

Bible Notes



July – September
2007
Ephesians

50p

July 1st

Ephesians 1 vv 1 & 2

Back to a more traditional Bible study this quarter. (Incidentally I am glad of any feedback from readers regarding what they find most helpful in these notes.) I have been reading the Epistle to the Ephesians in the daily readings in church and have found it very inspiring. In our Bible Study group we have just finished Colossians and I think members of that group will find that Ephesians complements their study of Colossians.

The thoughts behind these first two verses are very familiar to readers of Paul's letters. Christian ministers are called by the will of God. All Christians are called to be saints. The proper relationship between Christians, between ministers and people, within congregations, and between congregations is a relationship of brotherly love. We greet one another in the grace and peace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

July 2nd

Ephesians 1 vv 3 & 4

Far too many people believe that they have chosen God. They choose whether or not to go to church. They can decide to stay away. They decide what proportion of their time and money they will give to God. It is up to them how committed they are. I can see where they are coming from, but, actually, they have got things the wrong way round. God chose them. God made them members of His Church in the Sacrament of Baptism. God gives them all the time and money they have got. It is God Who gives them their talents and the opportunity to use them. It is God Who graciously accepts their offering of themselves, *their souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice*. God washes them clean of their sin. God calls them to be saints in love.

With St Paul we would do better to marvel that we are chosen and to glorify God that He welcomes us into His sublime presence than to feel that we are somehow doing God a favour by offering Him a part of our lives.

July 3rd

Ephesians 1 v 5

What we are is the children of God. Jesus is the Son of God. As Christians, we are baptised into His Body. We are one with Him. We are therefore the children of God and co-heirs with Christ. And this is His doing. None of us is good enough. None of us can wheedle our way into His good books. None of us deserves to be adopted by God and to inherit His Kingdom. All these things are His free gift. He knows us. He has known, does know and will know you and me throughout eternity. He loves us and that is why He has made us His children. No other reason, but that reason is enough to fill our hearts with love and praise.

July 4th

Ephesians 1 v 6

When we pray *hallowed be thy name* we are praying for everything good. When all creation is in harmony with its Creator, Heaven and earth and everything in them praise His Holy Name. When the creation sincerely worships its Creator, all creatures fulfil the purpose for which they were made – that purpose being the divine love. When everything is done to the glory of God everything is done right and, when everything is done right, everybody and everything is filled with praise. The redemption of any individual – his or her acceptance in the beloved – is therefore to the praise of the glory of God's grace. The final consummation, when the whole of Creation is perfected in Christ, is therefore an explosion of praise, of which the conversion of each individual is a spark.

July 5th

Ephesians 1 vv 7 & 8

What I have written for yesterday is literally cosmic. We could get lost in metaphysics. We could get lost in an unrealistic spirituality which had very little relationship to our life in earth. We might be tempted to distinguish between our spiritual life – our prayer time and our experience of worship in Church – and our real life – our home life and employment. This would, however, be quite wrong. The cosmic Word, the Wisdom of God, was made human flesh. It is our real, actual sins in this physical world which divide us from God and it was the shedding of His actual Blood on the Cross which made possible their forgiveness.

July 6th

Ephesians 1 v 9

Paul's point here is that God has made His purposes known. God has revealed Himself. He reveals Himself in the wonders of the world. He reveals Himself in Scripture. Supremely He makes Himself known in Jesus. Specifically, He has made known to Paul (through the Holy Spirit of the risen Christ) the way in which not only Jews, but people of all nations are to be redeemed and not only human beings but everything created in Heaven and on earth will find its fulfilment in Christ.

July 7th

Ephesians 1 v 10

Your God Is Too Small was the title of a well known book. The author had a good point. Human beings just cannot imagine how great God is. Moreover, most of us fall very far short of the knowledge of God which is available to us if only we would think and pray and read the Bible with more open minds. Certainly, most people have far too small an idea of Jesus Christ. He is not just the Son of Mary, the best man who ever lived, your best friend and mine; He is God the Son. He was there at the Creation. He will be there at the end. He is God eternally, indivisible from the Father and the Holy Spirit. As the person of the Trinity Who became incarnate, the one Who became part of the Creation He had made, He is the one in Whom everything has its end – using the word “end” both in the sense of completion and of purpose.

July 8th

Ephesians 1 vv 11 & 12

Paul is marvelling here that he (and other Christians) is part of this cosmic reality. The Father, Who made everything that is, made me. The Son, Who died on the Cross for the redemption of the entire cosmos, died for me. The Spirit, Who fills in the Universe and in Whom the Universe exists, dwells in my heart. Now will you marvel that you are a Christian?

July 9th

Ephesians 1 v 13

People are only likely to believe if they are told. It is the duty, therefore, of all Christians to share their faith, to pass on the Good News of Jesus. That way millions have come to put their trust in Him

in the same way that we have. They received the Word and they have been sealed with the Spirit. They are therefore part of this cosmic redemption and dwell in God in all eternity. Christian mission is not about filling empty pews, finding more people to do those jobs which in every church need doing or getting more people to put more money in the plate in order to pay our bills. Christian mission is about reconciling humanity to God.

July 10th

Ephesians 1 v 14

I might tell you that, when I die, I will leave you a million pounds in my will. You might or might not believe me. You might not even think much about it if you look at me and think I am sickeningly healthy and unlikely to die very soon. Suppose, however, I gave you £10,000 to be getting on with now. That would be *an earnest of your inheritance*. It tells you I am serious about giving you the million when I die and also you can start enjoying the 10,000 now. Paul says that God's gift of the Holy Spirit is like this. We can enjoy Him now, but He is also a guarantee of our inheritance, the infinitely greater blessedness of being with God in Heaven. Usually we wait for somebody else to die if we hope for an inheritance. In this case, however, we have to die in order to inherit.

July 11th

Ephesians 1 vv 15-20

What is going on here? Paul is thanking God for the members of the Church. Often we hear more complaints about other people in the church (especially the clergy) than we do thanksgiving or praise. Paul is praying for members of the Church. Is that something we do enough of? Paul is praying that the members of the church will have a fuller and deeper understanding of the divine mystery. Is that something we seek for ourselves and for one another or are we too obsessed with the petty, shallow minutiae of parish politics or minor details about the way things are done in our fellowship?

July 12th

Ephesians 1 vv 21-23

The picture we have to get is of Jesus as Lord of everything that exists and the Church as His Body, somehow pivotal in God's plan for the redemption of everything that exists in Heaven or on earth.

July 13th

Ephesians 2 v 1

And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins.

Yes, you. Without God, we are nothing. God is the source of all life. Without God, we are dead. Without God, on earth we are corpses walking. Without God, our eternal destiny is death. And what cuts us off from God is sin. It is our rebellion against God which cuts us off from Him. Life without God is not worth living. In fact there is no life without God. Yet the temptation is always to put self first. The Devil's great lie is that we shall only get the best out of life if we put number one first, if we do what we choose, if we think principally about ourselves and other people only in terms of the ways in which they can be useful to us. That is the Devil's lie, *Ye shall not surely die. Ye shall be as gods.* We've all been there. Many of us are still there. But, if you are a Christian, God has redeemed you, even you. He has restored you to eternal life. Marvel.

