

The Gospel according to Saint Matthew II.



Bible Notes
July-September 2013

50p

1st July

Matthew 9 vv 32-35

I hope you like Matthew! It's so frustrating to end a study without finishing the book and I thought that this time we just had to carry on!

The Pharisees attribute the miracle to the prince of devils. Other people might attribute a claimed miraculous recovery to natural causes or to the benefits of modern medicine. Other people might deny that the healing was real and insist that the miracle hadn't happened. Yet others might be quite prepared to believe that Jesus had done a miracle but still refuse to put their faith in Him. Miracles don't compel faith. They are signs of Who Jesus is and what God is like if we are open to see the signs, but they are not proofs to compel the non-believer to change his mind. He can always deny that the miracle occurred or offer an alternative explanation or even accept that there has been a miracle but still not see the point of it.

As for distinguishing between natural and supernatural causes of healings and other miracles, I do not think we should make too rigid a distinction. God made the natural world so that our bodies marvellously heal themselves or doctors treat us with marvellous drugs or surgical techniques. "Natural" healing is something to be profoundly thankful for and to fill us with awe at the greatness and goodness of God. Sometimes He may heal supernaturally, going beyond the natural healing of the body or effective medical remedies, but all healing is of God and we may not be able to discern the difference. Just be thankful for what God does however He does it and share the benefits of health with as many people as you can.

2nd July

Matthew 9 vv 36-38

People need God desperately, though they themselves may not know it. It is so frustrating that we provide so many opportunities to people to take part in public worship, to hear the Word of God and to participate in the Sacraments and yet in their obstinate ignorance they ignore the living water and instead seek to quench their thirst with what can never satisfy. We pray the Lord to send labourers into the harvest, aware that He may make us the answer to our prayers.

July 3rd (S Thomas)

Matthew 10 vv 1-15

Thomas used to be kept on 21st December but the festival was moved to the Summer so as not to interrupt the preparations for Christmas.

Thomas and all the apostles are sent out to do the work Jesus is doing and to be labourers harvesting God's crop as in yesterday's reading. They are a firstfruits answer to that prayer. They are to start with the Jews. The Jews are the chosen people who have received the Law and the Prophets. The mission to the Jews naturally blossoms and bears fruit in the mission to the Gentiles because God is the God of every nation and His blessings are poured out on the whole world. The Law and the Prophets are entrusted to the Jews as a gift for all the peoples of the world, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, *a light to lighten the gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel*. The apostles are to trust God for the things they need in order to accomplish their mission. They are to do the signs that Jesus is doing – signs of God's Kingdom of justice, mercy and peace. We may wonder whether the Church today is called to perform miracles? I am sure however that miracle or not, supernatural or natural we are called to be signs of the Kingdom by caring for the poor and sick. *Freely ye have received. Freely give*. Worryingly, they are told not to waste time on the people who reject them. Is that just an ordinance for them because they were in a hurry to accomplish everything in the three years before the Crucifixion or is it a general truth applicable in the world today? Is there any point in persisting with people who utterly reject the Gospel when there are other people who need to hear the Good News and might well respond to it positively? Why cast our pearls before swine, risking persecution and martyrdom where we are unlikely to succeed? Common sense does come in to the answer to this question, but so does the fact that God doesn't give up on anyone.

July 4th

Matthew 10 vv 16-28

It must have been terrifying for these humble men when later they were brought before royalty and high-ranking officials and threatened with imprisonment, torture and death. They needed to be *wise as serpents and harmless as doves*. They would even be rejected by their families. They could expect to be treated as Jesus was treated. And yet it would all be possible because of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit Who works in the Church today.

July 5th

Matthew 10 vv 29-31

Do we ever stop to think how much we, as individuals, are loved by God? God really cares about you. He cares about the things that happen to you, your hopes and fears. We really do matter to God as individuals. That being so, we should fear nothing. Also if God cares that much about everyone of us, so we should care so much about other people.

July 6th

Matthew 10 vv 32&33

If we are not confident that God is looking after us no matter what happens to us, we may be tempted to deny Him, to behave as if we were not Christians, not only to hold back from sharing our faith, but to join in with behaviour which we know to be wrong – gossip, bad language, questionable humour, mocking religion, feigning agreement with unacceptable political or other opinions – because we'd rather people didn't realise we were Christians. We don't want to stand out. It won't do! It's easier for me as a clergyman. People expect me to express Christian views, but my effectiveness is blunted by that very expectation. *You have to say that because you're a vicar!* It's tougher for you lay people to stand up for the truth no matter what, but your witness is potentially more impressive and effective than mine.

July 7th

Matthew 10 vv 34-39

This is all very difficult. Surely Jesus doesn't expect us to hate our own lives, actively to seek out martyrdom, to put Him before our families. Surely God wants harmonious, loving families and peaceful communities where people don't argue and quarrel. How can both be true that we should *honour our father and our mother* and that we should be prepared to fall out with them because of our allegiance to Christ? I remember writing to a MP when the Sunday Trading Laws were relaxed. Her response was that shopping is something that families do together and therefore a good thing. It is hard to quarrel with that – people who work hard all the week and only see their children for a short time each day before and after school shop together for the things the family needs and wants. And yet when these good things come between us and God we drift away from the One Who makes them good. God has to be first if the rest is to make any sense.

July 8th

Matthew 10 vv 40-42

One of my things at the moment is that Christians in modern Britain are so casual about their faith because we've lost the sense of what a privilege it is to be a Christian. When we come into God's House to enjoy the fellowship (the communion of the Holy Spirit), to hear His living Word proclaimed, to talk to our Heavenly Father and to share in the Body and Blood of Christ in the Sacrament, this is a wonderful privilege. We don't do it because we're better than other people. It's not a leisure activity. We're not doing God a favour. Church isn't something to fit in if and when we've nothing important to do. It is an almost unbelievable privilege to be allowed by God to come into His presence. In these verses Jesus teaches us that we His people are the same as Him. Ponder that! Sunday worship is astoundingly important, but it's in the whole of life that we evidence and experience what it is to be in Christ and He in us.

July 9th

Matthew 11 vv 1-6

It seems that John the Baptist became discouraged and who could blame him? He had been sent to proclaim the Messiah, but he hadn't been given much detail about what God's Kingdom would mean. Finding himself in prison, he must have wondered what was going on, even if he had got it all wrong. Maybe you and I wonder. If there is a God why does He let this or that happen? If the Church really is the Body of Christ, how come there are all these arguments in synod? If the Jews are the chosen people why the concentration camps? How come so many of the saints we commemorate are martyrs? Doesn't God look after His best friends? When we try so hard, why doesn't God apparently bless our efforts? The only answer John's emissaries got was *Go and shew John again those things which you do hear and see*. There is plenty of evidence for God working in the world. It is a matter of looking at it the right way.

July 10th

Matthew 11 vv 7-15

John might have had his doubts, but Jesus valued John's ministry tremendously. John is the culmination of the OT prophets, the greatest of them all and the fulfilment of OT prophecy in Christ. He is all these things despite his weakness. So hope for us spiritual weaklings too.

July 11th

Matthew 11 vv 16-19

I don't go to Church because they've removed all the grandeur and reverence with their new services, new bible translations and happy clappy hymns.

I don't go to Church because it's all stuck in the past with its *thees* and *thous* and old-fashioned hymns.

Who does our vicar think he is? Never goes into a pub or club. Always wants to be on the platform, either running things or the honoured guest. Never see him in casual clothes or doing anything what you'd call normal really.

You can't respect our vicar. You see him walking the dog in his old clothes, down the pub two or three times a week.

I wouldn't go to that church ever again. Nobody spoke to me for a whole month.

I can't face going to these churches where people are all over you, kissing during the peace, dragging you off to coffee when you just want to go home quietly.

Or maybe none of these six people really wants to hear the Gospel at all.

July 12th

Matthew 11 vv 20-24

The people who prescribe what we read in church (the lectionary) often these days suggest omitting verses. Maybe the reading is too long to take in. Maybe the omitted verses are a list of hard to pronounce names or a detail of the story we don't need to hear on this occasion. Verses are sometimes left out because they are difficult which is fairly disgraceful in my opinion. But worst of all verses get left out because they are politically incorrect or judgmental. Deliberately to leave out the verses we don't agree with is dishonest. It makes the biblical authors say what we want them to say, not what they really do say. If we believe, as the Church of England teaches, that the Bible is the Word of God, it is worse than dishonest deliberately to obscure the Bible's message. It is dangerous. Today's words of Jesus are quite often omitted in the lectionary readings. Rather we should be thinking why Jesus said these things, what He meant by them and how they apply to us.

July 13th

Matthew 11 vv 25-30

The reason why those who reject the Word bring judgment on themselves is that the Word is life. Without God there is no life. *The wages of sin is death.* Jesus, the Word made flesh, is one with God the Father. The gift which He offers is Himself, divine love in human form. Those who accept their need of God receive Jesus into their hearts and every blessing that He brings. Those who are hardened by pride or wealth, those who believe that they are self-sufficient or that the things of this world are all that they need and those that despair against any hope, are indeed lost. They bring judgment on themselves. But Jesus offers to all *rest unto your souls.* What we have to do is accept to His love and reciprocate with our love, which is something which we can only do through His grace.

