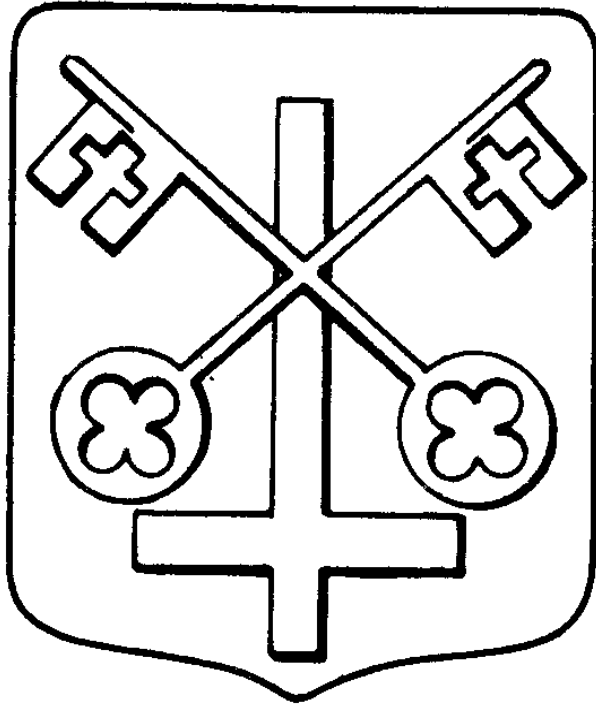


The First Epistle of St Peter



Bible Notes July - September 2014

July 1st

I Peter 1¹

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ to the strangers scattered...

How do I choose which books to look at in these notes? I do ask for suggestions from the readers, but I don't receive many. Left to myself, I try to select from what I think of as the three sections of the Bible – the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the rest of the New Testament. I try not to confine myself to what are everybody's favourite passages or even my own favourite passages. That would be to reinforce our prejudices rather than to challenge us with new ideas. On the other hand, I shy away from parts of the Bible which I think some of you might find so difficult that you give up.

Sometimes, as this quarter, I feel inspired to do a study on a book I myself am currently reading in the daily worship of the Church. This is how I came to be looking at I Peter, which I see we have not studied together like this for a long time or perhaps at all, although I do remember reading this letter in our Bible Study group, but that also must have been at least 15 years ago. There are some wonderful passages in I Peter.

There are two letters or epistles attributed to Peter in the New Testament. They are what are called catholic epistles or epistles general, in that they seem to be written to the whole of the catholic Church generally, not to any specific Christian community like Paul's letters to Rome or Corinth. Traditionally, they are believed to be the work of the apostle Peter. Some modern scholars deny this apostolic authorship, especially for II Peter, but I think that it is more profitable to take these letters at face value. If they deliberately set out to deceive by claiming an apostolic authority they do not have, what place have they in the Bible? How could they be the Word of God? And yet the Church has from early times accepted these epistles as authentic and found them to be profitable to salvation.

Peter, of course, is Simon the fisherman, brother of Andrew, the rock on which Christ builds His Church, the one who misunderstands and denies Christ, one of those privileged to share our Lord's most intimate moments, the great pastor entrusted with Christ's lambs, the first leader of the apostles and the first apostle to the gentiles, the one who is corrected by St Paul, the one who dies a martyr's death on an upside down cross. It is he who seeks to build the Church through these letters.

July 2nd

I Peter 1¹

Peter describes his readers, Christian people, as *strangers scattered*. In the original Greek, he uses the word Diaspora, which is the word used today for the Jews who are dispersed throughout the world, for the Jews who do not live in the Holy Land. Where is the home of the people of God? The people of God are at home in His Presence. For the Jews, the Holy Land is that special place. For all the people of God our true home is in Heaven. We are strangers on earth, dispersed among the nations of the world. So the question is this. Where lies our loyalty? God or mammon? The Church or the world? The eternal or the temporal? The spiritual or the material?

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve god and mammon. Matthew 6²⁴)

July 3rd (St Thomas)

I Peter 1¹

Scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia
The word apostle means *one who is sent*. Jesus is the first apostle because *God so loved the world that he sent his only-begotten Son*. Jesus sent Peter and Thomas and the rest of the twelve to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Already, in the lifetime of that first generation, the Gospel had reached all these places and, where there were Christian believers, there was a church, meeting together in Eucharistic fellowship and exercising the apostolic mission to build God's Church. So it was then and so it is today – insofar as we are prepared to cooperate with the Holy Spirit.

July 4th

I Peter 1²

Elect according to the foreknowledge of God

Just how special are you? What makes you special? Is it that you own a lovely house? Is it that you are rich? Is it that you do an important job? Or are you special because people love you? You may well be special for all these reasons, but the real reason why you are special is that God loves you. God loves you in all eternity, which means that He knew you before the foundation of the earth. He knows you now. He knows your future. It means that He holds you in His Hand and cherishes you always and forever. It means that one day you will know Him as He knows you. Then you shall see Him face to face and be made like Him. Just how special are you?

July 5th

I Peter 1²

Through sanctification of the Spirit

Christians are holy. You may not feel particularly holy. If you define *holy* as moral purity or if you define *holy* as Christlikeness, you may well not feel very holy. If, on the other hand, when you think of *holy*, the phrase *holier than thou* comes to mind, and you imagine so-called holy people who are in fact hypocrites, you may not want to be thought of as holy. Ordinary will do nicely, thank you!

The basic meaning of *holy*, however, is *set apart*, set apart for God. We are set apart for God, by the Holy Spirit. We are set apart from the world and the world's values – God, not mammon; the Church, not the world; the eternal, not the time bound; life, not self; the spiritual, rather than wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony. Only God can set us apart. Only God can make us holy. Holiness is not the same thing as goodness. Neither is holiness a reward for goodness. Only God can make us holy and we are made holy by His Spirit.

July 6th

I Peter 1²

Through sanctification of the Spirit unto obedience

That's the way round it is. First we are made holy; then we are obedient. Holiness is not goodness. Holiness is not a reward for goodness. It's the other way round. The holy become good. It is through the unmerited grace of God that we are set apart as the people of God. Being the people of God in Christ, we seek Christlikeness by His grace working in our lives.

We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.

What are these means of grace? Prayer, Christian fellowship, Holy Communion, the Bible...

And, we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, and that we show forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives; by giving up ourselves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days;

July 7th

I Peter 1²

And sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ

The children of Israel were set free from Egyptian slavery. The angel of death passed over their houses. They were baptised in the Red Sea. They were fed on what they thought of as the bread of heaven. They drank from the rock which was later interpreted as Christ. They were both protected and led by a pillar of fire and smoke, the glory of the LORD. They encountered God at Mount Sinai and there Moses was given the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law. The Israelites were a holy nation, a kingdom of priests. The LORD was their God and they were His people. They were to be holy because the LORD is holy. This is the covenant between God and His people. This covenant is signified and effected (as we say of the Sacraments of Holy Baptism & Holy Communion) by the sacrifice of burnt offerings and peace offerings at Mount Sinai (Exodus 24). The blood of the sacrifices is divided into two halves (for God and the people). One half of the blood is poured out on the altar. The other half of the blood is sprinkled on the people. Moses reads the Book of the Covenant to the people. This then is the blood of the [old] covenant [or testament]. The Blood of the New Covenant [or Testament] is the Blood of Jesus, which God shares with us in our covenant celebration of Holy Communion, because we, through Baptism in faith, through the sanctification of the Spirit, are the people of God, redeemed from slavery to sin, immune to eternal death, sustained by the Bread of Life, refreshed and invigorated by the Water of Life, guided by the Spirit, obedient to the Law of Love, sprinkled with the Blood of Christ.

[The Old Testament sometimes seems very strange, but without it you can't understand the New Testament and without understanding the Bible it is hard to see how you can grasp what it means to be a Christian.]

July 8th

I Peter 1²

Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied

This is the characteristic greeting in these New Testament letters. This is how Christians address one another *Grace unto you, and peace*. It is this kind of attitude towards one another which builds fellowship. The fellowship of the Church is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in the love of God.

July 9th I Peter 1³

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ

Jesus said that He came *that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full*. Can there be a more joyful experience than worship? What human beings are made for is to be loved by God and to love God in return. There is no greater joy than worship.

July 10th

I Peter 1³

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ

I wonder if are sufficiently awed by the thought that God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is transcendent, the infinite creator and sustainer of all that is, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and Jesus is one of us. That first Easter Day, the risen Jesus tells Mary Magdalene, *I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God and your God*. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is our God and Father. Now isn't that awesome? It's a thought I often use at funerals.

July 11th

I Peter 1³

Which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again

I've been reading an interesting book about medical ethics which tackles some of those very difficult questions we have to face about abortion, fertility treatments, embryo research, sex selection of our children, designer babies, care of the chronically sick and disabled, the questions of euthanasia and assisted suicide. It makes the point that the Bible speaks more often about human beings being begotten rather than our being made. Indeed, our brother Jesus, is quite clearly begotten, not made. Of course, unlike the Son of God, human beings are created entities. We are created by God. The Son of God is God, begotten not made. What the author is getting at, however, is that human beings are special. We are made in the image of God. He made us to be His children. He breathed into us the breath of life. We are Christ's brothers and sisters, begotten and made. The author's point is that human beings cannot be treated as commodities. We don't own our children. The state doesn't own us. We do not even own ourselves. We are not entitled to treat human beings as anything other than a gift from God. We cannot dispose of those we don't want, nor seek to manipulate other people in order to make them conform to our own specifications. Human beings are begotten to be people; we are not manufactured artefacts.