July 14th

Ephesians 2 vv 2 & 3

Before they were converted, Jews would have seen the Ephesians as outside the community of faith. They were gentile sinners, without hope in this world or the next. Having met the Risen Christ, Paul has been shown and is now teaching that both Jews and gentiles are sinners insofar as nobody keeps God's perfect law of love. Jews and gentiles, therefore, would have been without God, without hope, had it not been for Jesus in Whom both Jews and gentiles may be redeemed, set free from sin through faith in the grace of God. It doesn't take long to think about the sins of basic human nature, that rebellion against God, that essential selfishness which leads to lust, greed, dishonesty, indifference to the problems of others. We were all like that before we became Christians. We would be like that without Christ. Isn't it a shame that so many who call themselves Christians are still like that?

July 15th

Ephesians 2 vv 4 & 5

Paul's point is that God has sorted out the mess we have got ourselves into simply because He loves us. It is not because we have the sense to reach out to Him. It is because He reaches out to us. Marvel.

July 16th

Ephesians 2 v 6

When St Paul says that human beings are *of the earth, earthy*, he is making an obvious point. Our bodies are made up of what the earth is made up of. We come from dust and to dust our bodies will return. All that is perfectly obvious. It is also obvious that human behaviour is only too often far from exalted. Human beings' base instincts lead us to do some pretty horrible things. It is not at all surprising to say that we are *of the earth, earthy*. What is astonishing is to say that we are raised up together with Christ and that with Him we can expect to sit in heavenly places. Yet St Paul is equally confident of that point. Marvel.

July 17th

Ephesians 2 v 7

I don't know how you picture Heaven. How ever you picture it, it is infinitely more wonderful than you can imagine. All those spiritual beings – angels and archangels etc, the continual worship offered throughout eternity, the spirits of the just made perfect, the throne of God, too wonderful even for the vision of angels. And you have a special place there. God will reveal the exceeding riches of His grace by seating you with Christ in that heavenly realm. How about that?

July 18th

Ephesians 2 vv 8-10

Those people who think that good people go to Heaven and bad people don't, have the problem that no-one could be good enough for Heaven and so everyone would go to Hell. Those people, on the other hand, who maintain that it is all a matter of faith are accused of undermining justice. How can it be fair if a person tries hard to live a good life but fails to make it because he believed the wrong things, whereas an evil person gets in just because he claims to have faith? Paul answers the conundrum here. We can only be saved by God's grace. We do not deserve to be saved. We cannot earn our salvation. We accept salvation through the faith He gives us. Genuine faith, though, necessarily implies love and, if we love God, we, by His grace, do the good works which He has prepared for us to do. It is all of God. We use our God-given free will to co-operate with His gracious plan for our lives.

July 19th

Ephesians 2 v10

I want another bite at the notion that God has prepared good works for each one of us to do. It is a point taken up in the Prayer Book prayer of thanksgiving after Communion – a prayer which dwells on our wonderfully privileged status as loved by God, and the way our membership of Christ's Body is reaffirmed and reinforced every time we take part in the Eucharist.

God has made each one of us different. We are all unique. We have different talents and different opportunities. We often say that no-one is indispensable and that must be so; there will come a time when the world has to manage without us. However, we are needed while we are here on earth and God has given us all our talents and our opportunities. It is only reasonable to think that, if we are faithful Christians, we will use these talents and opportunities to His Glory and for the good of the Church and the world.

It may be a matter of choosing our career. What does God want me to do with my life? I believe that God wanted me to a priest. Maybe that is what He wants of you or your son or your grandson, but, surely, whatever career you decide on, you want to choose the path you believe God wants you to follow. The world needs carpenters and plumbers as well as priests and I am sure that is how God organises things.

What about odd jobs, however? What about voluntary work? What about leading the Bible study or cleaning the Church? Does God want you to do these kinds of jobs? People often ask themselves whether they want to do things. Wouldn't it be better to ask whether God wants them to do them? If there is a job that needs doing and you have the time and the ability, the question might be better put, why should you not do it?

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

July 20th

Ephesians 2 v 11

In Paul's world, the great divide was between the circumcised and the uncircumcised – the Jew and the gentile. Both groups despised the other. Paul was brought up a strict Jew and would have been brought up to think that gentiles were unclean. He would not worship with them. He would be unlikely to consort with them socially. He would even be cautious of coming into contact with them in business. Most gentiles, on the other hand, would look down on Jews and resent them for their particularity. Those gentiles who hung around the synagogues, accepting that the God of Israel was the true God, but unwilling to take the step of circumcision, would have been caught between the two worlds. They might have felt that they belonged neither to the Jewish community nor to the gentile community. Many of Paul's converts came from this group! What Jesus revealed to Paul was that there was no distinction. What mattered was to be in Christ. Once in Christ, there is no Jew or gentile. Social distinctions no longer matter. Neither do racial distinctions. Gender makes no difference to our unity in Christ. Everyone is welcome in the Church just so long as they repent and believe.

So why are Church of England congregations predominantly upper working and middle class, mainly middle aged and older, white and significantly more women than men. Don't jobs and toffs feel that there is a place for them in our churches? Don't immigrants and their descendants feel at home with us? Is there something about our churches which puts off men and younger people of both sexes? If so, is it them or is it us?

July 21st

Ephesians 2 v 12

I wonder if we sometimes write people off. The tabloid newspapers tell us that paedophiles will never reform. Maybe there are people in the village whom we could never imagine joining the church. We assume they would never want to. We are not at all sure that we would want them if they wanted to come. They'd turn our fellowship upside down. The young Paul would never have imagined welcoming uncircumcised gentiles. The young church didn't want Paul the persecutor!

July 22nd

Ephesians 2 v 13

If we think of ourselves as typical church members, what makes us typical? Why do we so obviously belong? We know how to dress. We know how to behave. We know how to speak in church. In many ways, we are like most of the other people who come to church. But is that why God loves us? Haven't we established that we don't deserve to be loved by God. We are sinners. We have failed Him by failing to keep His perfect law of love. We belong simply because God loves us and forgives our sins. He just loves us as we are, not because of our Sunday best, our gentle demeanour and our restrained speech. Isn't it possible that He equally loves people with shabby or showy clothing, people who can't sit still for five minutes, people with unrestrained loud voices? If God loves such people, then don't they belong in the church as much as we do? Surely the true sign of an authentic faith is not churchy manners but a life of self-sacrificial love.

July 23rd

Ephesians 2 v 14

What is this partition which Christ has broken down? Is it the partition between Jew and gentile? Is it the partition between rich and poor? Is it the partition between slaves and free people? Is it the partition between men and women? Is it the partition between the respectable and the rest? Actually, the partition which Christ has done away with is the partition between God and humanity. Once that partition is destroyed, all those other partitions cease to have any point at all.

July 24th

Ephesians 2 v 15

The Jewish Law divided Jews from gentiles. The Jews had received the Law from God through Moses and their relationship with God depended on keeping the Law (Torah). Gentiles were different. They had not received Torah. They did not live by Torah. They were not, therefore, the people of God.