July 14th

Matthew 12 vv 1-9

Some churches consecrate more bread and wine at their communion services than the number of communicants requires. The surplus is then kept in an aumbry or tabernacle to be taken to housebound members of the congregation or sometimes to be used in processions and other worship services. Taught by the Church of England, I am inclined to believe that the latter uses may lead to idolatry and a misunderstanding of what it means to receive Jesus in the Sacrament, but I do believe that it is a very good thing to take the Church's Communion to those members who are unable any longer to attend themselves. Anyway, when we were theological students we sometimes used to speculate on whether if one were somehow accidentally locked inside a church it would be legitimate to eat the consecrated bread to stave off the pangs of hunger whilst awaiting rescue (I'd ring the bell till someone came.) The implication of this passage is surely that it would be all right to eat the consecrated elements (though surely reverently) in these circumstances. Jesus is saying that religious observances like the shewbread in the OT (which was laid before the ark of the covenant each day as an offering to God before being eaten by the priests) and the Sabbath are good things, but you have to use your common sense to make sure you are using them for the purposes which God intended – to bless people and not turning them into burdens to be endured.

July 15th

Matthew 12 vv 10-13

The same principle applies in this story. Now here's a conundrum for you. Obviously doctors and nurses treat emergency cases whatever the day of the week or time of day. But it's been suggested recently that, given the length of waiting lists for routine investigations and elective surgery, hospitals ought to carry on working on routine procedures as well as emergencies all night and at weekends. Why leave all that expensive equipment unused if you can get enough staff to keep it in operation? Why keep patients waiting for treatments that might make them more comfortable, more mobile and possibly even save their lives? The case seems unarguable so long as you can get the staff.

But do we really want to live in a world in which vast swathes of the population work unsocial hours, a country in which there are no days on which most people are free to spend time with family and friends and to go to church? Would a 24/7 world really be so great to live in? Ought we not to be considering what jobs really need to be done at any hour of the day or night and then confining the rest to six days a week so that one day remains free for most people to things more important than work? Shouldn't we all be prepared to sacrifice the convenience of shopping, travelling, watching sport etc., having our routine operations on any day that suits us in order to allow the workers in those fields as much freedom as possible to have the same day off as the rest of their families and most of their friends?

July 16th

Matthew 12 vv 14-21

It is noteworthy how often in the Bible that it works out that when people try to oppose the work of God, God's work actually expands faster. The Pharisees here try to destroy Jesus. He goes out and heals the multitudes. There are all sorts of reasons why He doesn't advertise. He doesn't want to draw the attention of the hostile authorities. He doesn't want to be overwhelmed with people coming to Him for the wrong reasons – to witness and experience miracles rather than to become disciples. There is a reverend reticence in advertising the holy. Matthew notes that Jesus is fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy. This OT prophecy includes the Gentiles in God's blessing. The salvation of the whole world was always intrinsic to God's choice of Israel.

July 17th

Matthew 12 vv 22-30

Is not this the Son of David?

The crowds see the exorcism and they think Jesus must be the Messiah – great David's greater Son. The Pharisees however still insist that Jesus must be working by the power of the prince of devils. Jesus reasonably points out that doing good is hardly doing the work of the devil. *By their fruits shall ye know them.* The devil is powerful and it doesn't do to forget that, but Jesus is infinitely more powerful. He overcomes the power of the evil one by His offering of Himself on the Cross, by His self-sacrificial love. The followers of Jesus too overcome the power of evil by the offering up of self in love. Either, then, you are with Jesus in doing good through love or you are against Him, selfish, rather than selfless.

July 18th

Matthew 12 vv 31&32

Some people of course wouldn't care what Jesus says about an unforgivable sin. They are confident that they know for certain what God must be like and that, if there is Heaven, people like them and their friends will be assured of a place there. Other people of excessively tender conscience have agonised about what these words could mean. Could they somehow have committed the unforgivable sin and therefore be condemned to an eternity of hell? Some people in the early Church delayed Baptism until they were dying so that they wouldn't have time to commit an unforgivable sin after conversion and before death. The early Church often thought of murder, adultery and apostasy (relinquishing your faith) as unforgivable. A lot of people have wondered whether if it is blasphemy to say *Christ* or *God Almighty* as a swear word, could it be blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to use His Name in that way? The over confident and complacent are certainly wrong. There is a judgment and we are judged on God's terms not ours. If we get to Heaven, it is because God loves us and forgives us our sins, not because we aren't sinners or because our sins don't matter. But the over scrupulous are also wrong. God hasn't invented an unforgivable sin as a trap. The reason the sin against the Holy Ghost isn't forgivable is that the sinner has hardened his heart against God. If we open our hearts to receive His love all of us can be forgiven. And if sin worries you, you are not unforgivable.

July 19th

Matthew 12 vv 33-37

Maybe you do good things because you hope for a reward. Maybe you refrain from evil because you are afraid of punishment. Laws with rewards and punishments are one way to create an ethical society. A much better way is to create people who want to be good. Because of original sin, Law is the first defence against chaotic evil. The nursery school teacher promises time on the rocking horse for good behaviour and threatens with the naughty step for bad. In the long run, however, what the parent and the nursery school teacher want to achieve is so to bring up the child that he or she chooses freely to be good whatever the temptations to do otherwise and irrespective of any reward or punishment. Ultimately this is only achieved through Christian conversion and formation. We are washed clean of our sins in Baptism and we become a new creation. Throughout our lives the flesh wars against the spirit but through our communion with Jesus we are formed into better people who actually want to be good whatever the temptations. We might all be good while the policeman is watching but which of us can be trusted to be good when no one is watching? That's character and character is formed by knowing Jesus.

July 20th

Matthew 12 vv 38-42

All the miracles were signs. Everything that Jesus said and did was a sign. In fact He Himself was a sign. But these Pharisees couldn't or wouldn't see the signs. They were confident that they knew what God wanted – much the same as what they wanted. They studied the Law (Torah) and they based their lives on their understanding of the Law. The last thing they wanted was for everything they believed to be turned upside down by this new teacher. So they couldn't or wouldn't see the obvious signs of who Jesus is and they demanded something more and different. Jesus foretells that He will be imprisoned in the tomb and rise again just like Jonah was three days in the belly of the whale. (Elsewhere He warns that people won't believe even if someone rises from the dead if they don't accept the Law and the Prophets as God meant them {Luke 16³¹}.) Of course the Assyrians (capital city Nineveh) did repent at the preaching of Jonah and the Queen of Sheba listened to Solomon's wisdom. Those who encounter Jesus have a much better opportunity to receive God's Word than those ancient pagans and therefore much less excuse for refusing to hear.

July 21st

Matthew 12 vv 43-45

I've always found these verses hard. You can say, *They don't mean anything to me*, and then behave as if they didn't mean anything at all, but then why did Jesus say them? On the other hand, some people take them very literally. In some churches, there is far too much interest in exorcism. Any sickness or problem is diagnosed as being caused by demons. People who fancy themselves as exorcists then attempt to cast out the demons, often employing bizarre rituals and sometimes extreme cruelty, such as beating the allegedly possessed victim. If the person doesn't get better or suffers a relapse, the failed exorcist can then claim that the demon has returned with its mates! It is both rash and unwise to attribute every sickness or problem to demonic activity. I wouldn't dare say that there is never a case for exorcism, but it is certainly rarer than many people think, and, if it is needed, there are proper professionals in mainstream churches who exercise their ministry with extreme discretion and always charitably. Love is the devil's greatest foe. You don't make people better by terrifying them or hurting them. Speak to your vicar and, if he thinks, there is a spiritual problem which cannot be dealt with in the normal way through prayer and the Sacraments, he will contact someone with deeper knowledge of these things. As for these verses, I think they are a warning to us to say that where evil in us has been overcome we ought to be careful not to let it back into our lives. The recovering alcoholic ought to avoid the pub. If you can't help joining in spiteful gossip, stop mixing with the people you gossip with. If you used to shoplift for what you couldn't afford, try to stop thinking about how easy it would be to go back to your old ways.

July 22nd (S Mary Magdalene)

Matthew 12 vv 46-50

Have you noticed how often Mary Magdalene features in the various conspiracy theories about how the Catholic Church has supposedly suppressed the truth and that Jesus was really married (to MM) and had children or that MM was really an apostle and possibly more important than some of the 12 men? You can trust what you read in the Bible about her and you only trust the Bible absolutely. MM was a close friend of Jesus and a supporter and one of the first witnesses of the resurrection. Did she have any even more important status? What more status could she have? Jesus says we are all His brothers and sisters.

July 23rd

Matthew 13 vv 1-23

This parable is so well known that it is hard to know what to say about it. Vv 10-17 are interesting. We tend to think that a parable is an easy story which illustrates a simple point, a way of making it easier for us to understand the Gospel. In fact, the concept of parable is not far removed from the idea of a riddle. You have to work it out. There is very deep truth in parables, perhaps an unfathomable truth so that each reading can bring to us something new, something we had not appreciated before. Parables conceal the truth from those whose hearts are closed to the Truth, hiding the truth in plain sight. Christ's disciples ought to be able to understand the parable but it appears that they can't until He explains it to them. Parables are open to a multitude (an infinity) of interpretations – provided that the interpretation is always controlled by our knowledge of God. My suggestion is that you consider what the path, rocks, weeds and seeds are in our world today.

July 24th

Matthew 13 vv 24-30

My initial interpretation of this is that God has made good people and the devil has caused bad people in the world and also in the Church. You and I can't distinguish good people from bad people. So we ought not to judge or condemn but to leave judgement to God Whose angels will separate us out at the end of time and see that we go to the appropriate eternal dwelling. But the devil doesn't make bad people or good people. Maybe he makes good people bad, but surely only if God allows him and only if people cooperate with him in their own destruction. Everybody is a sinner, but God makes us good by washing away our sin in the Blood of Jesus. Again surely we have to cooperate with grace through faith, but then faith is a gift of grace. Maybe the good and bad seed are the thoughts sown in our heads by God on the one hand or by sin, the world and the devil on the other. Jesus tells us that the good seed are the children of the kingdom and the tares are the children of the wicked one. But how do we become the children of one or the other? And can we not change sides? Good people go bad sometimes. Sinners may repent.