July 12th

I Peter 1³

Begotten us again

I cheated a bit yesterday by writing about how human beings are begotten of God. That means all human beings. It goes right back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden when Adam is created as the son of God. It is true, however, that it is this understanding of human nature which defines Christian ethics and ought to inform our laws and all our behaviour towards one another. We are brothers and sisters in the family of God. Everyone of us is of infinite value to our heavenly Father and is therefore of infinite value to us and that includes the severely handicapped, the really wicked, those suffering from serious dementia, and helpless babies (including I think the unborn). It includes the poor. It includes other people in other lands. It includes the rich and the vacuous. There is no limit to our calling to love our neighbour as ourselves. It follows inevitably from the command to love God with all our hearts.

What this verse is really about, however, is being begotten again. Jesus said we need to be born again, the same thing expressed another way. We need to make a new start, a fresh start. It is because we have failed to treat ourselves and to treat one another as the begotten of God that we have forfeited our inheritance. We are like the prodigal son who took the father's gifts, left home and wasted it all on a selfish life. What we need now is to be reinstated in our Father's family, to be washed clean, to be given new garments, for the family ring to be placed on our finger where it belongs. Those who repent of their sins and come to God in faith are born again. He has begotten us again. We are restored to our inheritance as the children of God.

July 13th

I Peter 1³

unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

The risen Christ told Mary Magdalene *I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God and your God.* When it says that he hath begotten us again it means that we share in His Resurrection. This is why this thought is so suitable for funeral services. *The wages of sin is death.* We have committed suicide by not acting as the begotten of God, but He has begotten us again unto a lively or living hope, the hope of life, the *sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life.*

July 14th

I Peter 1⁴

To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away

They say that death and taxes are the only two certainties in life. It is certainly true that everything we have wears out with age. We wear out with age. Whether or not taxes are certain, we shall all certainly die. So it is quite some promise that you and I have an inheritance which is *incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away.* It isn't going to wear out. We can't mislay it. We can't gamble it away or be cheated out of it by unscrupulous financial advisers. It seems to me that this takes us back to the question of why we are special. We are special because God loves us. It is He Who has begotten us into this wonderful inheritance. Everyone is special to God. Whether or not people come into this wonderful inheritance depends on their response to His love.

July 15th

I Peter 1⁴

Reserved in heaven for you.

Most lunchtimes I listen to Radio 4's *You and Yours*, a consumer affairs programme. It seems that tickets for major sporting events and concerts often present problems. Ticketing websites crash and people can't get through to order. Touts buy up vast quantities of tickets and sell them at inflated prices. Fraudsters get people to part with their money for non-existent tickets. It is all quite a palaver to get to see your favourite group or team. Isn't it rather special then to have a place already reserved in heaven for you? It makes me feel cherished by God. It makes me all the more conscious that He looks after me in this life too. And it makes me all the more ashamed that I don't live up to my status as an heir of God and a co-heir with Christ, which is what all Christians are.

July 16th

I Peter 1⁵

Who are kept by power of God

When we listen to these consumer affairs programmes, they very often interview the victims of various scams. Sometimes you think how could the victims be so stupid as to trust the scammers. Sometimes the victims realise themselves that they have been stupid. Sometimes people get caught out because they are greedy, maybe not unwilling to profit by something which might not be strictly honest or even legal. Sometimes the victims couldn't reasonably have been expected to foresee the problems. As regards heaven, thankfully, it is God looking after our interests, not we ourselves.

July 17th

I Peter 1⁵

Through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time
It is God Who guards us. What is required of us is that we trust Him, that we have faith. Faith is the gift of God. In faith, we trust God. In faith, we have that *sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life*. Faith and hope and love and the greatest of these is love. *Ready to be revealed in the last time*. Our salvation exists in God's eternal plan. It is revealed:

On that bright and cloudless morning when the dead in Christ shall rise,
And the glory of his resurrection share;
When his chosen ones shall gather to their home beyond the skies,
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.

And so will you if you are a child of God begotten through faith to this inheritance by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

July 18th

I Peter 1⁶

Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations.

I told you about the book I was reading on medical ethics. The author (John Wyatt) was very concerned to stress that human beings are not commodities. Given the way so many people look at things these days, it is easy to behave as though this world were all that there is, as though material things were all that mattered and that our behaviour can only be based on a utilitarian ethic of maximising pleasure and minimising pain. In a consumer society, human beings are both the consumers and the consumed.

As Christians we ought to know better. This world is far from all that there is. The world to come is far more important. Important as material things are, they neither last nor are they meant to last, nor do they ultimately satisfy. Pleasure is often unfulfilling. Pain is sometimes redemptive. Human beings consume to live; we don't live to consume. Any system which consumes human beings is diabolical. Our behaviour is surely to be based on our worth, not on our appetites.

Joy is inextricably tied to worship, transcending all the best and worst of this world.

July 19th

I Peter 1⁷

That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried by fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.

People are fascinated by gold. They like to see the gold store in the Bank of England and to be allowed to handle it. What always surprises is how heavy gold is. Gold doesn't rust or corrode. There are very few chemicals which react with gold. The process of refining purifies it, burning or boiling off any impurities. Gold is quite attractive to look up. Being relatively rare, it is fairly expensive. It is not too difficult to work. So it is an appropriate material for making jewellery. Gold has often been used as coins or to guarantee other forms of money such as bank notes.

Yet, you can't take it with you. You can't eat it. You can't buy happiness. You can't buy love. Durable as it is, even gold won't last forever. In fact the desire for gold is corrosive, corrosive of relationships, corrosive of a person's soul. St Paul writes, *But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.* You know it makes sense.

July 20th

I Peter 1⁸

Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory:

Money can't buy love and loving relationships are more valuable than anything money can buy. The greatest of these is our relationship with Jesus. It is marvellous. Peter had known Jesus in the flesh. He had heard His Voice, shared meals with Him, seen the miracles, witnessed the crucifixion and resurrection. Yet the people he is writing to never saw Jesus or heard His Voice. They only have the apostles' word for the miracles, etc.. Yet they know Jesus as well as Peter knows Jesus. They talk to Him. They feel His Presence in their lives. They know that He is their beginning and their end, the Way, the Truth and the Life. They know that for themselves because they have the Holy Spirit. This is what it means to be a Christian.

He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way.

July 21st

I Peter ⁸

Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory:

I felt moved to dwell on this verse a little longer by that phrase *full of glory*. An *inexpressible and glorious joy* is how the NIV translates it. Is this my experience of Christian life, I ask myself? Often I fall short of rejoicing with joy unspeakable and full of glory. My thoughts, as I go about my daily life, are often mundane or even evil. Even in Church! This very morning, as I was reading the inspired words of Scripture and saying the sublime words of the prayers and canticles in Morning Prayer, I found my thoughts wandering and wondering whether the rain would stop in time to do the washing today and whether UKIP would replicate their success in the Newark by-election and, if so, whether this would be a good or a bad thing for the governance of this country. I suppose we shall not fully and wholly rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory until we get to heaven. But, even so, it is there at the core of my being. And it is there too at the core of your being, if you are a Christian. Whatever our failings, we are the Lord's people. Certainly, we ought to pray for God's grace and to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in order to become more fully the people we already are (Christians), but, by the grace of God we are what we are and no one and nothing can take that away from us.

July 22nd

I Peter ⁸

Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory:

And yet one more meditation on this sublime verse. I am continually disappointed with the quality of Church life. I am disappointed with the quality of my own Christian life. When you think of what we believe and what we say, how can we fall short of what Isaac Watts says in that great hymn: *Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small; love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all*. Someone had seen the martyrs' memorial at Oxford to three bishops burnt at the stake by Queen Mary for their loyalty to the Protestant cause. We thanked God that we no longer burn one another because of religious differences, but I also wondered whether any of us would care enough to give our own lives for Christ? *Joy in the LORD shall be your strength!*

July 23rd

I Peter ¹⁹

Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.

To what end are you travelling? What is the purpose of your journey? Where is the end of your journey? Where will your journey finish? "End" means both finish and purpose. Destination? You travel with the end of getting there, for the purpose of getting there. Your destination is also the finish of your journey, where you end up. Conclusion? We can play with words. NIV here has *goal* in place of *end*, which possibly clarifies and possibly restricts the meaning of Peter's Greek. We are saved when we come to faith. It is God's purpose to save us and, in faith, we align our purpose in life with His purpose for our lives. We are saved in Christ and to that end, as Christians, we live. Christ is the Way. He is also the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. The end of our faith will be eternity with Jesus Christ.

July 24th

I Peter ¹⁰

Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you.

If you're into internet dating, you'll know what SBNR means when describing a potential partner. It means spiritual, but not religious. That looks like a very attractive idea. On the one hand, if there is nothing spiritual about you, you are by definition purely materialistic. Life for you is producing, consuming and dying, not a very hopeful or even interesting prospect. On the other hand, Christians burn one another at the stake, Moslems wage holy war and I'm sure you can find something obnoxious about any of the world's major religions. Besides, religion restricts your life. You are expected to take part in worship and philanthropy. There are too many *Thou shalt not*s. So why not be spiritual, but not religious? Why not make up your own faith? Hold to the principles which you feel are life affirming and right for you and discard all the dross that millions of people have believed for thousands of years. Pick and choose from world religions and new age philosophies. Integrity and Truth? If God exists, He exists as Who and what He is. You can't create your own god. If God exists, there really are obligations such as worship and philanthropy. If God is love, there are inevitably *Thou shalt not*s and indeed *Thou shalt*s. It is God Who reveals God as He is. Peter and the apostles did not make up the Christian religion. It is the fulfilment of what God revealed through the prophets.

