered. We might not like the hymn tunes, but look at the words. We might disagree with the sermon, but it can make us think. We might be cold or uncomfortable or detest the décor of the building, but we could concentrate on higher things. Negativity not only poisons our own personal approach to God, but shared negativity and constant carping undermine other people's experience of worship and destroy the confidence of the leader. So, try to be positive. Pray for those who have to lead and try to encourage them. If you do feel you have to suggest doing things differently, do so charitably and positively.]

March 21st

John 18 vv 1-7

I am He.

Each of the four evangelists tells the story in a different way in order to bring out some aspect of the Truth. Some approaches to Gethsemane and what follows emphasise the helplessness of Jesus as He experiences what so many human beings have experienced, being bound and taken to places we would not choose to go, tried by people much more powerful than we are, executed even, guilty or innocent, with our having no say in the matter. All that is true and Jesus shares all this with both the sinner and the sinner's victim. John, however, stresses another aspect, that it is Jesus' own choice to suffer in this way. He goes through all this because He loves us and it could have been otherwise if He did not.

I am He. When we find these words in John, the probability is that God's words to Moses at the burning bush, *I am what I am* are not far below the surface.

March 22nd

John 18 vv 8-27

Jesus keeps His flock safe, even though they get it wrong again. He has to stop them shedding blood to set Him free, both because it is wrong to shed blood and because this is the hour for which He came. The chief representative of the flock denies Him, but there will be forgiveness and a new start. His enemies are determined to destroy Him even though they can prove nothing against Him.

This story is worth remembering as our own Government takes powers to arrest people and hold them without trial and without their names or their situation being made known to public. We may have infallible police and security services in which case we can be confident that those locked up really are terrorists. Then again our police and security services may be staffed by human beings capable of making mistakes and perhaps of deliberately perverting the course of justice. The utilitarian argument is that it is better to lock up a couple of dozen innocent people than to risk setting free one terrorist who might kill hundreds of people in a bomb attack. There might even be an unspoken

assumption that, if those locked up hold certain extreme political or religious opinions, they have only themselves to blame for their incarceration even if they would never actually hurt a fly. If you are tempted by this utilitarian argument, just consider how you would feel if you or a member of your family were detained indefinitely on the mistaken suspicion that you intended to commit a serious crime you would never in fact dream of committing.

March 23rd

John 18 vv 28-32

The Jewish authorities appear in a very poor light. They are concerned about ritual cleanliness, but they are plotting something much more serious than getting the Passover Ritual wrong. They are plotting the death of an innocent man. They are also hypocrites in claiming to respect the Roman Law so much that they will leave the death sentence for Rome to pronounce. (They stoned Stephen themselves!) What they are doing here is evading responsibility for a death which they want but which they think will be unpopular with the mob.

If he were not a malefactor. They can't bring a specific charge against Jesus. So they just say that He must be a bad man. Otherwise they wouldn't have brought Him before Pilate. Again I worry about the way our Government is going. Frustrated by the seeming inability of the police and courts to deal with what is now called "antisocial behaviour" government has handed a plethora of new powers to the courts, the police and local authorities which enable them to take action against people without having to prove specific charges or even, in some cases, to bring the alleged malefactor before a court. As good citizens, we might be relieved to see "louts" moved on, ASBOed and locked up, but there is a huge potential for abuse if those in authority effectively make up the rules as they go along and if they are not accountable to the Law and to public interest. (In my opinion, there were already sufficient laws against violence, theft and disorderly conduct long before this government came to power. The problem was that they were not enforced. Let the police apprehend people whom they have grounds to believe are committing crimes, charge them with specific offences and present the evidence against them in a public court.)

March 24th

John 18 vv 33-40

What the Jewish authorities need to do in order to get the Roman Governor to take responsibility for destroying Jesus is to make out that He is a threat to Roman power. Hence the charge that He is the King of the Jews – a rabble rouser who will lead a mob against Pilate's soldiers. Of course Jesus is not a king in this sense. He cannot truthfully plead guilty to this offence. He is, however, a king; He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He cannot deny that He is a king. Jesus speaks in a way that makes even Pilate realise there is a lot more to Him than meets the eye. If only Pilate could recognise that He is the Truth. Pilate doesn't comprehend Jesus, but He does know that He does not deserve to die. It takes a lot of strength sometimes even for a person in a position of power to do what he knows is right when he is under intense pressure to do what is expedient.

March 25th (the Annunciation)

John 19 vv 1-22

So who is in charge here? Pilate is nominally the governor. But he senses that there is something special about Jesus. He has Him scourged and the soldiers mocked Him, but Pilate still says there is no fault in Him. *Behold the Man*. There He is wearing a crown, but a crown of thorns, and imperial purple, but it is only a soldier's uniform. Is it that His regal power is made known in His human weakness? *Behold the Man*. This is the Son of Man Who stands for the whole human race and also an ordinary man like you or I, who could be caught up in a situation where he is powerless not to submit to derision, torture and death. The chief priests are pretty powerful too in worldly terms. They say that Jesus claimed to be *Son of God*, metaphysically One with the Father or a poetic title for the King of Israel, the Messiah, God's vice-regent over the chosen people. One, in their view, would be blasphemy, the other a political statement. Pilate has *King of the Jews* written on the Cross. They don't like that. The mob has tremendous power too. It is they who choose Barabbas, they who insist that Jesus is crucified. Yet surely it is the One Who is shortly to be nailed to the Cross Who comes over as the figure with the greatest dignity.

March 26th

John 19 vv 23-30

The soldiers acted of their own free choice in sharing out the garments of the condemned man but in doing so they inadvertently fulfilled prophecy. Incidentally, later commentators suggested that His seamless robe was a type of the unity of the Church. The Church should no more be divided by dissension and heresy than Christ's robe should be divided by the soldiers.