I'm raising all these issues to make the point that there is much more in a seemingly obvious parable than meets the eye.

July 25th (S James)

Matthew 13 vv 31-33

These parables seem to imply that the growth of God's Kingdom is inevitable. It might not look much – mustard seed or a damp lump of dough, but within there is a life force which nothing can stop. The mustard seed grows. The dough rises. God has done so much more than either the farmer or the baker. God does so much more than we do to make His Kingdom grow. But we do all have our humble part to play – like James the apostle, son of Zebedee and brother of John. We can trust God for the outcome, but each of us must do his or her best towards that outcome.

Grant, O merciful God, that as thine holy Apostle Saint James, leaving his father and all that he had, without delay was obedient unto the calling of thy Son Jesus Christ, and followed him; so we, forsaking all worldly and carnal affections, may be evermore ready to follow thy holy commandments; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

July 26th

Matthew 13 vv 34&35

When I was a theological student we had to write an essay on what a parable was. I don't think I got a very good mark for it and I don't think that that was entirely fair. The two great authorities on parables in the C20 were C H Dodd and Joachim Jeremias and they certainly were great authorities on the subject. However I thought (and I still do think) that they too much isolated the parables as told by Jesus from the notion of parable in the rest of the Bible, that they downplayed the meaning of the original Hebrew and Greek words for parable (משל and παραβολη) and that they forced Jesus' parables into a rigid mould which led them to scepticism that the Gospels had reported Him accurately and doubt that the explanations of the parables given in the Gospels was authentic – difficult for someone like me who takes literally the C of E's teaching that God *caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning* (Collect Bible Sunday). Matthew here is quoting the beginning of Psalm 78. So for Matthew there is not an absolute distinction between psalms and prophecy. In fact there are many examples in the New Testament of psalms being regarded as prophetic. The psalm begins *Hear my law, O my people*. The word

used for law is Torah (תורה). It goes on *I will declare hard sentences of old*. The word for *hard sentences* also appears in Proverbs 1⁶ there also associated with *parable* and wisdom. I've spent far too long on looking all this up and writing it up here and I've done so because it's fascinating. The OT is classically thought of as consisting of Law, Prophets and Writings. I think this little section makes the point that they are not rigidly distinguished. There is a fluidity – one message presented in many different ways. Jesus fulfils them all. We understand Jesus in the light of the OT and we understand the OT in the Light of Jesus. I suggest that a parable both reveals and obscures. It reveals the Truth to those who are open to God and conceals the Truth from those who are not. Openness to God, too, is a virtuous circle in which God gives us the grace to know Him and in knowing Him we receive grace.

Psalms 78 is a very long psalm – the second longest of them all after 119. It is the only psalm set for the 15th evening of the month in BCP and is never set in its entirety in the CW lectionary – which is a pity because there is a sense of integrity and completeness in reading the whole of it, even if it is exhausting. Ps 78 basically runs through the history of Israel, reminding the reader of God's constancy and faithfulness and His people's fickle faithlessness. By and large, the message is God saves His people and blesses them. Then they forget Him and thereby bring trouble on themselves. Then they pray to God and He saves them again. Then they forget Him again. So God will make a new beginning. This is much the same message as St Stephen offers in Acts 7 just before they stone him and is pretty much the message of the Bible. Every good thing comes to us from God. We quickly forget about Him, worship false gods, mistreat other people and generally look after number one at the expense of our responsibilities to God, our fellow human beings and the rest of God's creation. We thereby bring destruction on ourselves, whereupon we pray to God for help. The new beginning God ultimately makes is Jesus. Jesus is the Word made flesh. He speaks to us in parables. The spiritually open receive the Word and it grows in their hearts and they bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit. The hardhearted, the cowardly and the worldly either refuse the Word or run away from it or lose their grip on it. The good ground are *being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever*. 1 Peter 1²³

July 27th

Matthew 13 vv 36-43

Bear with me if I continue on from where we left off yesterday. The Dodd/Jeremias view was that the parables of Jesus are parables of the Kingdom of God. One view was that the Kingdom had arrived with Jesus. The alternative was to believe that the Kingdom was imminent with Jesus. For what it is worth, I think both are correct. The Kingdom of God is present wherever Jesus is but it is also always imminent until the last day *When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound, and time shall be no more, And the morning breaks eternal, bright and fair; When the saved of earth shall gather on the other shore, And the roll is called upon yonder, I'll be there.* For Dodd and Jeremias Jesus' parables were unique, different from any other biblical parables or any other parables in the Ancient World. They were always about the Kingdom. They were never analogies in which things in the story correspond to things in the real world (like the pigs in Orwell's *Animal Farm* correspond to the Russian leadership after the Revolution) and that therefore parables which looked like analogies had probably not been reported correctly and explanations such as the one we have here were made up by the early Church because they had forgotten what Jesus originally meant by the parables if indeed they had ever understood it. I think it is very unlikely that Jesus' parables were nothing like other biblical parables. Why call them parables if they weren't. If they are all about the Kingdom of God that phrase, it must be recognised, has a very wide range of meanings. Several of the parables as recorded in the Bible (including the wheat and tares) obviously are analogies and I trust the evangelists (inspired by the Holy Spirit) to have recorded Jesus faithfully. I think it is arrogant to believe that the early Church so soon forgot what Jesus meant only for us to rediscover what He intended to say two millennia later! Henry Alford (in my opinion) does a much better job on this parable in his Christian hymn.

For we know that thou wilt come,
And wilt take thy people home;
From thy field wilt purge away
All that doth offend that day;
And thine angels charge at last
In the fire the tares to cast,
But the fruitful ears to store~
In thy garner ever more.

July 28th

Matthew 13 vv 44-46

Kingdom of Heaven means the same thing as *Kingdom of God*, but is a slightly more reverent way of saying it. Just as the name YHWH was considered too holy to pronounce, some people felt that even saying *God* was something that should not be done lightly. Excessively scrupulous we might feel, but surely better than using *God* carelessly in expressions like OMG with reference to some minor emergency or surprise of some kind. Anyway, what these verses indicate is that the Kingdom of God is worth absolutely everything to you and that therefore there is nothing you should not be prepared to give up for it. You either believe that or you don't.

July 29th

Matthew 13 vv 47-50

The parable of the net seems to mean much the same thing as the wheat and tares. It is possible to interpret the wheat and tares to be about the world – in which good and evil are inextricably mixed until God sorts it all out on the Day of Judgment and the net to be about God's Church in which good and evil are inextricably mixed until God sorts it all out on the Day of Judgment. I think this is possibly pushing analogy too far. There is evil in the world and there is necessarily evil in the Church on earth. Our sins are washed away in Baptism but the flesh continues to lust against the Spirit so long as we remain on this earth. The message is not to be surprised that there is evil even within the Church and to leave judgment up to God. We don't know enough about people to judge them and, as sinners ourselves, we have no right to judge them anyway.

July 30th

Matthew 13 vv 51&52

When Jesus says, *Have ye understood all these things?* They reply, *Yea, Lord.* It would have been wiser to reply, *We're just beginning to catch a glimpse of what your teaching really means, Lord.* Jesus tells them to put together the old and the new, what they already know of God with what He is revealing to them. The old will be the Old Testament, our own existing experiences of God, what we have been taught by our parents and the wider Christian community and our cultural background.

July 31st

Matthew 13 vv 53-58

When I was in my last year at theological college, the Bishop of Rochester called me for interview to discuss where I should do my first curacy. When I told him that I had lived in the Medway Towns since 1963, he said I should not be sent anywhere there. So I went to All Saints Orpington. It is sometimes hard to take on a new roll in the community in which you are already well known. The people of Nazareth found it very hard to accept Jesus as anything other than the son of Mary and Joseph and brother to the other children with whom He grew up. One of the issues confronting the C of E is do we ordain ministers or license lay ministers to serve the communities of which they are already members or do we try to find ministers from outside, people with fresh ideas, who will not always seem too much one to be *just one of us*? Whatever the answer to that question, here is another. Is it possible to be like the people of Nazareth, to have a true but very partial knowledge of Jesus which holds us back from recognising the fulness of Who He is?

August 1st

Matthew 14 vv 1-12

On the face of it, Jesus and John had the same message, *Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand*. In the two men that same message developed very differently. Jesus is the Word which He and John proclaimed. So Jesus went on teaching at a far more profound level. He performed the miraculous signs. And He was crucified and rose again and poured out the Holy Spirit on His Church. John said, *He must increase; I must decrease*. And so John did decrease. He was imprisoned for his faithfulness to the message. He died a martyr's death in the squalid luxury of Herod's court. So John fulfilled the roll of the prophet and received a prophet's reward. *The servant is not greater than his master. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep your's also*.

In worldly terms, John's life looks like a miserable failure. In the light of eternity we see him as the great forerunner. *Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist, notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he*. John is now in heaven. What is true of John is true of us.