July 25th

I Peter 1¹¹

Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should be revealed.

A few decades after Peter wrote this letter a guy called Marcion had a go at inventing his own religion or, anyway, at adapting Christianity to suit himself and his followers. He rejected the Old Testament and most of the New Testament, keeping only the Gospel of Luke and the letters of Paul. He found the OT hard to understand and much of it repellent – bloodthirsty and harsh. If he found religious doctrines hard to understand or repulsive, then he just “knew” that they must be wrong. The early Church, however, rejected Marcion. He had got it wrong. It is God Who reveals Himself. It is not we who decide what an acceptable God would be like. Supremely, God reveals Himself in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Jesus is God and when you know Jesus, you know the Father. To know God is to have eternal life. The context of Jesus is that He is the fulfilment of God’s revelation of Himself in the Law and the Prophets (what we call the Old Testament). At a fundamental level, the Old Testament is about Jesus. We understand Him in the light of the OT; we understand the OT in the Light of Jesus. The New Testament likewise bears witness to Jesus and Jesus interprets the NT. We need to read the whole of the Bible if we are to make sense of our faith and it is only in making sense of our faith that we can make sense of the world.

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

July 26th

I Peter 1¹²

Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into.

An atheist recently claimed that the New Testament was the finest political manifesto ever written. He may well be right. Jesus means many things to different people. Rightly so. Christ is all in all. What we must never lose sight of, however, is that Jesus is the origin, fulfilment and culmination of God’s eternal purpose for the entire Creation. It is for the angels to look into. What the people of the OT had was authentic, but it was partial. What we have, Whom we have is Jesus, in Whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily. Jesus is preached to us in the Gospel which is the work of the Holy Spirit Whom God has sent down from heaven for that very purpose. This is the extent of our privilege and I suppose it is that very privilege which makes it both astonishing and disappointing that we do not live up to this wonderful truth. We have that truth at the core of our being here and now. In heaven we shall be wholly conformed to that truth. Couldn’t we aspire to be more heavenly here on earth? *Thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven.*

July 27th

I Peter 1¹³

Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Live up to your Christian calling. Occasionally I am subjected to little digs regarding my use of the King James Version of the Bible. In a way, it is verses like this which illustrate the dilemma. The KJV uses unfamiliar imagery and seems difficult to understand. On the other hand, the language is very powerful, just as Peter’s Greek is very powerful. The modern translations come across (at least to me) as weak and Peter’s words are not weak. Meaning is carried in the language, the vocabulary and grammar, as well as in the actual literal meaning of the words used. Live up to your Christian calling. Just like a soldier going into battle or a workman beginning a difficult and arduous task, prepare every fibre of your being for the struggle. Discipline yourself for the work in hand. Live your whole life in the context of its heavenly goal. There you see. I can’t put it anything like as well as St Peter.

July 28th

I Peter 1¹⁴

As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance.

I expect that most readers of these notes were brought up in a Christian home. You probably were probably taught the Christian religion in Religious Instruction at school. Britain thought of itself as a Christian country. So, even if you were not a Christian yourself, even if you were someone who did not know the Lord Jesus, you probably tried to live in accordance with Christian ethics, a Christian moral code. Peter is writing to people who were brought up as pagans or Jews. They did not know how the people of God were expected to behave and they had to learn. So their everyday lives as Christians were quite different from their former lives and the lives of their pagan friends, families and colleagues. This gives us three points to consider.

1. That young adults in Britain today were not brought up in a Christian culture in the sense that we were and may have to make far bigger changes in their lifestyle on becoming Christians.
2. The danger of our being complacent and assuming that being a Christian is much the same thing as being a decent English man or woman. Christ demands much more than that.
3. To be alert to the question of where to make a stand? Abortion? Euthanasia? Living together? Homosexuality? Divorce? Euthanasia? On all these issues modern Britain has diverged significantly from traditional Christian thinking. Some Christians think that the Church should move with the times and that the Holy Spirit speaks through the zeitgeist, the spirit of the age. Other Christians think that the world has gone astray and that we need to remain faithful to what the Church has always believed that the Bible teaches on these subjects. What do you think?

July 29th

I Peter 1¹⁵

But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation.

The NIV is probably better here. *Be holy in all you do.* To be holy is to be separate, separate from the world, separate for God, separate like God. To me, this helps to answer question 3 from yesterday's notes. We decide how to live in the light of God, not the world's light, Holy Spirit, not zeitgeist.

July 30th

I Peter 1¹⁶

Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.

The quotation referred to is what God says to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. *Be ye holy; for I am holy.* It goes with, *I will be your God; and ye shall be my people.* Peter here is identifying Christian people with the people of God, just like Israel of old. We are heirs of the promises. We are obligated to keep the commandments. *These things I command you, that ye love one another.* We are holy because God is holy. We are to be like Him and God is love.

This throws further light on question 3 from two days ago. In interpreting the Bible's teaching for this generation, the principle, as always, is love. On the one hand, I do not believe that love simply means giving people everything they want. People want a lot of things which are good neither for themselves nor for other people. On the other hand, a cold, clinical interpretation of the commandments without love betrays the whole purpose of the commandments. We take our moral direction from the Bible and the Church's teaching, but we cannot do so faithfully if we make ourselves deaf to what the world is telling us that its needs are.

July 31st

I Peter 1¹⁷

And if ye call on the Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear.

Superficially, the notion of God as Father and the notion of God as one to be feared are incompatible be with one another. The lazy Christian who doesn't read the Bible assumes that the NT God is an indulgent Father whereas the OT God is a God of wrath to be feared. The truth is that in both the Old and New Testaments, God is a God both of mercy and of justice. Justice and mercy are two sides of the same coin. They are indivisible. It is because God is merciful that He is just and He is merciful because He is just. Wrong-doing, sin, has consequences. That is why it is wrong. Sin hurts people. Justice demands that the victims are vindicated and the sinners punished. Mercy demands that the victims are vindicated and the sinners punished. Mercy also seeks a way to pardon the sinner, but not at the expense of justice. We are all sinners and the victims of sin. We depend on a God of mercy and of justice, a Father Who is also to be feared.

August 1st

I Peter 1¹⁸

Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers.

In the ancient world, redemption meant buying back a slave to set him free. A slave might somehow save the money to buy his own freedom or a family member or friend might buy him back, pay the purchase price, redeem him. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt and God redeemed them. Without God, human beings are slaves to all sorts of things. We are slaves to sin and the fear of death. We may be slaves to fashion or public opinion. We may be slaves to tradition. We may be slaves to the lust for power or money, slaves to gluttony, alcohol, gambling or sexual lust. We may even be enslaved to false religion with its false promises of salvation through good works or ritual. Slaves to the devil. A slave in the ancient world would be redeemed for money, gold or silver, which are ultimately worthless. They belong to this world and this world will pass away with everything in it.

August 2nd

I Peter 1¹⁹

But with the precious blood of Christ, as a lamb without blemish and without spot.

This gets a bit complicated, especially if people don't know their OT. When the Israelites were redeemed from slavery in Egypt, they kept the Passover, sharing a sacrificed lamb with their family and neighbours. That night, all the first born of Egypt died. The first born both of animals and of people belonged to God. First born lambs were sacrificed. First born sons were redeemed with the sacrifice of a lamb. Sacrifices had to be animals of the best quality, *without spot or blemish*. You can't offer to God the second rate, keeping the best back for yourself. Jesus is the first born Son of God. He is our Passover Lamb. He is without spot or blemish. We are the children of God, redeemed by Jesus, the Lamb of God. Unlike silver or gold, the Blood of Jesus is incorruptible. Its shedding is of eternal significance. Christ's death happened once and for all at a particular time and in a particular place, but its effectiveness transcends the cosmos. Good Friday overcomes death for ever. We are redeemed from all our slaveries for eternal life as children of the heavenly Father and sheep in the flock of the Good Shepherd. An ancient slave would have been overjoyed at being redeemed from slavery to an earthly master for gold. So what about us?

August 3rd

I Peter 1²⁰

Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you.

Jesus is God's eternal plan. The incarnation is not God's Plan B when Plan A (the Garden of Eden) went wrong. When God created the universe, when God created the creation, it was always the plan that the Word would be made flesh, that Jesus would die on the cross and ascend into Heaven and that the Holy spirit would be poured out on the Church and the world. This astonishing thing is that this is *for you*, for Peter and his readers, for you and for me. If God loves me this much, why should I worry about anything? If God loves me this much, why should I not love Him?

August 4th

I Peter 1²¹

Who by him do believe in God, that raised him up from the dead, and gave him glory; that your faith and hope might be in God.