Torah also, however, divided Jews from God. If their status as the people of God depended on keeping the Torah, they had failed. No-one lives up to what the Torah requires – that we love the LORD our God

with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Because the Jews had not kept Torah, they had forfeited their position as the people of God.

Paul would argue that the basic principles of Torah – honesty, peace, justice, charity – are in fact obvious to gentiles as well as Jews and anyone’s conscience would tell him to live by these principles. So, neither Jew nor gentile is without excuse. We all know the basic principles of God’s Law and none of us lives up to them. We have all divided ourselves from God by our failure to keep His Law.

Christ, however, has bridged the gap between humanity and God; He is one person with two natures – human and divine. He has taken to Himself the punitive aspects of the Law, the death sentence which results from rejecting the word of life. He has therefore healed the rift between us and God and all the divisions between human beings. We have eternal life and love, we in Christ and He in us, one in the communion of saints in the fellowship of the Trinity.

July 25th

Ephesians 2 v16

We are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people; and are also heirs through hope of thy everlasting kingdom, by the merits of the most precious death and passion of thy dear Son.

July 26th

Ephesians 2 v17

If Jesus died for the sins of the whole world and people have the choice to accept or reject what He has done for them, it stands to reason that they need to be informed. The Good News needs to be proclaimed. We need preachers, missionaries, evangelists, teachers. Jesus Himself is the supreme preacher and teacher as He is Himself the Word which is preached. The word is peace, peace with God and therefore peace with other people. We need preachers, teachers, evangelists and missionaries in our own age. We pray for vocations. We support those who are called to these vocations with our prayers, money and in any other ways we can. We are all part of the mission, however. If we are the Body of Christ, in Him you and I are preacher and word.

July 27th

Ephesians 2 v 18

It is the same for Jews and gentiles. It is the same for everyone. The way to God is through Jesus. Jesus the Way is open to everyone who sincerely seeks the Truth. To know Jesus is to know God and to know God is to have eternal life. Because we are in Christ, the Son of God, we are the children of God. We call God Abba, Father. One Holy Spirit dwells in our hearts. He is the same Holy Spirit in the heart of every believer. He is the same Holy Spirit Who permeates the world and in Whom the Universe exists. He is the same Holy Spirit Who is one with the Father and the Son in the eternal unity of the Trinity. We are thus caught up in a profound unity with other believers, with the whole creation, with God Himself. This is life in all its fulness. This is life in God Who is eternal love. This is peace. What does this mean, then, for the sort of people we should be, the sort of people we ought to let God make us?

July 28th

Ephesians 2 v 19

It doesn't matter what your background was. You might have come into the church from any social class, any race, any part of the world any prior religion. None of that matters now. Once you belong to Christ, you are His and no-one has any right to reject you from His Church, His Body.

July 29th

Ephesians 2 v 20

Everything depends on the cornerstone. When a mason puts together a stone arch, each stone is cut to its correct shape. Some sturdy stones form the foundations and the pillars. Others are cut in shape to form the curves. They all lean in to the top centre, however, where the cornerstone is the focus for all the forces and stresses which impact on the structure. In the same way it is Christ Who upholds His Church, all its members, whoever they are, and whatever stresses are placed upon it and upon them.

July 30th

Ephesians 2 v21

No image is adequate to convey a divine mystery. We are like stones in a building, but we are more than stones. We grow. The building grows. So long as we are on earth, we are pressing on to the goal, completion in Christ.

July 31st

Ephesians 2 v 22

In whom ye also. That is the point to grasp. This includes us. You and I are included in this Church, this structure. We are included in the make up of the dwelling place of God. You and I have the Holy Spirit. You and I address God as Father. He lives in you and me. I think that if we could only grasp what is our true stature as Christians, not only would we be much better Christians individually, but our churches would be true temples of the Holy Spirit, filled with true and spiritual worship and people falling over themselves to demonstrate God's love in action in the world. If only we could realise our status as children of God, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, surely the things we worry over and argue over would be seen in their proper perspective.

that we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people

August 1st

Ephesians 3 v1

The traditional view is that this letter was written by Paul while he was a prisoner in Rome in the last few years of his life. Certainly Paul endured imprisonment and other kinds of persecution, as well as the hardships and dangers of travelling in the ancient world, for his commitment to the Gospel. It is humbling that people like Paul put up with so much so that people like us could know about Jesus. It is important to remember that there are still parts of the world where people are persecuted for being Christians and to pray for them and to use such influence as we may have to promote their safety. It is also humbling and somewhat shaming to think how easily people like us are put off Christian commitment. If we don't like the form of service or the vicar, if the service is at the wrong time or in the wrong building, if we are busy or feel like a lie in, if it looks like rain...

August 2nd

Ephesians 3 vv 2 – 6

The mystery which has been revealed to Paul is that the Good News is for gentiles as well as Jews. They too can be Christians. They too can be very members incorporate in the Body of Christ and heirs through hope of His everlasting Kingdom. They too are part of the people of God.

It may be that Paul could have kept out of trouble if he had not insisted on preaching to the gentiles. The Jews might have left him alone. The Romans probably would not have interfered if he had confined himself to preaching in the synagogue to Jews. Paul, however, was part of a movement which turned the world upside down, converting thousands to a faith which renounced everything the world regards as paramount: power, money, sex, status, etc. Offering liberation to the world, Paul was a threat to those who preferred to remain in bondage to the ways of the world.

When Paul describes himself as a prisoner, he probably quite literally means that he was confined (at least to house arrest) by the Roman authorities. I think he is also a prisoner, however, in the sense that he was under a compulsion, an impulsion, to preach the love of God. He found he could not help himself. He had to share what God had done.

August 3rd

Ephesians 3 v 7

What we have to get out of this verse is the dynamic. Paul is a dedicated and effective preacher and teacher, but the dynamic is God's. Paul is energised by God. He does what he does by the grace of God. Now, not many of us are like Paul, but whatever we are as Christians, it ought to be the same for us as it is for Paul. When we come to do the good works God has prepared for each one of us to walk in, we are energised by God. It is God's dynamism that makes us effective. It follows that the foundation of Christian service is prayer. It is your prayer life which opens you up to receive the gift of God's grace. It is the prayers of the faithful which open the Church to God's dynamic energy.

August 4th

Ephesians 3 v 8

I am sure I can hear the cynics thinking. *“Energy” and “dynamism” are not the words which spring to mind to describe an average Anglican congregation.* Such cynicism is not entirely fair. We may not shout much in the C of E, but there is a power of divine love and grace in many congregations which does a lot of largely unseen good. But we could do a lot more if we really believe that our mission encompasses

everybody who lives in our parishes. Maybe we feel old and tired, but at least we are on the side of the angels. Paul was a persecutor of the Church and God turned him right round so that he became one of the greatest preachers ever. What can't God do with a few faithful people like us? Help me hear. I can't always see the way forward to unlock people's potential to be dynamic with the divine energy. Help me.