August 2nd

Matthew 14 vv 13-21

This is such an important story that it is one of the very few apart from the Passion Narrative which is told in all four Gospels. Jesus is Moses fulfilled. He sets His people free from sin and death and feeds them in the wilderness. Jesus is the fulfilment of Elisha and all the prophets, feeding His disciples with the bread of life, the Word of God. He is God Himself Who provides an abundance of good things to meet all our needs. He is pleased to accept the offering even of a small child and transforms it. He gives thanks and blesses and teaches to share so that everyone has more than enough. He invites everyone who will to join Him in the heavenly banquet. He presides at the Eucharist when we proclaim His death, participate in His Body and anticipate His return.

August 3rd

Matthew 14 vv 22-33

All four Gospels carry this story too and at this point. Jesus goes into the hills to pray. In all this excitement, it is vital to maintain our communion with God. The crowds want to make Him king and no doubt march on Jerusalem. Maybe the disciples supported them. Jesus has to reinterpret this sign for them so that they realise what it really means but without losing their enthusiasm.

The ship can be taken to represent the Church, the Ark of Salvation. Christ's people are safe in the Ark. We are all in it together, in Christian fellowship. But there are storms. We may well be afraid.

Jesus appears walking on the water. What are they seeing? A ghost? Jesus says *It is I (Εγω ειμι)*. These Greek words might just mean *It's me*, but they could also mean *I am*, which is what God told Moses His Name was. God is the One Who walks through the storm and calms the raging of the waters. Jesus is the one Who says, *Don't worry; it's me*. He's also Almighty God. So we really don't have to be afraid. The Church faces up to some terrible storms, but Jesus is always more powerful. *The waves of the sea are mighty, and rage horribly: but yet the Lord, who dwelleth on high is mightier.* (Psalm 93⁵).

And Peter. He could do what Jesus does if he had faith enough. What do we learn from that fact?

August 4th

Matthew 14 vv 34-36

I wish I knew the secret. Why don't people in Britain flock to Jesus now? We blame ourselves in the churches. We mess about with time of day, day of the week, style of worship. Or we don't and we accept it when people tell us that the reason they don't come to church is because it's at the top of a hill, half an hour too early for them or an hour too late, because Sunday isn't the most convenient day for them, or because they'd prefer a different kind of service. And yet people queue all night to get a concert ticket or to be first in line for the sales. Tour companies order holidaymakers to be at the airport at 5.00 am for a 9.00 flight. If you go out early Sunday morning you see people up and about running, cycling, walking or setting up their stalls at boot fairs and bleary eyed revellers still returning from Saturday night. People exhaust themselves at the gym, spend hours beautifying themselves each day, endure horrendous plastic surgery in order to look nice, take enormous pains over their hobbies, spend a fortune on leisure and pastimes. It is only God Who isn't worth any trouble or inconvenience and should consider Himself lucky if we can offer Him an hour of our time and a pound in the collection plate. I can imagine that we could so improve what we do that we could double our congregations at Cuxton and Halling. It would take some doing but it could be done. If we did it, there will still be over 4,000 people in the parish not taking part in public worship every week. Is it God or is it them?

August 5th

Matthew 15 vv 1-20

4,000 people don't come to Church every week, but they still need what looks like religious ritual. They put flowers at accident scenes. They have wedding ceremonies even if they do not involve the Church. Those who aren't religious still expect some kind of funeral service. There are secular naming ceremonies instead of Baptism. People seem not to be able to live without ritual. What is at issue is whether our rituals mean anything. The Pharisees observed the Law extremely scrupulously but many of them evidently had lost any sense of what it meant. Plenty of churchgoers lead lives which effectively deny the Gospel. The only true worship (with or without ritual) is founded on what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman: *God is a Spirit: and they that worship him, must worship in spirit and in truth.* (John 4²⁴).

August 6th (The Transfiguration)

Matthew 15 vv 21-28

I think it was 6th August just over thirty years ago that I attended a rally against nuclear war at St Mark's Bromley. (August 6th is the anniversary of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, a radiance horribly different from the holy light of the Transfiguration.) Not wanting to take part in the candlelit procession, I wandered off up the High Street and ran into someone I hadn't seen since school days. He introduced me to the Bricklayers' Arms, Masons Hill, the nearest Shepherd Neame pub to Orpington. On a subsequent visit, I almost got thumped by an aggressive and persistent drunk who kept repeating that as a clergyman I ought not to be in a public house and almost lost it when I told him that the woman I was with was another man's wife – perfectly true, but not what he thought! All this was quite embarrassing to the lady in question. I imagine that the disciples felt that they were being bothered by this Canaanite woman. Honestly, can you really blame them for wanting to get rid of her? Haven't you ever felt the same about someone who won't leave you alone? This woman, however, had a very real need and Jesus had the patience to meet that need.

August 7th

Matthew 15 vv 29-39

All four gospels have the Feeding of the 5,000. Matthew and Mark also have the similar Feeding of the 4,000. Some people think that they are the same story told twice in a slightly different way. As we shall see tomorrow, however, Matthew clearly thought there were two feeding stories. If Jesus could do it once, why not twice? One difference is that there were 12 baskets full left after the 5,000 and 7 after the 4,000. It could be that the 12 stand for the tribes of Israel and the 7 for the Gentiles, who were traditionally thought of as 7 nations. So Jesus *a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel*. This would fit with the fact that the last story is about healing the Canaanite's daughter, a story which somehow prefigures the whole Gentile mission. Gentiles come to Christ in faith and He casts out evil and heals them. There is some difficulty about Jesus accepting the Canaanite because His earthly mission was to Israel and maybe telling the story here reflects the difficulty some early Christians had in accepting that *God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him*. Acts

August 8th

Matthew 16 vv 1-12

Discerning the Truth. The Pharisees and Sadducees could recognise the common meteorological signs. *Red sky at night, shepherd's delight*. It doesn't always work, but it isn't a bad guide to tomorrow's weather. But they couldn't recognise Jesus. Their hearts were hardened against Him. And that's the real reason why people won't give their lives to Christ today, not because St Michael's is at the top of a hill or St John's is a little chilly in the Winter time. They don't see Who Jesus is and why, therefore, they can't be fully human without Him.

The disciples have trouble seeing that too. So do we His disciples today. Our religion can be every bit as conventional as that of the Pharisees – empty ritual if we don't have life-changing faith. Jesus refer to two feeding miracles. To understand them would be to recognise that we shouldn't waste our lives chasing after bread which cannot satisfy (Isaiah 55) when the Bread of Life is God's free gift to those who *believe on him whom he hath sent* (John 6²⁹). God gives us bread to demonstrate that we don't need bread!?

August 9th

Matthew 16 vv 13-20

This story features in all the first three Gospels and John also tells us in different contexts that Simon acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God and that Jesus named him *Rock*, Peter, Cephass. It is Matthew, however, who makes the most of Christ's promise that the gates of Hell will not prevail against His Church. That is a wonderful thought, born out by history – that how ever much we may despair of the world accepting Jesus or the Church obeying His commandments, nevertheless, in the words of one of my favourite hymns, *We have Christ's own promise, and that cannot fail*.

August 10th

Matthew 16 vv 21-28

As an idealistic new Christian, at high points of spiritual awareness you might promise God everything, and then like Peter get it all wrong and let Him down. This having happened umpteen times you might give up and become a merely nominal Christian. But you don't have to do that. Jesus never gives up on you any more than He gave up on Peter. As it's recorded in Luke's Gospel, take up your cross daily. (Luke 9²³).

August 11th

Matthew 17 vv 1-13

Glory. The glory of Jesus is the Cross. There is no greater love than to lay down your life and God is love. Jesus invites. No. Jesus commands His disciples to that intensity of love. But the Cross is hideous agony nailed in one place to die. Glory is the Beatific Vision, eternal life, everlasting joy, perfect freedom extending beyond the confines of time and space into the infinite immensity of God. Jesus is lifted up to draw all men to Himself to the glory of the Cross, to the glory of Heaven. The readings for yesterday and today bind these two thoughts into the unity of divine love. Each is a foretaste of what is to come. The one is temporal, temporary; the other is eternal.

Take up thy cross, and follow Christ, nor think till death to lay it down;
For only he who bears the cross may hope to wear the glorious crown.

To thee, great Lord, the One in Three, all praise for evermore ascend:
O grant us in our home to see the heavenly life that knows no end.

August 12th

Matthew 17 vv 14-23

This is a difficult story. In the Greek the boy is said to be *moonstruck* (σεληνιαζεται). The symptoms we would describe as epilepsy. The ancient belief that the moon has a roll in causing these conditions is also reflected in the word lunatic. However epilepsy is not a mental illness. It is the result of physical damage to brain cells. Neither epilepsy nor mental illness are caused by the moon. Neither is it usually helpful to think of these illnesses in terms of demon possession. They are certainly evil illnesses but they are not caused by their victims being evil. Nor does the absence of a cure imply a lack of faith or a wicked lifestyle on the part of the patient. These illnesses often respond to medical treatment and the doctor may well be able to help sufferers. What all of us can do is to be kind to people whatever is wrong with them and to keep them in our prayers. Jesus is more powerful than any kind of evil – physical, mental or spiritual – and we can and must have faith. We would need to pray for faith's discernment (always measured by love) before we recommended any particular course of action and to take note of those who know a great deal more about these things than we do.

August 13th

Matthew 17 vv 24-27

This is quite an amusing story, but what does it mean? I think it means that taxes don't really matter. That's not to say that we shouldn't pay them. We live in the community and we have responsibilities to the community – to pay our taxes, to obey the law, maybe to get involved in voluntary work or the political process, but ultimately we are citizens of heaven and that's what really matters (Philippians 3²⁰).