I was recently speaking with another minister of religion about how sad it is that people do not believe. The world is such a wonderful place. How could there not be a God? The commandments are so obviously the only way to live. How can people disregard them? Relationships are so precious. How can anyone doubt the Father of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named? Why do people ignore the Bible when it is so freely available? Why won't people listen to the testimony of those who have faith? Why don't people acknowledge the power of prayer even as they pray? The answer is that we cannot have faith unless God gives us faith by His grace. So, if we want to see people come to faith, if we want to see our churches grow in number, we not only have to witness to other people; we also have to pray for them.

August 5th

I Peter 1²²

Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently.

Jesus is the Truth. His commandment is that we should love one another. A Church which is a loving fellowship builds up its members into the full stature of Christ and commends the Gospel to the world.

August 6th

I Peter 1²³

Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.

In the end it is a question of what really matters in life? What will endure? Do I need to list the things which occupy so much of our time, energy and attention? The details of the list would be different for all of us, though I am sure that there would also be many items the same on most people's lists. But what really matters in life? What will endure? What therefore demands our time, energy and attention?

August 7th

I Peter 1²⁴

For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass.

The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away.

Peter here is quoting Isaiah 40. It is obviously true. Psalm 103^{15&16} expresses this reality similarly: *The days of man are but as grass: for he flourisheth as a flower of the field. For as soon as the wind goeth over it, it is gone: and the place thereof shall know it no more.* So obviously true. Sometimes these words are used at funeral services. My father thought they were quite depressing. Of someone's life, *the place thereof shall no it no more.* So true and so sad. But the next verse is *But the merciful goodness of the Lord endureth for ever and ever upon them that fear him: and his righteousness upon children's children.* One day I shall die and in a few decades after that my name will just be a name on the list of former rectors and vicars of Cuxton & Halling and perhaps someone my niece's grandchildren vaguely remember being talked about when they themselves were children. But, because of the merciful goodness of the Lord, I shall live for ever and the works I have built on Jesus Christ as the foundation will be revealed (I Corinthians 3¹¹⁻¹³).

August 8th

I Peter 1²⁵

But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the Gospel is preached unto you.

But the word of the Lord endureth for ever is part of the Isaiah 40 quotation. Peter adds the rest himself. God's Word is an absolute guarantee of His promises. God's Word is the Gospel which has been preached to us and we have received. *Because of the merciful goodness of the Lord, I shall live for ever and the works I have built on Jesus Christ as the foundation will be revealed* is an incredibly daring thing to say, but God Himself is my guarantor.

August 9th

I Peter 2¹

Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speaking,

Why do we need to be malicious, dishonest and hypocritical? It is because we are not content with our lives. We need to look better than we are. We need to feel that we are better than other people. We need more possessions, more power, more status. We are not satisfied with being the people we are. It is perfectly natural that people who do not know God should be dissatisfied with their lives. Only God can satisfy our deepest needs as human beings. Possessions, power and status are delusions, false gods, vanities, that can never satisfy. They don't fulfil us in this life. The more we have, the more we want. We shan't be able to take them with us. But, it is different, for Christians. By His grace, we do know God in Jesus Christ. We have eternal life. We have everything we need in Him. We don't need possessions, power or status (except insofar as we must live and perform the duties of our position in life). So we do not need to be malicious, dishonest or hypocritical. [If you'd like further reading on these themes, see Isaiah 55.]

August 10th

I Peter 2²

As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.

Breastfeeding always seems to be in the news. Health professionals try to persuade young mothers that breast is best. There are campaigns to discourage the sale of formula milk in developing countries where it is likely to be made up with less than pure water and in the wrong strength (because of the price), so that mothers may be spending money they can't afford on a product they don't need which might actually harm their babies. Then there are complaints about breastfeeding in public in this country and complaints about breastfeeding in public not being allowed. Infant nutrition is obviously a very important subject and the health and future development of the child depend on getting it right. What we need to thrive and grow spiritually (the growth that really matters) is the Word of God. Babies demand to be fed. They are hungry and they make a fuss until they get what they need. We ought to be the same for the Word of God. Finally, babies are innocent. So should Christians be.

August 11th

I Peter 2³

If so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious.

Occasionally you get a budgerigar chick which hatches from the egg and does not start to feed. Presumably, like the other chicks, it is hungry, but it doesn't know what to do about it. It has never learned the virtues of birdseed! Usually the problem is solved when it sees another bird eat. Then it discovers that it enjoys eating and that birdseed takes away those hunger pangs and gives it the energy to keep warm, to fly, to clamber round its cage, to ring its little bell and to fight its image in the mirror. It isn't likely to go off its seed unless it becomes sick. If it doesn't recover its appetite, it will soon die.

August 12th

I Peter 2⁴

To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God and precious.

Animal, vegetable or mineral? Animals and plants live. Stones don't. So what is Peter saying here? Trying to understand Jesus, the NT quite often uses rocks and stones as analogies. God is our rock. He is strong and powerful. You can rely on Him. He is our defence. Jesus is all of these things. During the forty years in the wilderness, the Israelites obtained water from the rock. Christ is the rock from Whom living water (the Holy Spirit?) flows. Christ is our foundation stone. He is also the head stone in the corner. Either way, the whole structure depends on Him. He is the stone from Psalm 118 which the builders rejected, the Messiah unrecognised by the authorities, Who turns out to be King of Kings and Lord of Lords. All this is true of Christ. But living stone? Hold on to that thought. Jesus is neither dead nor inanimate. He is the resurrection and the life – the source of life and life itself.

August 13th

I Peter 2⁵

Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the Son of God. Christians are His brothers and sisters, the children of God. We are (or at least we are becoming) as He is. In Him God dwells. He is the Temple. He is the priesthood, offering the sacrifice acceptable to God. He is the living stone. In Him, we too are all those things.

August 14th

I Peter 2⁶

Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold I lay in Sion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded.

I saw a film yesterday made in London in 1947. It looked as if the corner of the Old Bailey had been damaged by a bomb. Those of you who remember (or who have seen pictures of) the Blitz will know what war can do to a city – people killed and injured, buildings destroyed, infrastructure damaged with the threat of food shortages and diseases caused by disruption to the water supply and sanitation. In OT times, the city of Jerusalem was threatened by the Assyrian army (which destroyed many of the surrounding cities, towns and villages) and was twice besieged by the Babylonians, the second time leading to the destruction of the wall, temple and other principal buildings and the deportation of a considerable proportion of the population. In Isaiah 28, the prophet condemns the rulers of Jerusalem who have put their trust in false promises, false gods and treaties with unreliable allies. All these foolish stratagems are doomed to fail. The city can only be saved by trust in God. The people have rejected God and that is the reason all these troubles have come upon them. God has not, however, rejected them. Through the prophet Isaiah, God promises *Behold I lay in Sion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded*. Peter understands this to mean something much more profound than the deliverance of old Jerusalem (important as that was for the people of those times); God's promises are finally and fully fulfilled in Jesus. Christ brings an eternal and complete deliverance to all who believe in Him throughout the world in all time and eternity.

August 15th

I Peter 2⁷

Unto you therefore which believe he is precious

There is a nice story about an old man who was dying. He asked one of his friends to read a particular verse from the Bible. The friend only got as far as the first word of the verse, *Jesus*. For the old man, that was enough.

August 16th

I Peter 2⁷

But unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner.

The NIV has capstone for head of the corner. It is the keystone on which the whole arch depends. Recently I was telling the story in church of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who were thrown into a fiery furnace for refusing to bow down and worship Nebuchadnezzar's golden image. In the furnace there was a fourth man with them, described by Nebuchadnezzar as being *like the Son of God*. The men are released from the furnace unharmed and the point was made that there is only one true God and that they were right to refuse to worship a false god. It occurred to me that, if the same thing happened in modern Britain, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, on coming out of the fiery furnace, would promptly have been set upon by the diversity police for failing to respect Nebuchadnezzar's religious beliefs. In the space of a few decades, we seem to have changed from being a country in which the Ten Commandments were respected (if not always obeyed) into a country in which the only absolute principle is tolerance. Now evidently tolerance is an extremely good thing, but can tolerance really be the only absolute principle? Are there no other standards, no other right and wrong? Is there no such thing as truth? If we accept that the Christian religion is true, then certain other things cannot be true. As today's verse states. There are consequences to believing falsehood. Christians, therefore, must bear witness to the truth and refuse to compromise with lies. The devil is the father of lies. If that means, like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, standing up to authority and taking the consequences, we owe it not only to God, but also to the Nebuchanezzars of this world.

August 17th

I Peter 2⁸

And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient.

Christ creates division. The very fact that He is forces a choice. Are you for Him or against Him? Do you come to the Truth or do you evade it? Do you repent of your sins or wallow in them? Do you want to be like Jesus or don't you? Are you a child of God or not? Do you desire eternal life – not merely to live for ever, but to live for ever a life consumed by love? Or would you rather live in this world by this world's rules. The fact of Christ forces you to choose.

August 18th

I Peter 2⁸

Whereunto also they were appointed

We're back to the point that men and women can only come to God through Christ by the grace of God. We're not clever enough or perceptive enough or good enough to discover God for ourselves. We are not capable of recognising our own need for God, the depths of our sinfulness and its consequences. It is only God Who can bring anyone to saving grace. And, yet, paradoxical as it is, choices are real. It is God's commandment that we preach the Gospel. We can fail to do so and, if we do, we bear the responsibility, the guilt for the fate of those who were not warned. If we obey God's commandment to spread the Word, it is the hearers' responsibility whether or not they obey.