August 5th

Ephesians 3 v 9

This is a hard verse to translate. I looked at four translations and the original Greek! Paul's task and the task of the Church is to reveal what has not become clear until the resurrection of Jesus – namely that God will save not only the Jews, but also the gentiles and indeed the whole created order, and that this universal salvation will be through Jesus Christ, God made flesh, crucified, risen, glorified. The Authorised Version speaks of “the fellowship of the mystery”. More modern translations have words like “administration” or “organisation” or “arrangement” in place of “fellowship”. They are probably right, but the root of the word is “household”. The organisation it speaks of is the organisation of a household. I feel that we ought not to lose that sense of family, of being bound by ties of loyalty and love in God's plan of salvation.

August 6th

Ephesians 3 v10

Today is the Feast of the Transfiguration. Three apostles saw Jesus transfigured on the holy mountain. His robes shone. Great prophets spoke to Him about His mission. The Voice of God acknowledged Him. The apostles were briefly given a clearer glimpse of the way things truly are. The life, and especially the death and resurrection, of Jesus reveal the way things truly are – the glory of God made manifest in violent death. The post-Communion prayer for today invites us to say the following:

Holy God, we see your glory in the face of Jesus Christ: may we who are partakers at his table reflect his life in word and deed, that all the world may know his power to change and save. This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

August 7th

Ephesians 3 vv 11 & 12

Things only become clear when we know about Jesus, but it has always been God's purpose that human beings should enjoy eternal fellowship with Him. We have access to the Father through faith in Jesus Christ, His Son, in the fellowship of His Holy Spirit.

Some of you, I guess, will be worrying about my remarks about universal salvation. This phrase could seem to imply that everyone gets to Heaven. Now we certainly know that God does not desire the death of a sinner. Nevertheless He does respect our freedom. Human beings can choose to reject Him. Salvation is universal but it is not compulsory.

August 8th

Ephesians 3 v 13

Thinking about Paul in prison, some people might have wondered whether Christianity was worth the martyrdom of a good man. Some might have feared that they would share his fate. Some might have asked whether there really could be a good God if good people got locked up and beheaded. Paul's answer is that all these trials are worth it. Nothing compares with the knowledge of the love of God.

August 9th

Ephesians 3 vv 14 – 19

Paul's prayer really needs thinking about. He speaks of God in Whom everything in Heaven and on earth belongs. He asks that such a God, Who encompasses everything that exists, will not only take an interest in you as a person, but will fill you with the grace and power of His Holy Spirit. With Christ in you, your whole existence will be based on love. That being the case you will have an understanding of the wonder of God and His Universe and your place in it. You will be filled with the fulness of God. You will know Christ's love which surpasses knowledge. When did you or I last pray like that for anyone? It makes most of our prayers look quite tame by comparison.

August 10th

Ephesians 3 vv 20 & 21

Doxologies seem to have gone out of fashion. Quite a lot of preachers used to end their sermons with these two verses. Psalms and canticles

finished with *Glory be*. Hymns usually ended with an Amen, sometimes sung to a deeply devotional setting. Some ancient manuscripts of the Bible have extra *Alleluias* written in the margins by exuberant readers. It is natural to let yourself go sometimes praising God. Charismatics do it all the time. I wonder if the problem in mainstream churches is the shift of the focus of our services from the One we worship to the worshippers. Worship leaders teach congregations. They preach to congregations. They may even entertain congregations. Intercessory prayer offered out loud is often as much addressed to the congregation as it is to God. We think that if we please congregations, people might come to church. Congregations feel entitled to stay away if worship leaders don't give them what they want. But shouldn't the focus of our worship be on God? If our services are dedicated to Him, all the rest follows – the building up of the congregation emotionally, spiritually and numerically. If, however, we think God can look after Himself and focus on building up the congregation instead of on Him, only too often the congregation melts away.

August 11th

Ephesians 4 v 1

Paul starts this chapter as he started the last one, with a reminder that he is a prisoner. When we are casual about our faith, it is worth remembering not only how much Jesus endured for us, but also how much other Christians have been prepared to suffer because of their love for Him.

This actually is one of my favourite verses. People so often speak of vocation as being a calling to priesthood. More recently, this concept of vocation has been expanded to include a calling to various authorised lay ministries. But the reality is that all Christians have a vocation – the vocation to be a Christian. Being a Christian means following Jesus wherever He leads you. It means doing the good works He has prepared for you to walk in. Your vocation is to be the person God made you to be, using the talents and opportunities He has given you in accordance with His Will for your life. To be a Christian is a very high calling. It is wonderful even to aspire to living up to it.

August 12th

Ephesians 4 v 2

One of my grandmother's favourite sayings was *bear and forbear*. I am not entirely sure I know what she meant by it. There is, however, a holding back. Christians are not supposed to be *me first* people. There is a kind of spiritual pride whereby I am sure I am right or I am sure that my needs must be met by other people or by the Church in general. This is not right. There is a place for stepping back, for letting things go, for putting up with things, for forgiving.

August 13th

Ephesians 4 v 3

I had a rather wicked thought the other day. Someone was telling me about an argument in our parish before I came here, which led to certain people leaving our church. My wicked thought was *Then it isn't really all my fault that there have been such terrible rows in the parish during my incumbency and that people have stopped coming!* It was a wicked thought because we should not really be comforted regarding the present by thinking that things were just as bad or even worse in the past. Ministers too readily take the credit for what goes right in a parish and the blame for what goes wrong. Churches are not, however, personality cults. All members of the congregation make up together the local Body of Christ and all of us are responsible for what happens. We all share the credit when things go right and we all share the blame when they go wrong. The minister has a very significant role as the one who presides at the Eucharist and other services and has the training and the charisma to preach, teach and lead the pastoral and evangelistic work of the Christian community. It is not, however, all down to him!

August 14th

Ephesians 4 v 4

So this is the mystery. If we believe what Paul says here about the nature of the Church, how can it possibly be that there are such dreadful rows in churches? Not only are there terrible rows, they are often over such trivial things. If we believe what Paul teaches here, splitting a church or leaving it to go to another one ought to be a very last resort. It is a terrible thing to say that another person is unforgivable because Jesus teaches us that we cannot be forgiven if we cannot forgive. And what about those people who give up Church altogether? Could they ever really have believed what St Paul says here?

August 15th

Ephesians 4 vv 4 & 5

So what is our status as Christians? Each one of us belongs to Jesus. Jesus is one. So, if He is in us and we are in Him, we are one with one another. This unity makes up one body, the Body of Christ. All Christians together constitute the one Body of Christ – Methodists, Baptists, RCs, Orthodox, Anglicans, whatever. If you leave one church and go to another, you cannot get out of the fact that you are still one with the congregation you have left. If you no longer love the people in the church you have left, if you will not forgive them, you are disobeying Christ's command that members of His Body should love one another. Only if you believe that the church you have left is so far gone that it is no longer Christian can you escape your essential unity with it.