August 14th

Matthew 18 vv 1-10

I suppose, when we read these words of Jesus now, we are reminded of the dreadful child abuse scandals there have been in the Church. Of course, antichristian commentators like to emphasise the roll of the Church in these terrible incidents. To be fair, however, there have been similar scandals in local authority homes and of course in the lives of celebrities. Where people exercise power without effective accountability, given human nature, there is always the possibility of abuse. Official secrecy should always arouse suspicion. Even where secrecy is required by national security or client or commercial confidentiality, it may nevertheless still be a cover for everything from dishonesty and corruption to paedophilia. It is naturally worse when Christian people are involved. We have no excuse for not knowing better. Jesus warns of terrible consequences for any kind of abuse, but I do not believe that even this is an unforgivable sin. *The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.* The Church's Gospel preaching must not be compromised in a desperate endeavour to gain the approval of the mob.

August 15th (the Blessed Virgin Mary)

Matthew 18 vv 11-14

As we think of the place of Mary in God's scheme of salvation, it is worth contemplating just how much God loves us. He loves individuals. He loves you and me. Given the stresses under which the Church works today, we may care too much about numbers. The focus is on pleasing the majority, looking after the interests of the 99 sheep on the hillside. But the archetypal Christian pastor leaves them to their own devices and goes off to seek for the one that is lost. Worth thinking about. You and I were once that lost sheep. Individuals matter. The fellowship of individuals matters. But healthy numbers may conceal the fact that the fellowship is scarcely existent and individuals are not cared for. Where ought our priorities to lie?

August 16th

Matthew 18 vv 15-20

By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.

The nature of the Church is to be a community of people who love one another. We love God. We love Jesus. Jesus loves us. We love one another. Christ dwells within us and we in Christ. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit make their home in us. We are temples of the Holy Spirit. And God is love. As we expect to be forgiven, so are we required to forgive. As the Spirit-filled Body of Christ, the Church acts with the authority of God to proclaim the Good News. So how can it be that Church members fall out with one another and indeed with the Church? The answer is sin. Our only too human flesh lusts against the spirit and we behave like children of the world, rather than children of God. The old Adam reasserts himself, the Adam guilty of the original sin against God. Our unity will not be perfect until we are in Heaven, when our sinful flesh is completely subjected to the new Adam, Christ, love incarnate.

So what we do when Church members fall out? Some people think this prescription ought to be followed in every case. Try to sort it out between the people who have fallen out. If that fails, try to put things right with the help of a small group. If that fails, let the whole Church come to a binding judgment. However we work it out, the guiding principle must be love including love for our antagonists and for downright trouble makers. The hope is always to keep them within the fold, but we cannot allow the whole flock to be sacrificed for the sake of one sheep who seems determined to be lost.

August 17th

Matthew 18 vv 21-35

We may feel justifiably annoyed by what another person has done to us. People do behave badly. In this story the second servant really did owe the first servant money which he could not repay. It isn't fair that they should get away with it and we may feel entitled to demand our pound of flesh. What we need to remember is what we owe God, what sinners we are for whom Christ went to the Cross. If we properly consider our status as redeemed sinners, we inevitably realise that we must be ready to forgive other people who have sinned against us. But note that forgiveness is radically different from saying that the offence doesn't matter!

August 18th

Matthew 19 vv 1-9

In the world in which I was brought up, sex before marriage was strongly frowned upon, adultery was as bad as theft or murder, divorce was rare, disgraceful and not talked about and homosexual relationships between men were illegal and between women were unthinkable. How times have changed! But what are supposed to think? Which is better, the way things were 50 years ago or the way things are now? For most of human history, the family was what we depended upon. It provided such economic security as was possible for ordinary people, education, housing and the care of the sick and the aged. For most of human history, there was no safe, effective contraception and sex always might lead to the procreation of children. For most of human history, war, disease and poverty killed a lot of people while they were still young and it was generally necessary for everybody to cooperate in maintaining the population by having a family. For all these reasons, stable families were absolutely necessary to the survival of society and maintaining them was worth (it could be argued): painful sanctions against unmarried mothers, fornicators and adulterers; strong pressure for couples to stay together no matter what (*for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; till death us do part*); and the condemnation of *unnatural relationships*, which could not produce children and seemed to risk destabilising a social order based around heterosexual couples and celibacy in every context other than marriage.

You could, however, argue: that contraception makes sex safe for romantic reasons or even for recreation; that overpopulation is more of a problem than under population; that the welfare state will take of individuals whose families can't or won't look after them; and that, in any case, the community has taken over many of the family's traditional rolls – preschool childcare, education, nursing the sick, looking after the elderly. Frankly many of these tasks were performed by women who did not GO OUT to work. Nowadays, it is generally considered good for women to go out to work and earn money and for other people to be paid for the work the stay at home mum used to do.

In reality, most people still seem to regard the traditional two parent family with children as the ideal, while actually living very different modern lives.

August 19th

Matthew 19 vv 10-12

What's the use of having principles you don't act on? In the last passage Jesus described what family life ought to be. He went right back to the creation story, the fundamental nature of men and women – *that a man shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh*. In today's reading the disciples suggest that, given our human weakness, if only a perfect marriage based on this principle is allowable, it would be better not to marry at all. Jesus replies that this is not possible for everyone. What is He saying? That those who really cannot keep their marriage vows should remain single? Or that even those who try their best with absolute sincerity may fail? Could it be that the ideal is lifelong heterosexual marriage, but that in the real world of flesh and blood, some people's marriages will not survive and perhaps some people are fulfilled sexually other than in heterosexual marriage? What is the point of having ideals if we don't try to live by them? But what is the point of having principles which are not only impossible to live by, but which might lead us into more harm than good if we try to live by them? What of the wife who is murdered because she refuses her husband a divorce? What of the frightened schoolgirl who commits suicide because of the shame of being pregnant? I can't say I know the answers to these questions. When we made divorce hard, women sometimes had to put up with husbands who spent all their money on drink and beat up their wives and children. When we made divorce easier, we created a situation in which many children are growing up without fathers. We've gone from putting unmarried mothers in institutions to subsidising the lifestyle of teenage girls who don't care. Where we used to spurn people who committed adultery, now we come close to celebrating it. I don't know in my head, though I know what my heart thinks? How about you?

August 20th

Matthew 19 vv 13-15

Jesus certainly loved children. One of our favourite Sunday School pictures is of Jesus in a flowery meadow surrounded by happy children. Children have every right to feel loved by Jesus. The Church, as His Body, is constrained to exhibit that love in our care for the children whom we encounter in our services and in our daily lives.

August 21st

Matthew 19 vv 16-26

Some time ago I wrote a magazine article (slightly tongue in cheek) about how maybe it isn't worth taking too much trouble to look after our bodies. Don't eat or drink anything that tastes nice. Spend time each week doing pointless exercise. Don't smoke. Take regular health checks and dose yourself up with pills against the illnesses you might one day get. I suggested that being too careful to prolong your life, you might spoil what life you actually have left. You're going to die one day anyway. You'd be better being like this young man and asking, *what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?* If you can spend two hours in the gym each week, give up cream cakes and red wine, eat salad every day and take enough pills that you rattle on the way to work, surely you can make a bit of effort towards the attainment of eternal life. Jesus says, *Keep the commandments*. The rich, young man think he's done enough, but feels quite rightly that it isn't enough. After all, he isn't a murderer or a thief. I don't suppose many readers of these notes are either. So Jesus probes deeper, *Sell that thou hast and give to the poor. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions*. The only way to eternal life is to give up yourself to God. It does amount to infinitely more than time spent in the gym, swallowing a few pills and denying yourself a few pleasures. *Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all*. Yes, it is impossible for us. *But with God all things are possible*. So come to God.

August 22nd

Matthew 19 vv 27-30

What difference does it make to be a member of a church? What do we get out of it? If we think God won't hold it against people that they never had time for Him in this life and we'll all get to Heaven anyway, what difference does it make if we give up our time, talents and money to Christian service? After all, God doesn't desire the death of a sinner. It is His Will that all men should be saved (I Timothy 2⁴). If everyone is going to be saved anyway, by the grace of God, why bother to go to church? Why spend your precious time on Christian activities? And why put a significant amount of money in the plate? I think there is a certain facetiousness in the way Jesus answers Peter's question. We're not asking for 100 houses. Knowing in God is enough!

August 23rd

Matthew 20 vv 1-16

People go on about the unfairness of this story. Why should the men who only worked for one hour be paid the same as the ones who worked all day? Primarily this parable is about the unmerited generosity of God. He gives to us what He gives us, not because we have earned it but because He loves us. My own personal interpretation, however, bears on yesterday's conundrum. If you and I are the people already working in the vineyard – never missing Church, tithing our income, giving up our time and energy to Christian work – and we are wondering about other people who are hanging around in the market place until such time as one hour's work (last minute repentance, a deathbed conversion?) will earn them a place in heaven the same as us who have worked all day, my answer would be this. Those of us who are working in the vineyard are living purposeful lives. We feel that we are achieving something worthwhile. We also know that we will receive our reward. Whereas the people idling about in the market place are bored, living meaningless lives, accomplishing nothing worthwhile and desperately wondering what they're going to eat for supper and where they're going to sleep. They'd be better off joining us now labouring in God's vineyard.