For all His personal anguish, Jesus still cared about Mary. Jesus cares about individuals. The fact that we may be under pressure, ill or in pain is no excuse for not treating other people with consideration, though we must make allowances for other people in such circumstances. It's not fair, but it's called being a Christian.

In dying on the Cross, Jesus accomplished what He came to accomplish. His love overcame hatred. His goodness overcame evil. Personally He defeated Satan. His Death brings eternal life. His being bound to the Cross sets us free. All God's purposes are accomplished in the Death of Jesus – God's supreme act of love, the complete manifestation of His Nature which is Love.

March 27th

John 19 vv 31-42

Christianity was not a new religion. Christians have always seen the Christ event as the fulfilment of the Old Testament and themselves as the authentic heirs of Abraham, Moses and the rest. Those contemporary Christians who do not bother to read the Old Testament cannot begin to understand the New. Jesus and the apostles take the Old Testament as given and their teaching is derived from it. So the greatest event of the New Testament is seen as fulfilling the prophecies in the Old.

The wonder is that this rather obscure passage about His bones being unbroken is fulfilled in the spear being thrust into His side and the appearance of water mingled with blood, signifying the gift of the Holy Spirit, Who becomes available to all flesh because the Cross of Jesus reconciles man to God.

March 28th

John 20 vv 1-18

The first evidence of the Resurrection was that the tomb was empty. Perhaps the disciples couldn't take in more than that at first. We would be a tremendous state of shock if someone we lived died as cruelly as Jesus died. It would be even more of a shock if they rose from the dead. Maybe they needed to empty tomb to introduce them to the idea gently. Then there was individual experience of the Risen Christ. He spoke Mary's name. She knew at once Who He was. She was not to cling to His Body, but she would always now know that He had risen from the dead.

We cannot touch Jesus, but we can speak to Him in prayer and we do know that He is with us all the time.

March 29th

John 20 vv 19-31

Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.

The Risen Jesus is known not only to individuals, but also to Christians met together in fellowship. Encounter with the Risen Christ is a fellowship thing. Indeed Luke tells us that this was a fellowship meal they were having. Coming to His people when they are gathered together, Jesus commissions them to carry out His work and endues them with the Holy Spirit.

Only a few hundred people actually saw the Risen Christ in the flesh. Everybody else relies on the testimony of others and personal experience of the Holy Spirit. But those who have believed without seeing are no less part of the apostolic church than the original apostles. We enjoy all the privileges of being in Christ and He in us and we fully share the responsibility of bearing witness of His love to the world.

What Jesus said and did has been preserved in the Bible. The Bible exists not as "heritage" or as an interesting historical document. The Bible exists so that men and women may believe and, through believing, they may have life. The Church is the custodian of the Bible, preserving its texts, translating them into the languages of the world and

using them to build up the Church into the full stature of Christ and to reach out to those who do not yet know Jesus.

March 30th

John 21 vv 1-14

After what has just gone, this story seems a bit of a let down. We have been reading about Atonement, the Redemption of the World, new life in Christ and a worldwide mission. We have been thinking about the power of the Holy Spirit to transform us into Christ-like people, children of God and heirs of eternal life. And now we have a story about fishermen going fishing! My theory is that they did not know what else to do. It was all so much that they just went back to what they knew for a bit. Jesus shows Himself to them and recommissions them.

This leads my thoughts in two directions. One is that we may have experienced such let downs. We feel really inspired by a service we have been to or a sermon we have heard. We feel all fired up to do marvellous things for God. Then, for some reason, nothing comes of it and we revert to the ordinary. We need to strike while the iron is hot. If, after due consideration, we decide that God really is calling us to a particular service, then we should get on with it before we go cold. Sometimes we backtrack when we realise the cost. We really don't want to give as much time or effort as it would take to make the project succeed, but that ought not to be a consideration if we really believe God is telling us to do it. We do, however, have to be careful if our idea involves other people. If we need a team or the support of our church or even just the vicar, we have to be sure that they understand their part in it and share our belief that it is God's Will. It really isn't fair to blame others for not doing what they didn't believe they ought to have done.

Secondly, for most of us, being a Christian is something that we have to do in our ordinary daily lives, doing ordinary jobs in ordinary places. You may be called to be a priest or a missionary, but most of us are not. God wants you to be a Christian where you are. That does not mean your devotion should be any less than a priest's or that your vocation is

any less important than his. What it means is that God is giving you opportunities to serve him in situations in which priests and missionaries are unlikely to find themselves, but he is not asking you to do the things that they do. No doubt He takes into account our natural abilities and the spiritual gifts He intends to give us when He decides what kind of full time service (fishermen, evangelist, housewife, farmer, factory worker) to which to call us.

March 31st

John 21 vv 15-25

Jesus recommissions the apostles. They are to get on with His work. Peter is to lead. His three-fold denial is forgiven and he gets the chance to say three times that he loves Jesus. If he loves Jesus, he will care for Christ's flock. Bishops, priests and other pastors are all called to do that. And all Christians are called to pastor one another. Don't leave it to the vicar. Care for one another. And care for the vicar, too. He needs it.

Peter will die a martyr's death as have many Christians. That is the supreme act of witness, to lay down your life in love, as Jesus did. We are called, however, to take up our cross daily and follow Him.

Then he wants to know what will happen to John. We can be far too inquisitive (and judgmental) about other people and their Christian progress. We should care and we should assist, but we shouldn't be nosey or interfering, comparing ourselves with them. We all have our God-given vocation. My job is to get on with mine; yours is to get on with yours.

Finally, this whole Gospel is about proclaiming Jesus to the world. So let's get on with ` it!