There is one Christ and we, together, make up His one Body. We know that Jesus is our Lord and we come to God as Father because we are inspired by His Holy Spirit. There is only one Holy Spirit. It follows that everyone who calls Jesus *Lord* and God *Father* participates in that one Holy Spirit. There is one Baptism. All who are baptised are united in that fact. All Christians press to the same hope, the hope of heaven, to dwell eternally with God. If you can't stand other Christians on earth, don't forget you're going to spend eternity with them. Indeed I sometimes wonder if heaven and hell are in fact the same "place" a place where we are compelled to be forever with God and with other people. If we love God and other people, that place is heaven. If we don't love them, to spend eternity with them would be hell.

August 16th

Ephesians 4 vv 4 - 6

One of the great insights of the Old Testament is that God is one. *Hear O Israel, the LORD your God is one Lord.* The whole universe is His work. The universe exists in Him and He in it. There is a profound unity about the whole of reality. This is how things are and, if we are in Christ, we are one with this ultimate unity. God is the Father of all. There are not different Fathers for different families of Christians. We all have the same Father and therefore we are all part of the same family. Whatever the sibling rivalries, we are all brothers and sisters and we know how families ought to live and love. So it is for the Church.

August 17th

Ephesians 4 v 7

To everyone of us is given grace.

God's gifts and God's calling are not just for the clergy and other special people. A congregation needs its ministers and its lay leadership. These do not, however, have a monopoly of vocation or a monopoly of grace. If you are a Christian, whoever you are reading this, you have a vocation and you have God's grace for the carrying out of that vocation.

August 18th

Ephesians 4 v 8

This verse is very difficult to understand and it probably does not help you much if I say that it is a quotation from Psalm 68. Psalm 68 is pretty hard to understand too. Think of a general returning with his troops from a great victory. Probably there is a victory parade. The general is honoured. He distributes to his followers the spoils of victory – goods plundered from the defeated enemy, land which had belonged to the enemy, titles, money and power derived from the campaign. Now think of Jesus winning His victory on the Cross, not by killing others, but by giving up His own life in perfect obedience to the Father and perfect love for the human race. God raises Him from the dead and He ascends into Heaven, victorious over sin, the world and the devil. He is honoured and glorified with a seat at God's Right Hand. He now shares the spoils of victory with His faithful followers. His key gift is the Holy Spirit. He gives the Holy Spirit to every Christian and the Spirit supplies every Christian with the gifts he needs to do the good works God has prepared for him to walk in.

August 19th

Ephesians 4 vv 9 & 10

The Bishop of Tonbridge had a good point about this in *Link*. Some people say that the Ascension is the reversal of Christmas. It is not. The Ascension is the fulfilment of Christmas. Jesus became one of us in order to transform the Universe. He did this by His living, preaching, teaching and healing. Above all, He transforms the way things are by His Death and Resurrection. The Ascension is the consummation of all this.

August 20th

Ephesians 4 v 11

Paul lists some of the ministries in his churches. The Church still needs all these ministries: those sent with authority, those who discern and proclaim what God is saying to the Church and the world, those who spread the Word and those who build up Christians by caring for them and teaching them the implications of the divine mystery of what it is to be a Christian. It is important, however, that whatever form of ministry we offer ourselves for – priesthood, churchwarden, PCC member, youth leader, etc. – that we see our role in terms of what God is calling us to do. Do we stand for election, do we offer our services because we believe that God may be calling us to do this and we are seeking the view of the Church as to whether this is so? Once elected or appointed, do we bear in mind that we are primarily answerable to God for what we do as warden, PCC member, youth leader or whatever?

August 21st

Ephesians 4 v12

So what are bishops and priests for? What are our PCC secretaries and wardens and readers for? What about Sunday School teachers? What is the point of all those other ministries: treasurers, people who look after our buildings, administrators, magazine printers, people who make beautiful music? What are vocations for? Paul's answer is that we are all supposed to be working to make all Christians (Paul calls all Christians "saints") fit to do God's work in the world and to do a bit of body building, to build up the Body of Christ.

August 22nd

Ephesians 4 v 13

Our goal as individual Christians is to become like Jesus. The goal for our Church, the local Body of Christ, must be to become like Jesus. Our goal for the whole of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church is to become like Jesus – individually and corporately. That is what it means to be fully human – to be like Jesus, the perfect human-being. We become like Him through knowing Him. Our knowledge of God grows as we experience Him through the pages of the Bible, our participation in the Eucharist, the fellowship of the Church, personal prayer and meditation and in so many other ways.

August 23rd

Ephesians 4 v 14

I've written above about the ease with which Christian fellowships fall out and sometimes fall apart. The problem is that we are not sufficiently rooted and grounded in Christ. A doctrinal dispute, a personal slight, a bit of unpleasantness in parish politics, a disagreement about who is responsible for what, a feeling that we are unappreciated, any of these things can knock us off balance, because we are not so rooted in Him that it is hard for us to be knocked over or pulled up and that we have in Him a constant resource of spiritual wisdom.

August 24th

Ephesians 4 v 15

Speaking the truth in love is a much abused phrase. People sometimes use it as an excuse to say hurtful things and then claim they were speaking in love. Now we do have to be honest. No true relationship can be based on hypocrisy, but speaking the truth in love requires great sensitivity – an awareness of the other person's real need to be loved and supported (built up into the full stature of Christ) and an awareness of our own ability to be tempted to be self righteous or patronising. The idea is that you and I and all our fellow Christians should *grow up into Him in all things*. It is a vital part of our Christian vocation to build one another up in our most holy faith. Whether we are tempted to gossip about people, to put them down, to talk when they are trying to pray, to form cliques, or anything we may do which diminishes or discourages other people, we need to pray for grace to be better people. We ought to be supporting other people in their attempts to grow closer to Christ and allowing them to assist us.

August 25th

Ephesians 4 v 16

Jesus is the Head. The Church is His Body. In the human body, everything is connected by nerves, blood cells, hormones etc. The brain directs the body, giving it its aims and goals. The Church is bound together and bound to Christ by love and by the Holy Spirit and by faith and grace and all God's good gifts. We are all tissues and organs and limbs. We are all different with our individual roles, but we are all also part of the whole. We depend on the whole body. The whole body depends on us. The Body is only healthy when all the parts are in harmony and all under the direction of the Head.

August 26th

Ephesians 4 v 16

Another stab at this profound verse. Paul is writing about body building. If we watch our diet, exercise and generally live healthily, we build our bodies. Our hearts grow stronger. Our lungs develop greater capacity. Our muscles get bigger. Our skin is clearer. We can do more and do it faster and we become less susceptible to disease. But our bodies grow in a different way. At least when we are young, healthy well nourished bodies grow bigger. I am sure Paul has in mind body building in the first sense. If we abide in Christ and He in us, we the Church, the Body of Christ, become stronger and healthier. I hope I am not misrepresenting Paul if I suggest that a strong, healthy Church, rooted and grounded in Christ, will also very likely grow in the other sense. It will attract more members.

Now, one way to attract members is to please people and one way to please people is to downgrade the message, to encourage people to be comfortable when God wants to discomfort them out of their complacency. So growth in numbers does not necessarily mean that the Church is being faithful. Moreover the multitudes quite often rejected the true prophets and even the Christ. So unpopularity can be a sign of faithfulness. But it is nevertheless my hope that a Church, rooted and grounded in the love of God, its members building one another up into the full stature of Christ, would experience an incremental increase in numbers by its attractiveness to genuine seekers after Truth.