I heard recently of churches who say, that as it is all down to God, they don't have to go out into the world and tell people about Jesus. Those whom God is calling will just come into the churches. That isn't the New Testament model. The apostles go out into the streets and the Lord adds to the church daily such as should be saved (Acts 2). What are we doing to spread the word?

I think we sometimes treat membership of the Church as though it were a personal choice, a personal choice with no real consequences. Can that really be so, knowing what we know of God?

August 19th

I Peter 2⁹

But ye are a chosen generation

Meditate on that. The Church isn't a human institution at all. Well it is in the sense that it is made up of human beings. It is a human institution in the sense that it owns property and deals with money, holds meetings, takes minutes, etc.. It is a human institution in the sense that it is human beings who preach, teach, sing, pray, witness, offer pastoral care, baptise, break bread, work for the transformation of society, cut the grass and wash the dishes. But really the Church is the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit. It is as living stones, as parts of the Body that we preach, teach, sing, pray, witness, offer pastoral care, baptise, break bread, work for the transformation of society, cut the grass and wash the dishes. The Church is not a voluntary society. We are a generation chosen of God.

August 20th

I Peter 2⁹

A royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people Peculiar people. The Greek means a people for God's own possession, a people in God's keeping. *Royal priesthood, holy nation.* These phrases come from Exodus 19⁶, where they describe Israel, the people of God, at Mt Sinai. We Christians are the people of God. We experience the theophany, the manifestation or revelation of God. Jesus is the revelation of God. The Holy Spirit bears witness of Him to us. We have access to the Father through Jesus. We mediate God's blessings to the world through the Holy Spirit. We are the sons and daughters of the King; we are brothers and sisters to the Prince. We belong to the royal household. We are God's own possession.

August 21st

I Peter 2⁹

That ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

The Church is a philanthropic society whose members happen to like re-enacting ancient rituals. The point of the Church is to do good in the world. The point of the Church is to make us feel good. Churchgoers tend to be people who find that re-enacting old rituals makes them feel better and inspires them to be better citizens.

Or

Dynamic worship is what the Church exists for. Dynamic worship empowers personal transformation, builds the Church, inspires witness and loving service, makes us the light of the world, the salt of the earth and the leaven which leavens the lump.

August 22nd

I Peter 2⁹

That ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

This is one of my favourite verses, which I am inclined to quote when I am preaching or praying extempore. It really is wonderful that this is what we are doing, here and now and in all eternity. It is the very best. This is what worship is really about and the spirit (Spirit) in which to approach our Sunday Eucharist, daily prayer and whatever else we may do.

August 23rd

I Peter 2¹⁰

Which in time past were not a people but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.

Who were Peter's original readers? Fairly new converts to Christianity presumably. He addresses them as people familiar with the Scriptures, which might suggest that they were Jews. He addresses them as the Diaspora, with the same implication. On the other hand, verses such as this seem to imply that they were gentiles, formerly not part of the people of God, but, now, as St Paul says, grafted into the people of God, as part of God's eternal plan in Christ through the preaching of the Gospel to all nations. Of course, Peter might mean even of his Jewish readers that they had not come to the fullness of their inheritance as the people of God until they had come to know Christ. In the *Nunc Dimittis* Simeon talks about Jesus, *thy salvation Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.* Time after time, in the Old Testament, the Israelites had rebelled against God. The history of Israel was typical of the history of the human race. God remained faithful to a faithless people. This sorry history culminates in the crucifixion of the Son of God, but, in God's faithfulness, this turns out to be the means of salvation of both Jew and gentile.

Whoever Peter's original readers were, it remains marvellous that we, whatever our background, have been incorporated into the people of God by the Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ – not at all on our merits, but wholly on His.

August 24th

I Peter 2¹¹

Dearly beloved

On 24th August 1662, the Book of Common Prayer was reinstated in English parish churches for use at every service. *Dearly beloved* is frequently used (as it is by Peter here [NIV, *dear friends* is weak for a word derived from the Greek *agape*, love, the very nature of God, and the characteristic relationship between believers and God, God and believers, believers and one another, God and the world]) in the BCP for the relationship between minister and people. It sounds quaint. It perhaps becomes meaningless with over use. But, for all that, it ought to be true. Love is the relationship between people and people and people and God.

August 25th

I Peter 2¹¹

I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims

Both the nouns in this clause mean people who are not at home. Why does Peter address his readers as people who are not at home? They are at home in *Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia*, just as we are at home in Cuxton or Halling or wherever. Only we are not at home. Our home is in heaven. This used to be our home, but now we have a new citizenship, new passports. We are resident aliens on earth. Do you remember in Jeremiah? After Nebuchadnezzar carries away a large proportion of the population of Jerusalem to exile in Babylon, God tells Jeremiah to write to the exiles. They are to settle down. They are to be good neighbours to the people of Babylon. They are to build houses and plant gardens. They are to pray for the peace of Babylon. But they are not Babylonians, and one day, *the redeemed of the LORD shall return and come with signing unto Zion*. That is what it means to be a Christian living in this world.

August 26th

I Peter 2¹¹

Abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul.

Peter isn't just talking about sex. *Fleshly* means worldly, unredeemed humanity, the natural behaviour of fallen human nature. It does include sexual immorality. It is quite horrifying that, in a world which has forgotten God, sex has become a dominating, but ultimately meaningless, pastime, less concerned with the surrender of self to the beloved and the procreation of new life in mutual love, than a basically selfish recreation. *Fleshly lusts* also includes all the selfish, unloving desires which human beings pursue in a desperate search for meaning because their lives without God are essentially meaningless. *Fleshly lusts* is more all encompassing than NIV *sinful desires*, unless we realise that anything which falls short of Christ-like love is in fact sin. Christians don't need to seek meaning and purpose without God, because in Christ we find everything we need. We don't need status, power or wealth. We don't need to be better than anyone else. We don't need to be admired and respected. We can afford to abstain from *fleshly lusts* because *all are yours; And ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's*. (I Corinthians 3^{22&23}).

August 27th

I Peter 2¹²

Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles.

Roughly speaking, in the OT there are the people and the nations. The people are Israel, the people of God. The nations are the gentiles, the ones who are not the people of God. Implicit in the Old Testament, however, is that God is the God of the whole earth, the nations (or gentiles) as well as His people (Israel). The gentiles are depicted in the OT as sharing in the ultimate salvation. What is implicit in the OT, is explicit in the NT. Jesus is a light to lighten the nations and the glory of God's people Israel. So the Gospel is to be preached to all nations (gentiles). Through the preaching of the Gospel, people of all nations share in God's salvation with Israel. They are grafted into the people of God. They form a new Israel. So we have seen how Peter encourages his Christian readers to regard themselves now as the people of God. Having identified Christians as the people, Peter now uses the word *gentiles* to mean those human beings who are neither Christians nor Jews. NIV translates this as pagans, but misses the subtlety of what is going on here – a transformed understanding of what it means to be God's people, to share the faith of Abraham, rather than his genes.

August 28th

I Peter 2¹²

Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles.

So we don't belong here anymore. Heaven is where we belong. We are citizens of heaven. We are in the world, but not of the world. The word translated *conversation* here means conduct in general. We live in the world, but our values are the values of heaven. The unbelieving people we live among (gentiles) may well live according to their *fleshly lusts*. They have nothing else to live for. If we are recent converts, they may well be surprised that we no longer live in accordance with our *fleshly lusts*. We may well feel that our lives would be easier if we did. No one wants to stand out as different or odd, peculiar in the modern sense. Perhaps we are not so confident in our faith that we feel we can let go and let God. We want to remain friends with the gentiles. We have to work with them, socialise with them etc., but there are several reasons for not giving into them: we would dishonour God; we would pollute our own souls; we would fail as witnesses to the gentiles of the glory of God; we would give them real reasons to persecute us. No one likes a hypocrite!

August 29th

I Peter 2¹²

That, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.

People can be uneasy about aliens living among them. One of the reasons that the Egyptians enslaved the Hebrews was that they did not trust this large ethnic minority living in their midst. For similar reasons, the Jews have been persecuted down through the ages. We are uneasy today perhaps about minority communities living among us. (A great deal could be said about that, but whatever we think about immigration, multiculturalism, etc., it is clear that the Bible requires us to look after the resident alien. After all, we too are resident aliens!) Because we have different values, because we do not really belong to this world, we may stick out. We may seem a bit odd. We may seem a threat. So people do say nasty things about Christians and may persecute us. If, however, we live up to the values of God's Kingdom, people will have no reason to abuse us. They may thank God for our help if we visit the sick, relieve debt, run food banks, etc.. They may even be converted by our love and our prayers.

August 30th

I Peter 2^{13&14}

Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether to the king, as supreme, Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.

Of course Peter here is talking about the pagan Roman emperor, not a Christian king. It might well be tempting as resident aliens, not of this world, citizens of heaven, to think that we need not abide by the laws of the country in which we happen to live. Supposing that the law of the land does not specifically attempt to force us to acting against our Christian conscience, here are some reasons why we should resist that temptation.

1. The powers that be are ordained of God. Almost every government is better than anarchy, which is what you get if every man does what is right in his own eyes.
2. The basic laws of most countries are the laws all decent people would want to live by – prohibiting violence and dishonesty.
3. You aren't going to win against the powers that be.
4. If you disregard the laws and customs of the country in which you live, you are inviting people to distrust, dislike and persecute you.
5. It would harm your Christian witness to be a rebel.