August 24th (S Bartholomew)

Matthew 20 vv 17-28

Last year on this date we celebrated the 350th anniversary of the Book of Common Prayer. Today's portion incorporates (by chance?) the Gospel for S Bartholomew's Day. It is about Jesus, the Word of God, offering Himself in self-sacrificial love. It is about His 12 apostles (including Bartholomew) living that love, proclaiming the Word by their words and deeds, by their very nature as people who followed Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life, who took up their cross and followed Him and were lifted up by Him and with Him to eternal glory. It is about how all we who are baptised, the apostolic Church, are called to do the same, to offer ourselves in love as witnesses of Christ to the world, to be exalted with Him, to the place where He has gone.

O almighty and everlasting God, who didst give to thine Apostle Bartholomew grace truly to believe and to preach thy Word; Grant, we beseech thee, unto thy Church, to love the Word which he believed, and both to preach and receive the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

August 25th

Matthew 20 vv 29-34

I first visited Jericho on a sponsored bike ride in 1996. We were escorted to the city from where we crossed the Jordan at the Allenby Bridge by a marching band of Palestinian boy scouts. That was nearly thirteen years ago and those boys must now be young men. When I hear about atrocities in Israel/Palestine today I sometimes wonder if any of those young men have been caught up in the trouble. The tragedy war brings to individuals and families and yet we human beings don't seem to be able to help ourselves. We are blind to the reality of peace. What we need is to come to Jesus the Prince of Peace so that our blindness may be cured and so that we may follow Him in the Way of the Cross, the Way which leads to everlasting life.

August 26th

Matthew 21 vv 1-11

Kings rode horses into battle and donkeys or mules when they came in peace. We may well be thinking about the enthronements of the ancient Kings of Israel here. The Lord's anointed, acknowledged as the son of God, takes his seat to rule as a shepherd over God's people – answerable to God for the safety, welfare and health of the flock, governing in accordance with God's Law for the benefit of all and for the greater glory of God, the son of God and servant of God, the shepherd of Israel. We are certainly thinking of the Exodus when God sent Moses to set His people free and to lead them first to Sinai to receive the Law and to affirm and seal the covenant, and then to lead them through the Wilderness to a land flowing with milk and honey. This is the Davidic Messiah and the prophet who would come in the place of Moses and in fulfilment of all the prophets. No wonder everybody is so excited.

Ride on, ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die;
Bow thy meek head to mortal pain, then take, O God, thy
power and reign.

August 27th

Matthew 21 vv 12-16

Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings is one of those biblical quotations which has entered the English language. Jesus is quoting Psalm 8. The point is that the innocent children can see what the sophisticated denizens of the Temple cannot and will not see.

August 28th

Matthew 21 vv 17-22

If you are alert you will have noticed that Ps 8 has *Out of the mouth of very babes and sucklings thou hast ordained strength*, whereas in yesterday's reading Jesus quoted it as *Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast ordained praise*. Our English Bibles quote Psalm 8 as it is in the Hebrew text. Matthew is reporting Jesus here as though He were quoting the Greek translation of Ps 8. Three possible explanations.

- 1) The Hebrew text we have is altered and the Greek translation is an accurate translation of the original.
- 2) Jesus quoted the psalm in its original Hebrew but Matthew looked it up in a Greek Bible when writing this Gospel for Greek-speaking Christians.
- 3) Jesus quoted the OT in Greek, which I think is unlikely at least in this particular context.

I'm telling you all this because you might be interested in the wide-ranging considerations involved in biblical studies.

Of more practical relevance, however, is the point that *praise* and *strength* are not so far apart. Psalm 149⁶ *Let the praises of God be in their mouth: and a two-edged sword in their hands.* Nehemiah 8¹⁰ *The joy of the LORD is your strength.* Matthew 21²¹ *Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith and doubt not, ye shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree, but also ye say unto this mountain, be thou cast into the sea; and it shall be done.* In loving, joyful, faithful, praiseful relationship with God we can do anything.

August 29th (Beheading of John the Baptist)

Matthew 21 vv 23-27

I'm sorry but, when I read this story, I always think of politicians wriggling on the *Today* programme. They can't give a straight answer, because they're more concerned with what people will think of them than they are with the Truth. So here the chief priests act as their own (not very impressive) spin doctors and decline to answer a question which will get them into hot water whichever way they answer it. They should have said what they really believed about John the Baptist. They were trying to trap Jesus, but in Him they could have found the Truth.

August 30th

Matthew 21 vv 28-32

Sometimes at clergy meetings we receive the latest instructions from on high about what we ought or ought not to do. If I don't think the new regulations are sensible, I usually say so. But in the end I generally obey them if I can't find a lawful way to avoid doing so. It seems to me, however, sometimes that other clergy who apparently welcome the new arrangements when we discuss them in public then don't implement them. When this happens, it makes me think of this story. The Pharisees and Sadducees made a big thing of saying that they would do what God wanted them to do. The publicans and harlots made no pretence that they were good people but they listened to John the Baptist and did what he said, whereas the Pharisees and Sadducees refused to accept that John was a messenger from God. So it turned out that the publicans and harlots were of more use to God than the Pharisees and Sadducees and had a greater claim to be citizens of heaven. People who honour God with their lips but their heart is far removed from Him (Isaiah 29¹³) have no right to call Jesus *Lord* (Matthew 7²¹⁻²³).

August 31st

Matthew 21 vv 33-46

This parable confounds those scholars who deny that parables can ever be allegories, because it quite evidently is. The vineyard is Israel. The owner is God. The people of God (the husbandmen) ought to have brought forth fruit. They should have kept His commandments, worshipping Him alone and treating other people with justice and mercy. But they didn't. The servants sent to claim the fruit were the OT prophets, who were consistently ignored and abused. The son of course is Jesus and the husbandmen slay Him. So what will the owner do? *He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out the vineyard to others.* The wicked men could be the Pharisees and Sadducees and the others might be faithful Israelites like the publicans and sinners. The wicked men could be all the Israelites and the others the Gentiles. Parables are open-ended and even with allegories, the analogy should not be pushed too far. Some Pharisees and Sadducees were converted as were many Jews. They therefore became God's heirs together with the others – the publicans, sinners and Gentiles. The quotation in v42 is from Ps 118, the Palm Sunday psalm.

September 1st

Matthew 22 vv 1-14

Dare I tell you this story? When I started in my last parish, just like when I started here, they had Mattins once a month instead of the service Jesus gave us, Holy Communion. It took a lot of persuading on my heart to get them to do what I am sure we ought to do – the Lord's own people holding the Lord's own service on the Lord's own day. It so happened that at a crucial point in these negotiations, this passage was appointed for our Sunday morning reading in Church. You may be aware that the BCP draws on it as well in an exhortation to be read when people are reluctant to come to Communion. *Ye know how grievous and unkind a thing it is, when a man hath prepared a rich feast, decked his table with all kind of provision, so that there lacketh nothing but the guests to sit down; and yet they who are called (without any cause) most unthankfully refuse to come. Which of you in such a case would not be moved? Who would not think a grave injury and wrong done unto him? Wherefore, most dearly beloved in Christ, take ye good heed, lest ye, withdrawing yourselves from this holy Supper, provoke God's indignation against you.* The parable has a much wider application than Holy Communion. It refers to all God's invitations to come into fellowship with Him in this life and the next. Those who might have been expected to respond fail. Everybody is invited, but it's a serious matter to come into the presence of God. The man without the wedding garment was thrown out. Everyone may come into the presence of God but we must come with faith and repentance.

September 2nd

Matthew 22 vv 15-22

This is one of the best known and most debated stories about Jesus. *Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.* This has been interpreted (at one extreme) as meaning that religion and politics don't mix and that our faith is a private matter with no place in government or commerce and (at the other extreme) as meaning that, since everything is God's, Caesar doesn't really come into it. I think a lot of people over-interpret a brief answer which Jesus gave to avoid another trap. We do have a duty to the world (including politics and commerce), to render unto Caesar, but we, as Christians, practise politics or commerce or anything else we do in the context of being answerable to God for everything.

September 3rd

Matthew 22 vv 23-33

A lot of people don't seem to get this. Again they are trying to trap Jesus. The custom in the OT was that if your brother died you were expected to marry his widow. She therefore would still have a home and security and your brother's share of the family inheritance would be kept within the family. The Sadducees that it makes nonsense of the doctrine of resurrection that people might be married more than once because *Therefore in the resurrection whose wife shall be of the seven?* Jesus points out that they are talking nonsense. The world which is to come is so different from this world that there won't be marriage. We shall all be one in the love of God. All our relationships will be love. It's beyond my understanding and I'm sure it's beyond your understanding. We can trust God!

Then Jesus teases them. Everybody knew that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That is how God describes Himself to Moses at the burning bush so that Moses will know Who is talking to him. Since God is the God of the living, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob must be living in Him. There is therefore resurrection. This could be more than teasing because at the burning bush God reveals Himself as YHWH, I am. God is the One Who is and Who causes everything else to be. He cannot die and neither can anyone found in Him.

September 4th

Matthew 22 vv 34-40

There were two terrible world wars in C20 in which millions of people lost their lives. The second broke out 3rd September 1939. During and after WWI there was a great deal of interest in spiritualism. People were desperate to communicate with their lost loved ones. It hardly needs saying that had we human beings obeyed God's perfect Law of Love there would have been no world war (or any other wars). Moreover, if we understand that God is love, we know that all those who love Him are one with Him and with one another in all eternity. We don't need mediums to communicate with the dead. *I believe in the Holy Ghost; The holy Catholick Church; The Communion of Saints; The forgiveness of sins; The Resurrection of the body, And the life everlasting. Amen.*

September 5th

Matthew 22 vv 41-46

This is another story a lot of people don't seem to get. The Pharisees and Sadducees have been trying to catch Jesus out. Now He quizzes them and draws out of a text they know perfectly well that the Messiah is very much greater than they imagine. He is not simply King David's great, great, great, grandson and his mission amounts to much more than re-establishing the Kingdom of Israel with its capital at Jerusalem.