August 27th

Ephesians 4 v 17

If we believe these wonderful things about ourselves, that we are the children of God, members of His Body, heirs of eternal life, then we ought to be different from other people who are not members of God's Church. We have resources which they do not have. We read the Bible. We experience God in prayer. We are part of a Spirit guided 2,000 year old tradition. We are transformed by our participation in the Sacraments. We are members of a fellowship with millions of members worldwide and millions more in Heaven. I think the problem is that we don't make full use of the means of grace with which God supplies us. We won't let go and let God.

August 28th

Ephesians 4 vv 18 & 19

People who don't know God don't know what it means to be human. Human beings are made in God's image. God is the source of everything we have. God makes us what we are. God is the purpose of our lives. Without God we are pointless and ultimately dead. If we don't know God, we don't know ourselves. We don't know who we are. We don't know who and what other people are. People without God desperately seek to deal with life by giving themselves up to selfishness, greed, lust, drugs, money, power and all kinds of sin. They become exploitative of other people and destroy themselves. The paradox is that by clinging on to this life you actually forfeit life. It is only through the offering of your life to God that you can truly find it.

August 29th

Ephesians 4 v 20

If, however, alienation from God explains why people are materialistic, money loving, power seeking, obsessed with sex, tempted by drink, selfish, cruel, indifferent to human need, you would expect that those who know God would be entirely different. Those who truly knew the Source of all that is would surely put Him first. Those who truly knew that self-sacrificial love is the principle which sustains the Universe would devote their entire lives to the well-being of other people. The Church would be entirely different from the world.

August 30th

Ephesians 4 v 21

Paul's introduction of this "if" shakes us up a bit. Is he saying that worldly Christians are no true Christians? Is a worldly Church no true Church? *By their fruits shall ye know them*, says Jesus. The way I see it as that we are on a journey. It is like we are climbing a huge mountain range to get to our Promised Land. Jesus is the Way and if we are on the Way we are in Him. He is our guide. He is our protector. He provides for us on the journey. He is infinitely patient with our weaknesses and our uncertainties. Even feeble Christians are Christians and are saved. And yet, why do so many Christians and so many churches hang about in the foot hills? We are reluctant to leave base camp. We hold back. We prevaricate. Is it possible that if we are not even trying to progress, we are no longer truly on the Way?

August 31st

Ephesians 4 vv 22 – 24

Jesus talks about the need to be born again. Paul talks about a fresh creation, a new man. Becoming a Christian is a new beginning. In a sense, when we become a Christian, we become a new person. In reality, when we give ourselves to Jesus, we become the people we were always meant to be. We become who we truly are. We grow into our potential. Our human spirit is in harmony with the Spirit of God, which is the way things ought to be, considering that human beings are made in God's image. So why is that the baptised are so often content with the old ways, the old life, a life lived in harmony with our all too human flesh? We have been set free by the Blood of Jesus, yet we so often live as if we were still slaves to sin. Why should that be? To an extent, it is inevitable; we cannot be made perfect so long as we are on earth. Until we die and go to heaven, our human flesh will hold us back. Yet we could be much freer than we allow ourselves to be. If only we would *let go and let God!*

September 1st

Ephesians 4 v 25

I've been thinking about what I wrote a few days ago about it being impossible to base a relationship on lies and I've been wondering about those little white lies. *Your new hairdo really suits you. Your speech was really witty.* I've also been thinking about great big whoppers. *I never really loved anyone before I met you. The cheque is in the post.* Probably there are times when it would be cruel to tell the truth. What she doesn't know can't hurt her. Maybe. But can you really base a relationship on lies? Can we say that we are *members one of another* if we cannot trust other Christians with the truth about ourselves?

September 2nd

Ephesians 4 v 26

Never let the sun go down on our wrath is advice often given to those proposing matrimony. I am sure it is good advice. I wonder if we can extend it to all our relationships? No grudges, no nursed anger. It is very hard to let go, to forgive, to forget, but can we ever be free until we do? Is it right that relationships within the Body of Christ should ever be permanently fractured?

September 3rd

Ephesians 4 v 27

Remember the story of Cain and Abel, right back at the beginning of the Bible. Cain's nature is twisted by his jealousy of his brother Abel. This situation arises, human beings fall out with one another, because the human race (in the persons of Adam and Eve, the lads' parents) has turned its back on God. Cain, twisted by jealousy, eventually murders Abel. Abel's life is over. Cain's is ruined. He is forced to become an exile. By turning his back on God and by nursing his jealousy against his brother, Cain has given place to the devil. He has allowed evil into his life and he has allowed the evil to grow. We need to repent of our sins, not nurse them; forgive those who have hurt us, not bear grudges. Otherwise we ruin our own lives as well as other people's.

September 4th

Ephesians 4 v 28

Christians are sometimes accused of making it too easy for wrong-doers. "You just have to say you are sorry and you are forgiven." Such a simple proposition makes it look as if we are letting bad people off scot free so that can carry on in their wicked ways. In fact, we are saying no such thing. If we truly repent, we will sincerely try to give up whatever it is that we are doing wrong. We will make amends to the people we have injured if that is at all possible. Now it is perfectly true that we very often do fail and repeat sins for which we have been forgiven. It is also true that God forgives us as often as we repent. We cannot, however, claim to repent sincerely, if we do not at least intend (with the help of God's grace) to do better in future.

September 5th

Ephesians 4 vv 29-32

These verses remind us of what life in a Christian community, a Church, should be like. The Church is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. So when we abuse, malign or drag down other members of the congregation, we are grieving the Holy Spirit. It is very odd to refuse to forgive other people if we believe that God has forgiven us for Christ's sake. If we are open to the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts, we will forgive other people the wrong they do us and support and sustain them in their growth as Christians.

September 6th

Ephesians 5 vv 1 & 2

Again and again in the Old Testament, God tells His people, *you shall be holy because I am holy*. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us *Be ye also perfect even as your Father in Heaven is perfect*. If we are the children of God, where is the family likeness? Jesus, the Son of God, exhibits the divine/human nature by giving Himself up in love for God and for His fellow human beings. If we are CHRISTians, Christ is our example and our inspiration.

September 7th

Ephesians 5 vv 3-5

We are supposed to be different! We live in a world dominated by sex and materialism. Just watch the advertisements on TV. These things are idolatry. Idolatry is worshipping a false god, offering up your life to that which is not God. Sex and materialism claim to satisfy the longing in human hearts, but that longing can only really be satisfied by a relationship with God. If we believe in God and know Him in Jesus Christ, the things of this world fall into their right place and marriage or single celibacy are aspects of our Christian living. Devoting your life to sex and materialism will never satisfy you and you will very likely do a great deal of damage to yourself and to other people. Only by wholehearted surrender to God will you find your true self. Yet many Christians live as if God were in one compartment of their lives and the rest of their lives outside Church and prayer times was very little different from the way other people live, devoting their energies and their endeavours to the acquisition of the things of this world.