August 31st

I Peter 2¹⁵

For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men.

It can be very frustrating trying to talk to people about the faith. They think they know what we believe and they don't like it. They are so sure of themselves that they won't listen when we try to tell them otherwise. They remain ignorant because they are too foolish to look at the evidence and reconsider their position. *The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God.* After all, churchgoers are psalm-singing hypocrites. You don't have to go to Church in order to be a Christian. The clergy take advantage of people's gullibility. The Church has plenty of money. It's hard nut to crack, but the ignorance of foolish men is best countered by well doing, rather than by vain arguments.

September 1st

I Peter 2¹⁶

As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God.

How much freedom do you give your children and at what age? When are they old enough to be allowed out on their own? How old do they have to be to be allowed to light the fire or to work with sharp tools? Do you need to regulate their internet access. Freedom is worrying. You don't want your children to hurt themselves or to hurt other people. And yet you do want them to grow up, to be able to take responsibility. Freedom is a good thing. People have given their lives fighting for freedom. Yet we don't entirely trust adults, either. Every society has laws and means of enforcing its laws. Britain has more CCTV per head of population than any other country in the world. It is not so much that British people are intrinsically less trustworthy than foreigners; it is that we have lost the ability to trust one another, the willingness to take risks of any kind.

So people worried even in NT times that Christian freedom, freedom from the Law, freedom from the fear of death, the liberty of the sons of God, would lead to anarchy. If we don't fear punishment, what is to stop us doing just as we please and, being human, what we please might be bad. We might even use the fact that we are justified by grace as an excuse. But not if it is our character to be servants of God.

September 2nd

I Peter 2¹⁷

Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.
These words are very well known and are sometimes used in Church of England services, although I cannot find an official text in BCP or Common Worship which makes use of them except when this passage is appointed for the Epistle at the service on the anniversary of the accession of the sovereign. It is worth remembering that St Peter is referring to the Roman emperor, not a Christian sovereign. So what are Peter's instructions to Christians? We are to honour everyone, not just fellow Christians. All human beings are made in the image of God. That is our dignity, our worth. Fellow Christians are special. We are a family, a brotherhood. Love ought to be our characteristic virtue. See reading July 31st for why God is both our Father and One Whom to fear is the beginning of wisdom. Again we are to honour our rulers, even if they are not Christians. They epitomise society. They bear heavy personal responsibility. Their function is indispensable to civic society.

September 3rd

I Peter 2¹⁸

Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also the froward.

This is a difficult text for us. Thank God, we live in very different times from the days of the Roman Empire. We can join a union. We are free to leave one job and take another. If we don't find another job, the welfare state won't let us starve. We don't have, perhaps, to put up with bad employers. We may bridle a bit, thinking that in the past bad employers have used texts like these to teach their servants to know their place. Wouldn't it be better advice to an oppressed employee to stand up for his rights? All that is true and if you can get the union on your side or find another job or go to an employment tribunal there is no reason why you should not do so. However, it is right to do a fair day's work for a fair day's pay. It is right to be honest and conscientious. It is right to do your duty to bad people as well as to good. And if you are powerless? If you can't get another job? If you can't get the support of a union or a tribunal to help you to deal with a bad employer, what do you do then? Is there strength in the assurance of this text? Surely you can find comfort in your knowledge of God.

September 4th

I Peter 2¹⁹

For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully.

It's easy to be cheerful when everything is going well. This morning the weather is damp and relatively cool. Somehow, I got all behind with my work this morning. When I tried to log on to my BT account I had forgotten the password and their website isn't satisfied with my answer to the security question. So I can't find out what my telephone bill is. I've just made a lovely Victoria sponge – which fell to bits when I tried to get it out the tin. So I'm feeling grumpy. Most of my troubles are pretty trivial like these examples. It may well be that many of your troubles are trivial too when you think what some people have to face up to. It is important to keep a sense of proportion!

September 5th

I Peter 2²⁰

For what glory is it, if when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? But if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God.

Taking his punishment like a man. We do admire people who are brave in the face of punishment or adversity even if it is deserved. In fact we may have little respect for people who whinge on about it when they get what they deserve. *If you can't do the time, don't do the crime.* Sometimes a person with a serious illness, will say, they have got what they deserved after years of smoking or drinking. It is much harder to understand when people suffer undeservedly. Undeserved suffering may be harder to bear. What did I do to deserve this? Yet the sufferings of Jesus were undeserved and, whatever happens to us, we can bring our troubles to God through Him, in the knowledge that He understands.

September 6th

I Peter 2²¹

For even hereunto were ye called because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example that ye should follow his steps.

Peter is really talking about martyrdom here. He reminds us that Jesus is the first martyr. A martyr is a witness. That's what the word martyr means. The supreme witness is to lay down your life. You can't give more than that.

September 7th

I Peter 2²²

Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth.

We're often unaware of the numbers of Christians in the world today being persecuted for their faith. I can't help suspecting that it is considered politically incorrect to report the sheer extent of persecution of Christians by militant members of other faiths, especially by Moslems. Christians are also persecuted in communist countries. Jesus sets the example to us all. He is blameless Himself and He prays for His persecutors. He instructs us to pray for our persecutors. Because we are one body with Christians throughout the world, one family, when one suffers we all suffer. It is a central tenet of our Christian calling that we pray for our persecutors.

That it may please thee to forgive our enemies, persecutors, and slanderers, and to turn their hearts: *We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.*

September 8th

I Peter 2²³

Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.

You might not answer back because you are afraid to. For the same reason, you might not defend yourself. Or you might defend yourself, vigorously, not caring how much you hurt your aggressor. Or you might deliberately hurt your aggressor in order to obtain revenge. Jesus did none of these things. He was not afraid. He loved His enemies. There was no viciousness in Him. He trusted God and He is our example whatever happens to us. We can only hope to follow His example by grace, which we seek and find in prayer.

September 9th

I Peter 2²⁴

Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.

And this is where and why we obtain grace in Him. He has done everything for us. He has born our sins and we are made righteous in Him. We are born again, washed clean. We are set free from sin, free even from the sin of resenting those who persecute us. In Christ we have forgiveness and the grace to lead a righteous life in His footsteps.

September 10th

I Peter 2²⁵

For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

The imagery comes from the OT. Isaiah 53 (which the Ethiopian Eunuch was perplexedly reading in his chariot when Philip explained to him that it referred to Jesus, thereby leading him to faith and Baptism) talks about us as sheep gone astray who are healed by the sufferings of the servant of the LORD and Ezekiel speaks of the Good Shepherd Who will rule over and care for God's people.

Instead of *bishop*, NIV has *overseer*. Are bishops like Jesus? They certainly ought to be. I think I would rather think of Jesus as a bishop than as an overseer. The word overseer conjures up images of slaves or at least downtrodden labourers. *Shepherd* could just as well have been translated as *pastor*. There is a sense in which Christian ministers are called to epitomise Christlikeness – the role of Christ, the roles of Christ. There is also a sense in which Baptism is the inauguration rite of Christian ministers (i.e. servants of Christ), not ordination. All Christian people are called to fulfil the ministry of Christ to God, to the world, and to one another. Just as we are all, in a sense, priests and kings, so we are also bishops and pastors.

Whilst on the subject of possible different translations. The word translated *souls* could have been translated *lives*. We are not to think of our souls as something separate from our bodies, more the concern of God and His Church than our bodily existence. Christ is the Shepherd and Bishop of our whole lives, not just the part of them which we think of as spiritual.

September 11th

I Peter 3¹

Likewise, ye wives be in subjection to your own husbands, that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of their wives.

Suppose a woman married to a pagan. She becomes a Christian. He doesn't. She then declares that her allegiance is to Christ and not to her husband. So she no longer has to behave as a wife would be expected to behave. This might well put the husband off Jesus, but surely she still loves her husband and wants him to come to faith.

September 12th

I Peter 3²

While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear.

Conversation here means the whole way we conduct our lives, not just chatting with our friends. The word translated *chaste* means pure in every respect, not just in matters of sexual morality. So far, so obvious. The difficult word is *fear*. NIV ducks the issue by rendering it as *reverence*. We would think there was something wrong if a woman were afraid of her husband. He would presumably be a brute. Yet, fear is more than reverence. It is the same word as we use for the fear of the Lord. I take it that we are not afraid of God (unless we are wicked). Is respect the right word? Not quite, I think. Can you think of a word which conveys what we mean by the fear of the Lord and which Peter means here to describe the proper relationship between husband and wife. [In Ephesians 5²²⁻³³ St Paul pursues this analogy between husband and wife and Christ and the Church, God and His people. On the one hand wives are to submit to their husbands, as we all are to submit to one another (v21); on the other hand husbands are to lay down their own lives for their wives. In the 1662 marriage service, wives promise to obey their husbands and husbands promise to worship their wives. Both obey and worship have been considered controversial and have been dropped from Common Worship (unless the alternative vows are used when obey comes back). Personally, I still entertain doubts that the modern symmetrical marriage has the depth of the traditional complementary marriage. Men and women are different!]

September 13th

I Peter 3³

Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel.

How much time, effort and money do people spend on their appearance? Will you call me sexist if I suggest that women are more likely to invest excessively in their appearance than men? Female TV personalities complain about being judged by their looks. Girls (and some boys) develop eating disorders because they hate their own body shape. Don't get me started on the craze for plastic surgery. Teenagers want to look mature. Old people want to look young. They tell me they haven't time to pray or to come to church, yet they can spend hours in front of the mirror. How does spending on clothes and cosmetics compare with our Christian giving? Priorities? Obsession with appearance is not only wasteful; it is harmful.