The text in question is Ps 110 which refers to the King of Israel (presumably David in its original context) and also a priest after the order of Melchizedek. Kings and priests were anointed (Messiah, Christ) and before David captured the city of Jerusalem for his own capital it was ruled by men who were both priest and king (such as Melchizedek). It is obvious why the NT recognises Jesus in this psalm.

Ps 110¹ *The LORD (יהוה, Yahweh) said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand.* The second Lord is the Messiah. The person speaking (or singing) is David. So David addresses the Messiah as *Lord*. You don't call your son, *Lord*. The Messiah therefore is someone much greater than merely the son of David. Even David calls Him *Lord*. In fact the Messiah is the Son of God, the King of Kings and a priest after the order of Melchizedek.

September 6th

Matthew 23 vv 1-12

The Pharisees taught the Law. So it was a good thing to be guided by what they taught. But they didn't live by God's perfect Law of Love. They thought too much of themselves. They put themselves between God and ordinary people. They became a burden to ordinary believers and turned religion into a burden. We ought to live by the Law they taught (Love cf Matt 22³⁴⁻⁴⁰), but not to follow their example. Everyone who believes and repents may come into the presence of God and joy in the LORD is our strength.

September 7th

Matthew 23 vv 13-33

Empty religion. Going through the rituals. Talking morality. Seeing yourself as better than other people. Seeing yourself as entitled to respect. Self-satisfied if you can make converts. Ingenious in working out ways to serve yourself at the expense of others without technically breaking the rules. Appearing religious. You won't get to heaven yourself and you're putting other people off.

God is a Spirit; and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth. What we do in services is an expression of our love for Him. Our love for Him constrains us to love other people, to love other people in practice, behaving towards them with justice and mercy because our God is just and merciful. Such love in action draws to the Lord all whom He is calling, all who are ordained to salvation.

September 8th (Mary's Birthday)

Matthew 23 vv 34-39

This is back to the parable of the vineyard. Abel was of course the second son of Adam and Eve. He was slain by his brother Cain because sin entered the world with human disobedience to God. And since then, the blood-soaked story has continued. Zacharias son of Barachias is probably the same guy as Zechariah son of Jehoiada whose terrible end is related in II Chronicles 24. By accident of translation we have here an A-Z of martyrdom. What is meant is martyrdom of good people throughout human history, culminating in the Martyrdom Of Jesus Whose longing for people to repent of their wickedness and return to God to be saved is declared in the last verses of our chapter.

Abel's blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies;
But the blood of Jesus for our pardon cries.

September 9th

Matthew 24 vv 1-14

How many Hollywood films presage the end of the world? Nuclear war, global warming, solar flares. Human beings seemed to be fascinated by apocalypse. Terrible things do happen. Terrible things will happen. Eventually Heaven and earth will pass away and there will be new heavens in which righteousness dwells. The thing is to approach whatever happens in faith and hope and love because God is in charge.

September 10th

Matthew 24 vv 15-35

There are two intertwined stories here. Less than forty years after Jesus says these words, the Romans will sack the city of Jerusalem and destroy the Temple. The wise will keep their heads, take care what rumours they believe, pray and escape if they possibly can. Good advice in all the wars, famines, plagues and earthquakes that will inevitable afflict this planet. Face them with faith, hope and love.

The other story is of the end of time. There will be no doubt about that. Jesus will come again. The dead will rise. We shall all be judged. This too we can only face with faith and hope and love.

September 11th

Matthew 24 vv 36-51

This is the anniversary of the attack on the Twin Towers when so many people died as a result of the aircraft deliberately crashed into them by religious terrorists. Presumably those terrorists hoped to bring about God's Will. They expected themselves to go straight to Paradise and they thought that causing so much devastation at the heart of America – the richest and most powerful country in the world, an icon of Christianity, capitalism and secularism – would somehow hasten the day when the whole world would be subject to Allah. That isn't the way God works! God's Kingdom is established not by acts of violence but by self-sacrificial love. God's Kingdom will come when He is ready, not at a time of our choosing or even of our knowing. The fact that so many people died on what started out as an ordinary working day is also a reminder always to be ready. We don't know when we shall be called to account. We ought always to live as if we were about to stand before the Throne of God (as indeed we are.)

And there's another country, I've heard of long ago,
Most dear to them that love her, most great to them that
know;
We may not count her armies, we may not see her King;
Her fortress is a faithful heart, her pride is suffering;
And soul by soul and silently her shining bounds increase,
And her ways are ways of gentleness and all her paths are
peace.

September 12th

Matthew 25 vv 1-13

J Jeremias and C H Dodd come into their own here. This parable is not an analogy or an allegory. It does have one point and that point is about the coming of God's Kingdom. The point is that we should be ready because we don't know when the bridegroom will come. So don't worry that Jesus appears to be supporting the wise virgins in their decision not to share their oil with the foolish ones. This is not a parable about being good to other people. We'll soon come to one of those. This is about being ready for Jesus when He comes. Those who are ready for Jesus are those who are always doing good. *Blessed is that servant whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing* 24⁴⁶.

September 13th

Matthew 25 vv 14-30

Ok so we've thought of the Kingdom of God as a wedding feast and Christ as the bridegroom. Now we think of Jesus ascended into Heaven and ready to return one day as a wealthy man who goes abroad, leaving his affairs in the hands of his servants, us. A talent was a large sum of money and the talents were given *to every man according to his several ability*. So we are given gifts of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 12). Each of us has time, money, talents in the modern sense of the word, and opportunity. God has entrusted them to us. What do we make of them. Again than Jeremias and Dodd. This isn't an allegory in which God or Jesus corresponds to *a hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed*. But there is a judgment. We do have to give account to God for what we have made of the time, talents and opportunities He has given us. *All things come from you and of your own do we give you*.

September 14th (Holy Cross Day)

Matthew 25 vv 31-46

When I was at Orpington, the old peoples' club used to come to Church for an annual service and this was always the reading. There is a judgment and it is perfectly obvious what God expects of His people – to treat one another with justice and mercy, to love our neighbours as ourselves, to do as we would be done by, to think of our brother and sister human beings as our Brother Jesus in Whose image they were made and for whom He died. *Who is my neighbour?* Anyone who gives or receives love.

September 15th

Matthew 26 vv 1-5

Politicians! They want to get rid of Jesus, but they want to avoid trouble. Literally millions of people from all around the Eastern Mediterranean would have been at Jerusalem for the Passover. The Romans would have been on edge and ready to crush ruthlessly any hint of trouble. This is the Caiaphas who John tells us said, *Ye know nothing at all nor consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.* Caiaphas Jesus might start a revolution which would result in the Romans wiping out what was left of the Jewish state. He was willing to sacrifice one good man for what he considered to be the common good. (If you don't think that is morally dubious, imagine if you were the one good man or woman some politician decided was expendable for the greater good.) John notes, however, that as high priest God had given him words which he himself did not see the significance of. *He prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; And not for that nation only, but that he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad.* (us). John 11^{51&52}.

September 16th

Matthew 26 vv 6-16

When I first lived in London I very much enjoyed walking in the public parks – which are enormous and provide green lungs around the heart of the metropolis. But I used to think about how all this open land had been acquired and maintained at least initially by extremely wealthy people when thousands of very poor people were living on the verge of starvation in fever ravaged slums in the very same districts. Surely it would have been very much fairer if the royal and other parks had been shared out so that instead of extremes of riches and poverty everybody had a nice little villa with a little garden. If some C19 reformer had brought that about, there would have been no parks to enjoy and the poor as well as the rich would have missed out on them. What I am getting at is that, as Jesus says here, *ye have the poor always with you.* We have plenty of opportunities for doing good both in terms of almsgiving and, better still, working for social justice, but that does not mean that there is no room for extravagance. Justice doesn't mean a dull uniformity in which everyone has the same and no-one has anything interesting. It tipped Judas over the edge, however.

Chips with everything. That was one criticism of the Parish Communion Movement. The Mediaeval Church had come to the view that Communion was so holy that, although everyone was required to attend Mass, only the priest normally received Communion except at Easter when the laity communicated with him but only received the Bread. At the Reformation, the point was forcefully made that all Christians should receive Communion at every celebration, receiving both bread and wine, priest and people together. In England, however, people were so concerned that they might receive unworthily that celebrations of Holy Communion became very rare – only three or four a year in many places. The normal Sunday morning service was Mattins, Litany and the first part of the Communion service (the ante-Communion). Later on this was often cut back to just Mattins. People rightly approached Holy Communion with the greatest reverence. The Parish Communion Movement attempted to bring to the C of E to what Jesus apparently intended and what has always been best practice in both Catholic and Reformed circles – all Christian people participating in Holy Communion every Sunday. This frequent and regular Communion was not intended to diminish the specialness of the Sacrament. It was not intended that people should become so accustomed to regular Communion that they became less reverend – even blasé. On the contrary, it was anticipated that more frequent Communion would nourish us and enable us to mature as Christians. We should become what we ate. But, human nature being what it is, there probably has been a tendency to treat Holy Communion as something ordinary, which does not require preparation beforehand or a reverend and receptive approach to the table. There is a danger that it has become *chips with everything*. In some circles HC seems to be regarded as a bit of a bore which puts people off coming to Church. What I'm working round to is the experience that when we receive Communion as we ought to, thinking deeply of Christ's Death for us, His Presence with us and within us, this earnest of eternal life, like the apostles we find ourselves promising that we will never let Him down. Then, like them, we do let Him down, but we are restored and forgiven as often as it takes. Too easy to become blasé. Rather, let's plumb the depths of the divine love whenever we come to the Sacrament.