September 8th

Ephesians 5 vv 6 & 7

Some people in the first century believed that what really mattered was the soul. It therefore did not matter much what you did with your body. So long as your soul was right with God, it didn't matter if you were a fornicator or a dishonest shopkeeper or whatever. If you are set free in Christ, you are free to do what you like. Paul shows this up for the nonsense it is. God is just. The reason that people are judged by Him is because they reject His Law of love. They cheat, exploit, commit acts of violence against other people. This is why we come under judgment. If we know that we are forgiven, this is not a licence to carry on

sinning. If we love Him, we will keep His commandments and His commandment is that we should love one another and people who love do not lie, steal or commit adultery!

September 9th

Ephesians 5 vv 8 & 9

It is only too easy to be negative, to list the things that Christians ought not to do. Sometimes this task has to be done as Paul has done it here. The danger, however, is that, if we only stress the negative, the *thou shalt not*s, we give the impression that Christianity is a joyless religion of prohibitions. We can become sanctimonious, feeling ourselves to be better than people who fall into the sinful ways which we condemn. It is vital also to emphasise the positive. The Christian life is not just about avoiding vice (especially the vices that other people seem most to enjoy) but it is about goodness and righteousness and truth, the fruits of the Holy Spirit. The Christian life is a life of joy!

September 10th

Ephesians 5 v 10

Surely we want to please God! But what does please Him? How do we know if our actions (our words and our thoughts) are acceptable to Him? Start from the principle of love. Do we love God with our whole hearts? Do we love our neighbours as ourselves? Are we doing this because we love the person we are doing it to or for? Is what I am saying loving? Are these loving thoughts? If we are in doubt about what loving thoughts, words and actions are, we can refer to the Bible, to the commandments, the promises and the stories. It is all there. There is not really any excuse for knowing what sort of conduct is acceptable to God.

September 11th

Ephesians 5 vv 11 – 14

The works of darkness do not bear fruit. We are supposed to bear fruit. We are branches of the Vine, which is Christ. Indeed, He says, *By their fruits shall ye know them*. The fruits of the Spirit are such things as love, joy, peace and self-control. Fornication and vice, dishonesty, greed, materialism, violence, a hardness of heart towards those in need. None of these things bears any worthwhile fruit. They are shameful. Jesus is the Light of the world. When Christ comes He exposes the shameful of the deeds of darkness, but, if we come to Him with a sincere heart, He shares His Light with us.

September 12th

Ephesians 5 vv 15 – 17

We live in a wicked world. There are all sorts of terrible things happening around us. Thankfully, many of the worst of them do not seem to happen where you and I live. It would be complacent, however, not to recognise the things that are wrong even in the nice places we live in. In many ways, the roots of our problems – crime, disaffected youth, domestic violence, loneliness, anxiety over debt – are the same as the root causes of really serious crime, war and major human rights abuses. The seed of these roots is humanity's rejection of God. And yet Christians are only too easily seduced by the ways of the world – too busy for prayer and worship, unwilling to stand out by insisting on personal chastity, too afraid to make a stand against materialism, unwilling to be “different” by not joining in the village gossip or appearing to question popular prejudices. It was the same in Ephesus 2,000 years ago. We are very unwise if we save our Christian insights for Church and live in the ways of the world at work, at home and when mixing socially with our non-Christian friends. We do them a disservice if our lives do not bear witness to the truth which is in Christ and we imperil our own salvation.

September 13th

Ephesians 5 vv 18 & 19

It seems that we are always being shown pictures of town centres in the early hours with young people “out of their heads” on booze or other drugs: fighting, fornicating, destroying property, intimidating passers by, ruining their own health and risking their own safety. Why? Because their lives are empty? They have not been taught to know God. Many come from broken families or families in which money, material goods and personal fulfilment mattered more than love and peace and self control. We can condemn. We can blame Government, parents, schools. But what are we doing? What are we doing to make sure that our families grow up in the love of God? What are we doing to pass on our faith to them? What are we doing for youngsters who don't come from Christian homes? Can we help with youth clubs? Do more to bring them to Sunday Schools or other places where they might learn about Jesus? Or do too many Christians either themselves emulate the ways of the world or else at least fear to make a stand?

September 14th

Ephesians 5 vv 20 & 21

I think what Paul is saying here is that the Christian's whole attitude is different. He or she doesn't strive for dominance. We know that everything we have comes from God. We know that He is still caring for us even when things seem to be going wrong. We are always thankful to God no matter what. We do not need to feel superior (or inferior) to other people. We are not greedy either for things or for status. We are humble before God and humble before one another. *Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.*

September 15th

Ephesians 5 v 22

When we reached the parallel passage to this in Colossians in our Bible Study group, I thought I was going to be confronted with a feminist revolt. Instead the group seemed more concerned about the loss of respect for authority generally in our society. Husbands and fathers being no longer respected was seen as all of a piece with our lack of respect for teachers, policemen, politicians, the judiciary and all forms of authority. This loss of respect for authority was tied in with a loss of respect for God. If people do not respect authority, they only obey the rules for fear of the consequences of disobeying them. If they don't think they will get caught or they are not afraid of any likely punishment, they will do just as they please with no concern for anyone else. Self-respect is tied in with our self-understanding as human beings, the belief that we have an intrinsic value and that we somehow let ourselves down if we do not treat other human beings with respect. Our self-respect is tied in with our belief in God Who made us and other people special. Our respect for the authority of human institutions in society is derived from our understanding that they ultimately derive their authority from God. We value ourselves and other human beings because we are all the children of God. We all exist for a purpose. We all are loved by Him. We all have our eternal destiny in Him. Each human being is of infinite value. This is why we respect ourselves and one another and the Laws that constrain us to behave rightly even when we feel like doing the other thing.

September 16th

Ephesians 5 vv 21-25

Whatever we think about the relationship between husband and wife or any other human relationship, if we are Christians all our relationships are based on our relationship with Christ. Surely this implies a passion. A human marriage isn't based on wise advice or a set of rules or relationship counselling. Marriage is based on love, even on passion. It is appropriate to use marriage as an image of the relationship between Christ and the Church because it is a relationship based on passion. He is passionate about us. He loves us so intensely that He gives His life for us. In principle it is possible for us to reciprocate that passion and offer our lives back to Him in an all-consuming fire of love. Many Christians do this. What is remarkable is that so many people who call themselves Christians are apparently so cool about their divine/human Lover.

September 17th

Ephesians 5 v 25

So now we can concentrate on this one verse which defines the relationship between husband and wife. If husbands in a Christian marriage enjoy headship, this is not domination; it is not an invitation to treat one's wife as some sort of inferior being, a domestic servant or a sex slave. As always in the Bible, power is indivisible from responsibility. The husband's headship is his opportunity to sacrifice self for the good of his wife. He will respect her as his equal, having her own needs and legitimate aspirations, and such authority he has in the marriage will be exercised for her good and for the good of any children and for the good of any other members of the household over which he is head (e.g. dependent relatives or domestic servants).