September 14th

I Peter 3⁴

But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.

Would you rather be judged by your appearance or by your character? If you would rather be judged by your character, why do you care about the opinions of those who judge by appearance? Maybe you have to, if you are an actress or a singer. Possibly, especially if you are a woman, you have to consider what an employer might think about the way you look. Admittedly, physical appearance plays a part in attraction between people. But what sort of person would stop loving someone or even stop being someone's friend because he or she ceased to be good looking and was disfigured in some way? How stupid would an employer have to be to judge employees on the way they looked rather than how well they did the job? If you're looking for a singer, would you rather choose a blackbird or a peacock? Isn't it true that the good opinion of people who judge by appearance isn't really worth having? *The LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.* That was what God told Samuel 3,000 years ago. Isn't it time we paid attention?

September 15th

I Peter 3⁴

But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.

However, to some degree our appearance does reflect our character. If we can't be bothered to wash or comb our hair, the implication is that we have very little self-respect and don't care much about the impression we make on other people. Self-respect is not unconnected with respect for others. That is why we are told to love our neighbours as ourselves. If we are to fulfil our role in society, we do have to dress and groom ourselves appropriately for the occasion. If the bank manager turned up to discuss your mortgage dressed in his gardening clothes or swimming trunks, you might think he wasn't taking you seriously. On the other hand, if he turned up in a Lamborghini and wearing a Savile Row suit you might feel that he was trying to make you look poor by comparison. There is a need for wisdom in applying these principles, wisdom based on love for all.

September 16th

I Peter 3⁵

For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands.

It sometimes hangs in the air at rape trials that the woman was “asking for it” if she went out dressed provocatively or scantily. Obviously, there is no excuse for rape even if a woman did set out to tease men. Apart from that, however, it is often said that girls and women dress the way they do because other girls expect them to. It is more a matter of belonging to and identifying with her group of female friends than trying to attract boys or men. It is also often the case that, when women in public life complain about being judged by their appearance, it is often other women who have drawn attention to their wrinkles or cellulite or whatever. It seems to me that the mistake lies in worrying too much about what other people think of the way you look. Whether you’re a middle aged female newscaster or a young Essex girl out on the town, dress to suit yourself, the way you think is appropriate, and, if you are a Christian, surely what you think appropriate will take into account what the Bible teaches.

September 17th

I Peter 3⁶

Even as Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement.

There are several things we can do with bible verses we don’t agree with. We can ignore them. We can try to explain them away. We can say that they were only relevant in a different time of place and that they are no longer apt for the modern world. We can even say that they were inapt even in their own day, reflecting the perspectives and prejudices of the male writers of the biblical books, rather than the Word of God. All those four approaches undermine the Bible. The Church believes, Christians believe that the Bible is the Word of God. If I behave as if the Bible were only the Word of God when I agree with what it says, it would be the word of Roger, not the Word of God. If we behave as though the Church of England were free to edit out the bits of the Bible it didn’t like, we would be disowning our heritage. Protestants based their faith *sola Scriptura*, on scripture alone. Roman Catholics and Orthodox regard Scripture as the most important part of the teaching ministry of the Church, but no serious Christian Church can stand above Scripture, editing and discarding what offends the sensibilities of its members. We’d be making up our own religion.

September 18th

I Peter 3⁶

Even as Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement.

So, if we can’t just discount Scripture, what do we do with passages like this which really jar with our modern sensibilities? I think we have to accept that *God caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning* and try to work out what we can learn from. When Sara calls Abraham, Lord, she is using the same word (Adonai) that is used in the Bible for God, as well as for men in various positions of authority and responsibility in the household and the nation. So, we are in the territory of Ephesians 5 and other parts of the Bible in which the relationship between husband and wife is described as being like the relationship between Christ and his Church, between God and the people of God. These are relationships of unconditional love and faithfulness. They are relationships of care and protection, of the sacrifice of self for the sake of the beloved. They are, however, also asymmetric relationships. Christ is not the same as the Church. God is not the same as the people of God. Husbands are not the same as wives.

And are not afraid with any amazement. Peter’s Greek is difficult to translate here – not just for me. The sense seems to be that the righteous have no need to fear. Good women are not afraid of God, nor of their husbands, even unbelieving husbands, nor of persecution or anything else the world can throw at them. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. Fear in that sense (extreme respect) will supply the wisdom necessary to deal with any challenge life may throw up.

September 19th

I Peter 3⁷

Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.

As a MCP, I note that there are two contradictory arguments used by feminists. The classic feminist case is that men and women are essentially the same, apart from the plumbing, and it is therefore unfair if boys and girls are not given the same opportunities in life. As men and women are equally able to fulfil any role, the argument goes, there should be no sex discrimination and people should be offered jobs irrespective of their gender.

The other feminist argument accepts that men and women are different. If it is unfair that boys and girls are not offered the same opportunities because of their different abilities, adjustments must be made, both in the interests of fairness to the applicants and of gender balance in the organisation. It is now often asseverated that organisations work better if they have a diverse workforce with men and women represented equally and a variety of ethnicities and sexualities. [I'm not sure how good the evidence is for this asseveration. It seems to be a bit convenient if it just so happens that every major C21 organisation works better if it is 50% female, 20% ethnic minority and 5% gay!] So, instead of no discrimination, we have positive discrimination to ensure that there are enough women and minority successful candidates to achieve the appropriate level of diversity. Jobs are adjusted so that they can be done equally by men or women. So, for example, fitness standards may be lowered or the product may be stored in smaller amounts. [I knew a personnel officer who asked applicants for the loading bay if they could lift half hundredweight sacks all day. Nowadays, if that requirement was found to put off female applicants, the sacks would be made smaller.] The big issue is to ensure that men take the same leave to care for babies as women so that mothers are not left behind on the career ladder, even though it is actually women who have the babies and are probably best suited to look after young children.

Personally, I think the biblical model is more realistic and the second kind of feminist is agreeing with me even though she or he might not like to admit it. The woman is the weaker vessel and ought to receive special consideration. To me that means that, having accepted that men and women are different, it is appropriate that they should have different roles in human society and I guess that the traditional roles are the obvious ones.

But note what Peter says about what really matters. In the last analysis what matters is not that women can serve in the infantry or that men can feed infants on breast milk expressed and stored for the purpose. What matters is that men and women are *heirs together of the grace of life*. Men and women are made equally in God's image and are equally redeemed in Christ. Our eternal destiny is the same, life for evermore, everlasting love.

September 20th

I Peter 3⁷

Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.

When people are hard on the Christian religion for its alleged disrespect for women's rights, comparison ought to be made with other cultures which have not been so influenced by Christianity and consideration given to the way they treat women – Hindu widows immolated on their husbands' funeral pyres, Chinese girl babies left out to die because they were not wanted, Moslem women forced to cover themselves up when going out and stoned to death for alleged immorality, couples in modern India who, following scans during pregnancy, have female babies aborted. It is very much the influence of the Christian religion with its belief that men and women are equal – made in the image of God, redeemed by the Blood of Christ – and, dare I say it, the acceptance that women deserve special honour as weaker vessels that teaches us to respect women's rights. Modern European and North American secular culture derived from the C18 Enlightenment ultimately derives its values from Christianity. Cut off from their Christian roots, secular values wither and die.

September 21st (S Matthew)

I Peter 3⁸

Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous:

These words really emphasise the unity of the Church, our unity with the congregation to which we belong, our unity with the Church throughout the world, the Church militant and the Church triumphant. We belong to Christ. We belong to one another. We are one body. We ought to be of one mind. Compassion is fellow feeling, sympathy in the correct sense of the word, sharing one another's needs at the deepest level. Pity is a deep sense of the needs of other people and an absolute determination to act on their behalf, almost an indignation that the world is so badly ordered that anyone does suffer. Courtesy is humility, the opposite of arrogance and self importance. These should be the characteristics of the Christian congregation, one with one another in love, as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one in love, a mutual love between us which flows out to embrace the people of the world and their needs, just as God so loved the world that He sent His Son to meet the needs of all of us.

September 22nd

I Peter 3⁹

Not rendering evil for evil, railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing.
This is hard, isn't it? Not to retaliate. Not to answer back. Not to brood on past injuries. To claim to have forgiven but refuse to forget, meaning that you haven't really forgiven. I confess I find it hard not to respond at once with a comeback when someone upsets me and, perhaps more seriously, I find it difficult not to hang on to the grudges and resentments I feel for past injuries. But they sour me. They spoil my relationships. They spoil my own life. When I can pray for my enemies, when I do ask God's blessing on my opponents, I am much happier, much more at peace with myself. I am blessed in blessing others.

September 23rd

I Peter 3¹⁰⁻¹²

For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile: Let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it. For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil.

These verses are a straight quotation from Psalm 34. No doubt Peter used the psalms regularly in his own personal worship and in praising God, in the synagogue and in the temple and in the Christian congregation. When we pray the psalms, we are part of a movement which has worshipped God in fellowship for thousands of years and will do so in all eternity. Being so familiar with the psalms, it came naturally to Peter to include these verses to illustrate and to support what he had written in the previous verse. If we know the Scriptures well, they guide us in all our thoughts and support us in whatever we do and say. This is why it is so important to read and to meditate on the Bible daily. It is the Word of God and it speaks to us to sustain in our daily lives.