September 18th

Matthew 26 vv 26-35

I find it hard to relax the evening before a church meeting and to get a good night's sleep. There may be times when you find it hard to concentrate and to think of others and their needs. Maybe you have an exam tomorrow or a dentist's appointment. Quite small things prey on our minds. Yet Jesus, knowing that He was facing the full horror of crucifixion the next day, had the presence of mind, the love, to pause and institute this Sacrament for His disciples in every generation until the end of the world.

September 19th

Matthew 26 vv 36-46

For a girl I knew at college, it was Christ's agony in the garden that spoke to her of how much Jesus loved her. If He so loved her, than how could she do any less than love Him back. What is it that makes us sensible of Christ's love – so sensible of it that we know we can do nothing less than to love Him back with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength?

September 20th

Matthew 26 vv 47-56

What does Jesus endure for us? It takes some thinking about that He came down from heaven to be born of the Virgin Mary. He experienced everything we experience because the truly divine was also truly human – love, laughter and happiness, hunger, thirst and tears. He was tempted in every way that we are tempted only He remained without sin. We know that He suffered tremendous physical pain. He was treated as a criminal. The immortal experienced death for us. He was badly let down by His friends and one of them actually betrayed Him. He was the victim of the grossest miscarriage of justice there has ever been. He was flogged, mocked and spat upon as well as being crucified. We can possibly begin to imagine what all those things were like, but we cannot imagine what it meant for Him, the sinless One, to take on Himself all the sins of the whole world to the point where He cried *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* And He did it all voluntarily for us. He could have prayed the Father Who would have sent twelve legions of angels to deliver Him. Even at this point, He is the Prince of Peace Who tells Peter to put up his sword. *Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.*

September 21st (S Matthew)

Matthew 26 vv 57-68

The OT Law required at least two witnesses to substantiate a charge. Jesus had done nothing wrong. So there was no charge that could stick. The high priest's parties false witnesses naturally failed to agree and their testimony didn't stand up even in Caiaphas' kangaroo court. At last they seized on something Jesus had said about tearing down the Temple and rebuilding it in three days. This sounded like blasphemy, or at least madness, to destroy the Jerusalem Temple, Herod's magnificent edifice which was considered to be the House of God. *But he spake of the temple of his body.* John 2²¹. The true dwelling-place of God is the Body of Christ. You can take that two ways.

Caiaphas moved on to a direct challenge, *Tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God.* I'm not sure how Caiaphas understood these terms. Quite possibly he was asking if Jesus claimed to be the earthly King of Israel, but there are strong metaphysical undercurrents for those of us who really know the story. Jesus is the Son of God in a more than metaphorical sense. He is *God from God, Light from Light, true God, from true God; begotten, not made, of one being with the Father.*

Jesus answered implying that He is the Son of Man (cf Daniel 7). For us Christians the Son of Man is the Word Who became flesh, *For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man.* In Daniel, the Son of Man is exalted to Heaven to represent the people of God before the Throne of God. We can keep all these ideas in our heads as we meditate on this scene before Caiaphas.

September 22nd

Matthew 26 vv 69-75

Much of what we thought about yesterday is very hard to understand, but we can quite easily sympathise with Peter. He had promised so much and failed so badly. He had loved Jesus so much and let Him down so completely. *He went out and wept bitterly* and no wonder. The fall from grace and the bitter tears are genuine. Peter will be pardoned which is not to say that his denials did not matter but that they were forgiven. To say they didn't matter would untrue and would diminish Peter. To forgive him is to treat him as a responsible person.

September 23rd

Matthew 27 vv 1-10

Some people try to diminish the seriousness of what Judas did. They make excuses for him. Others have regarded Judas with contempt and hatred. Both of the above are wrong. What Judas did was extremely wicked. He betrayed his friend. He handed an innocent man over to a corrupt authority which Judas knew intended to get rid of Him. Although he probably didn't realise it, he handed over the Messiah to death. What Judas did was very wrong and there are no excuses adequate to exonerate him or any other sinner. But Jesus didn't treat Judas with contempt or hatred. God is always love. If we are to be like Jesus, we must love even our enemies, pray for those who hate us, do good to those who abuse us. That is the nature of God and it is our nature too insofar as we are Christians. The ultimate tragedy of Judas is that he did not return to Jesus Who, I am sure, would have forgiven even him.

September 24th

Matthew 27 vv 11-25

As the gospels tell the story, the Jews are more culpable for the Death of Jesus than the Romans. Some people think that the gospel writers were being smart here. Christianity had to survive in the Roman Empire. They wanted the Romans to see that Pontius Pilate and the Roman authorities were not against Jesus and to heap any blame on the already unpopular Jews. There is also the implication that the Jews were more culpable because they ought to have known better. They had the Law and the Prophets but how were the Romans supposed to know who the Messiah was? Jesus was innocent in Roman eyes, the victim of a Jewish plot. I see no reason to believe that this Gospel account is substantially untrue. What it does not do, however, is justify Christian persecution of the Jews. In fact many Jews (including all the first believers) did become Christians. The Jews as a body did reject their God. The whole human race as a body rejected our God. We are all equally culpable. Jesus died for each and everyone of us. My sins took Him to the Cross, as did yours. We are all equally guilty for the Crucifixion. But the Blood of Jesus washes us clean. We are forgiven. Buried with Him we are called to live His risen life. We cannot claim to be doing that, to be recreated in the image of love, if we are prejudiced against our fellow human beings and persecute them.

September 25th

Matthew 27 vv 26-37

A lot is made of the fact that Jesus was crucified as King of the Jews. So He was. That was what the Messiah was. He is also King of kings and Lord of lords. All power belongs to Him. But this is where the mistake is made. True glory is the offering of self in love. Jesus is the King Who reigns from a cross. He suffers the mockery, the scarlet robe, the reed for a sceptre and the crown of thorns. Prophecies are fulfilled and Jesus is crucified. This is the true glory, the laying down of His Life for His friends. Nobody present at Calvary understands this, but this is what divine kingship really means. This is the essence of what Jesus is, the king and high priest Who sacrifices Himself for the sins of the world, reconciling man to God so that we should have life in Him.

September 26th

Matthew 27 vv 38-49

The mockery focuses on the claim to rebuild the Temple and the titles Son of God and King of Israel and the fact that apparently God will not save Him. Surely God would save a righteous man. *Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him: I will set him up, because he hath known my Name.* (Ps 91¹⁴). This is the same psalm that the devil quotes when he tempts Jesus to jump down from the Temple right at the beginning of His ministry. All the foci of this mockery are based on the truth. The dwelling place of God will be rebuilt in three days. Jesus is the Son of God and King of Israel. The Lord does not abandon His own. But all these truths are misunderstood by unspiritual people and twisted to make it look as if Jesus were not truly the Way, the Truth and the Life. The so-called new atheists in Britain today make the same error. They fail to understand spiritual things and then they use their own misconceptions as ammunition to mock what they refuse to believe in.

September 27th

Matthew 27 vv 50-56

It is well known that the rending of the Temple veil at the instant Jesus died signified the opening of the Holy of Holies to all believers. Can we adequately appreciate what that means – not the most sacred room in the Jerusalem Temple, but the very presence of God – that we may come into the Presence of the Maker, Redeemer and Sanctifier of heaven and earth?!

September 28th

Matthew 27 vv 57-66

Sealing the stone, and setting a watch.

This is one of those Scriptures that naughty choirboys would wilfully misunderstand in the interests of humour. I suppose it isn't so funny if your battery watch doesn't need setting and you read the Bible in a more pedestrian modern translation! Anyway, the Burial of Jesus is one of the things mentioned in the Creed and St Paul makes it part of his proclamation of the Resurrection (I Corinthians 15^{4&5}). Jesus was certainly dead and buried. It wasn't that someone who was almost dead was somehow resuscitated. He definitely died for the sins of the world and God raised Him from the dead. His Body lay in the tomb while His soul or spirit descended into Hell *and preached unto the spirits which were in prison* (I Peter 3¹⁹) – the Harrowing of Hell. This is the Old English and Middle English term for the triumphant descent of Christ into hell (or Hades) between the time of His Crucifixion and His Resurrection, when, according to Christian belief, He brought salvation to the souls held captive there since the beginning of the world. (Catholic Encyclopaedia).

September 29th (Michaelmas)

Matthew 28 vv 1-15

When Jesus was tried before the high priests, it was obvious that the case against him was false because the supposed witnesses could not agree. It would have been even more suspicious if they had all said exactly the same thing. It would have been obvious that they had colluded in fabricating a lie. There are different accounts of the Resurrection in the Bible. The four gospels and Paul all describe it slightly differently. They have not colluded in a lie. But neither are their accounts so different that they cannot be trusted. They agree on all the main points – including of course the one that matters above all things – that Christ is risen from the dead!

September 30th

Matthew 28 vv 16-20

I don't know how long I've been producing these notes, but it's obviously a long time because I remember when we did Matthew before someone who moved away from this parish many years ago saying I hadn't adequately expressed the imperative of vv 19&20. I still can't think of words adequate to make the point. There is nothing I can add to what Jesus said. Teach all nations. Baptise. I am with you. That, quite simply, is our responsibility and His promise.