What these verses say is the basic message of the Bible. If we live by God's law, if we love God with all our hearts, if we love one another, if we keep the Ten Commandments, if we are honest and generous, then things go well in the world and for us. If we do evil, the face of the Lord is against us. But, of course, we are only righteous in Christ. He is the only truly righteous man entitled to these blessings and He shares them with His people, with all who believe in Him.

September 24th

I Peter 3¹³

And who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good?
Maybe the people Peter was writing to were afraid of persecution. Maybe the people who had been their friends before they became Christians had now turned against them and ridiculed them. Maybe their faith had made things difficult with their families or their employers. It is not reasonable that people would harm you if you do that which is good. You shouldn't need to be afraid. Sometimes, when you are afraid, you find that your fears are unfounded. People are more reasonable and generous than you expected. I remember a bishop saying that when he went to do his National Service (long before he was ordained), he was afraid that the other men in the barracks would laugh at him when he said his prayers. He screwed up his courage and said his prayers anyway and, to his surprise, no one minded a bit.

If people are unreasonable and ungenerous and do make trouble for you because you are a Christian, put your trust in Christ. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

September 25th

I Peter 3¹⁴

But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled.

The word translated here as happy, could just as well have been translated as blessed. Jesus said: *Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake.* Peter heard Jesus say these words, probably more than once. But how can we be blessed (or happy) when we are maltreated? I suppose that we might feel honoured to be following in the footsteps of Jesus. Rejection by the world provides us with an opportunity to discover from our own experience what really matter. Jesus Himself comforts us in our affliction.

[We] rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. And not only so, but we glory in tribulation also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope; And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. (Romans 5³⁻⁵).

September 26th

I Peter 3¹⁵

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.

What do you think of when you think of evangelism? What do think of when you think of witness or mission? Maybe you think of evangelical churches and you are not sure that evangelism is for you. Maybe you think of big preachers addressing crowds of thousands in tents or auditoria or in the open air. Maybe you think of missionaries packing up their belongings and going off to serve God in foreign lands. Maybe you think of men with sandwich boards or people you accosting you in the street or Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons on your doorstep. Maybe you admire people like that. Maybe you think they are a bit strange. But you can't see yourself doing anything like that. Evangelism, witness, mission, whatever you want to call it, isn't for you.

And yet it is the Great Commission, what Christ commanded His Church to do before He ascended into Heaven. *All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.* We cannot escape the fact that it is our Christian responsibility to tell the whole world about Jesus.

Now, we can of course support missionaries and evangelists, bishops, priests and deacons, all kinds of "authorised" ministers, with our prayers and financial and other contributions. We can ensure that we are informed about what the Church is doing in other parts of the world. It is possible that some of you reading these notes are being called by God to some special kind of ministry. But the fact is that Christian ministry, Christian mission is the responsibility of all the "ordinary" Christians as well. It so happens that the most effective witness is a Christian life. Evangelism and mission are love in action. All Christian lives are love in action. "Ordinary" Christians may have opportunities to meet people in ordinary life in a way which "authorised" ministers find difficult. Live a Christian life and *be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.* (Respect).

September 27th

I Peter 3¹⁶

Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your conversation in Christ.

I, no doubt, have many faults. I could attempt to list them here, but I suspect that many readers of these notes will be even more aware of them than I am. Sometimes, however, I feel aggrieved when I am blamed for saying something I haven't said and doing something I haven't done. People think they know you. They may stereotype you because they know that you are a Christian. They think they know what attitudes you are likely to have. Someone once asked me indignantly, *How can you be against abortion if you are in favour of capital punishment?* That must really have rankled, because I remember it after nearly forty years. In fact, I don't support either capital punishment or abortion because I believe that all life (especially human life) is sacred. I didn't like being accused of supporting capital punishment or the implication that I was some kind of hypocrite. You can't stop people thinking what they like about you and saying what they like about you, but you can try to live a righteous life, such that if people do say nasty things about you they are untrue. You can also try not to resent it when people do make unfair or downright assumptions about you.

September 28th

I Peter 3¹⁷

For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing than for evil doing.

In the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, King Nebuchadnezzar tells the three young men, that unless they worship his golden image, they will be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. They reply: *O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.* In, other words, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are going to keep the Ten Commandments. It doesn't matter with what suffering Nebuchadnezzar threatens them. It is all the same whether God in His sovereign Will saves them from the flames or not. Whatever happens the people of God retain their integrity. They follow in the Way whatever.

September 29th (Michaelmas)

I Peter 3¹⁸

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit.

This is one of those verses which seem to sum up the whole bible message. This is what it is all about. The bible story is the story of God's faithfulness and humanity's faithlessness. It runs right through the Old and New Testament and throughout all human history. God pours out His love. We reject His love. Rejecting love, we reject life. Ignoring the commandments of God we bring disaster on ourselves and on the whole creation. Yet God remains faithful and, time after time, He visits and redeems His people. He delivers us from our enemies. He delivers us from our sins.

Then Christ. Jesus incorporates God and Man in one person. Jesus is the ultimate outpouring of God's Love. Jesus' is the only appropriate human response to the love of God, the yielding up of oneself in loving obedience, even to death. In Christ, God's faithfulness. In Christ, the obedience that humanity owes to God. In Christ, God's faithfulness deals with our faithlessness once and for all. Sin is forgiven. Atonement is effected. *The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

In Christ, then, His righteousness is imputed to us so that we should be free from sin and its consequences, the fear of death. Set free in Christ, we are free to live His risen life, to walk in the footsteps of the One, Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. By His grace we follow His example of loving obedience to God. As we know His forgiveness, as we participate in the atonement, we experience and know the life-giving (quickening) Spirit, Who transforms our lives so that we should become like Him.

Christ is our example and He is the means by Whom we follow His example. It is in following His footsteps that we know true freedom, the freedom to be truly human as the children of God, free to live righteous lives, indifferent to the fear of suffering or the lure of worldly prosperity. In Christ we have found that pearl of great price which it is worth disposing of all that we have to possess it (Matthew 13⁴⁶).

September 30th

I Peter 3¹⁹⁻²²

By which he also went and preached to the spirits in prison: Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ: Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him.

People often ask why in the Apostles' Creed we say, *He descended into hell*. The thought is that hell is for bad people, not for Jesus, the only truly good person who ever lived, and also, that once in hell, hell is where you stay for all eternity. I Peter 3¹⁹ gives scriptural warrant for the descent of Christ into hell. The thought is that, while His body was lying in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathaea from Good Friday till Easter morning, His spirit was preaching to the spirits in prison (i.e. hell).

This may help with another question people ask. If everybody who hears the Gospel and believes in Jesus is saved and those who do not believe are condemned, what about all those people who died before Jesus came into the world? What about all those people who have been born in the years AD, but have never heard the Gospel? What about all those people who have heard the Gospel, but from such nasty people that they have been put off? For example, what about Jews who were brought before the Inquisition and told to convert to Christianity or be burnt at the stake? You would surely admire rather than condemn those who refused.

Suppose, however, Jesus makes Himself known to people after they are dead. Might that not be a chance for people who never heard the Gospel or who heard it in such a way that they were put off by it? Peter here seems to be suggesting that there was a second chance for the people drowned in the Flood. If so, might there not be a second chance for other people who have died without the knowledge of God? Indeed, if people after death are shown clearly what the options are, might not everyone choose heaven?

It would be nice to think so, though it is fair to point out that Peter is only talking about people who lived before the Flood. There are other ways of thinking about what happens to people who never knew Christ on earth. Some people would say that, not only those who never heard the Gospel, but also those who rejected Christ, could never truly have known Him and ought to have another chance. So what about them? One reading of Romans 1 is that people in the world (people who do not know the God of the Bible) will be judged on whether or not they lived in accordance with their consciences. Some people believe that followers of non-Christian religions will be judged by their fidelity to the vision they had received. [This view is stated to be wrong by the XVIIIth of the 39 Articles of the Church of England.] In the light of I Timothy 2⁴, some people think that everyone will be saved ultimately, irrespective of what he or she did, said or believed on earth. And then there is the Roman Catholic doctrine of Purgatory – a place where those who die imperfect may be purified and made fit for heaven. [Purgatory too is rejected by the Church of England in Article XXII.]

This is all speculation. It is beyond us to understand heavenly things (John 3¹²). I know that we can trust God. I know that God is love. I also know that love requires justice and mercy. I know that the claims of justice and mercy are reconciled on the cross. I know that Christ commissioned us to proclaim the Gospel to the whole world and I know that all those who call on the Name of the Lord are saved. I know that God does not desire the death of a sinner but I would not want to foster any complacency about sin. The wages of sin is death. The Bible warns us that, if we fail to warn the unrepentant sinner, we are responsible for what happens to him. So, whatever I might hope for, I am only certain of the salvation of professed Christians and that is what I preach to the Church and to the world as the Truth of God.

Inevitably, these are mysteries we cannot understand. In God, there is always hope. But we have our orders to preach the Gospel to the whole world.

*All power is given unto me in heaven
and in earth. Go ye therefore, and
teach all nations, baptizing them in
the name of the Father, and of the
Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching
them to observe whatsoever I have
commanded you: and, lo, I am with
you alway, even unto the end of the
world.*