September 18th

Ephesians 5 vv 26 & 27

As Paul thinks about the relationship between Christ and the Church as a "type" of the relationship between husband and wife, he gets carried away thinking about the wonder of it all – how Christ loves us so much that He gives His life for us and makes us pure and holy through the shedding of His Blood and the Spirit filled waters of Baptism so that we may become one with Him, not till death us do part, but in all eternity.

The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is his new creation by water and the word:
From Heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride;
With his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died.

September 19th

Ephesians 5 vv 28 – 30

Can you get your head round this? We demean marriage by making it provisional. People expect to sleep together (to become one flesh?), perhaps to sleep with several people before they make the commitment of marriage, when they promise to love one another for the whole of their lives whatever happens to them and God formally joins them together in one. If things don't work out, the vows are set aside and the divorce court is asked to put asunder those whom God has joined together.

We demean Church also by treating our commitment as provisional. We drift in and out of churches with even less thought than we drift in and out of bed, our loyalty dependent on our getting what we want out of the relationship.

It is true that people whose experience of marriage is dreadful should be treated with compassion rather than condemnation. It is also true that some people have had truly dreadful experiences of church and great sensitivity is needed if such experiences are not going to be allowed to wreck their relationship with God. Maybe there are times when a change of church (or even a period of abstention from church) or divorce and possibly re-marriage are the right way ahead out of an awful situation, but the bonds between husband and wife or believer and Church are never to be sundered lightly. If we get to the point where such sundering is unremarkable we undermine both the sacraments of Baptism and Matrimony.

September 20th

Ephesians 5 vv 31 – 33

The essential unity of the Holy Trinity, God's essential unity with humanity, the essential unity of the human race, these are all summed up in the unity of marriage – a privilege available to the most ordinary of people!

September 21st

Ephesians 6 vv 1-4

Basing our family relationships on our relationship with God extends beyond the marriage bond. Our communion with God also determines how we react towards our parents and children. Even animals instinctively care for their children. Maybe you could even say that the higher animals love their children. But we are more than animals. We human beings are made in the image of God. Essentially we are His children; He is our Father. Our notions of parenthood and childhood inhere in our understanding of our status as God's children and the fact that He is our Father. One of the ten commandments is to honour our parents and it carries a promise – *that our days may be long in the land*. As the Bible Study group concluded when we were looking at Colossians, a healthy, stable society with proper respect for authority, wise laws and leaders with integrity, has to be based on Christian family life. Two things to note are that it does not say that we are to stop honouring our parents when we are grown up and they are old and feeble. It does say that the authority parents have over children is no excuse to “provoke” or otherwise abuse or exploit them. Authority in the Church always implies responsibility exercised with humility.

September 22nd

Ephesians 6 vv 5 -9

In the Roman world a prosperous household would include servants and slaves as well as people related by blood. The head of the household had considerable power over the slaves and servants. He was also responsible for their welfare and their conduct. He could be a tyrant. He could let them suffer through neglect. Sometimes, slaves were treated almost as friends or even family members. In Paul's day a Christian householder might have slaves who were not Christians, although slaves would very likely be expected to follow their master's religion (or at least appear to). Christians were often slaves in pagan households. In some households, the family and the slaves were all Christians. How was the Church to deal with these situations? The answer was to see all our relationships, whether with masters or servants, believers or unbelievers, in terms of our relationship to Christ. We don't own slaves. We do, however, work for other people and other people work for us (directly as employees or indirectly as service

providers.) The same principle will apply – to see our relationship with those we work for and those who work for us in terms of our relationship with Christ.

September 23rd

Ephesians 6 v 10

Do you feel strong in the Lord and in the power of his might? If not, why not? Could it be because faith does not have a high enough priority in your life? Do you have time in every day for Jesus? Do you think about Him as you would think about a lover? The best of Christians sometimes feel pretty low and helpless and, at those times, it is important to remember that we can cast our burden on Him because He cares for us. But sometimes our weakness as Christians comes from the fact that we do not cast our burdens on Him because He hardly enters our thoughts.

September 24th

Ephesians 6 vv 11 - 13

This passage about the armour of God makes a good Sunday School lesson. You can make pieces of cardboard armour and use them as visual aids. If you are so minded you can try to learn which virtues are represented by each piece. You can even test yourself on how many you can remember. But the point is, what are you going to do with this knowledge? Paul warns that we face powerful adversaries in our Christian life. We may know this passage by heart, but do we apply what we have learnt? When I was at primary school, we used to be taught our kerb drill: *At the kerb, halt. Look right. Look left. Look right again. If the road is clear, quick march.* Unfortunately it was found that some children would stand at the kerb, recite the drill parrot fashion and step into the traffic. They did not make the connection between the words and the effect the words were supposed to have on their behaviour.

September 25th

Ephesians 6 v 14

Having challenged you to think what we are really supposed to do with this armour, it is surprisingly difficult to think through the implications of Paul's words. Jesus is the Truth, as He is the Way and the Life. So that would be a good start. Cleave to Jesus as a man cleaves to his wife.

If we cleave to Jesus as the Truth, it is hard to see how we can be comfortable with lies, even minor deceptions and prevarications. As Christians, surely we must be honest in every day life and honest in bearing witness to the Truth when we have the opportunity to speak about our faith. If we cleave to the Truth, we shall be people of unassailable integrity.

Righteousness is what God gives to us when He forgives our sins in Jesus. Co-operating with the Holy Spirit in our lives, we seek to live in accordance with that righteousness which is God's gift to us.

September 26th

Ephesians 6 vv 15 & 16

I think the meaning of the *shield of faith* is obvious. We know what it means to have faith even if sometimes we are like the father of the epileptic boy in Mark, *Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief*. It is a good thing that a grain of mustard seed of faith is enough to move a sycamore tree!

The preparation of the gospel of peace? Is it that we are ready to receive the good news of Christ's peace? Is it that we are ready to share the Good News of Christ's peace? Given that Paul is talking about footwear, is he referring into walking in the Way, which is Christ, the eternal Word of God?

September 27th

Ephesians 6 v 17

A helmet is a defensive piece of armour. Salvation (= safety) comes from God. It is God's gift to us. Salvation from sin, the world and devil, salvation from the fear of death, are God's gift. All we have to do in order to receive these gifts is to ask in faith. We can trust in the protection of the helmet we wear because it is forged by God.

Many evangelical sermons have pointed out that the only weapon in this armoury is the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. They have deduced that you and I should be really familiar with our Bibles so that we have spiritual resources to resist temptation and also to answer those who question our faith. I am sure they are right about this, but remember the Word of God truly is Jesus and the Scriptures bear witness of Him. The Bible is the Word of God, but the Word of God is infinitely greater than the Bible.

September 28th

Ephesians 6 v 18

When you fall in love, you can't stop thinking about the loved one. In the same way, God ought always to be in our thoughts. Any thought can be turned into a prayer – confession, thanksgiving, a request, pure worship – just by remembering that we are always in His presence. Prayer sustains us as branches are sustained by the sap rising through the vine of which they are a part. Our prayers sustain us - both the prayers we offer formally in church and in our daily prayer time, and the informal prayers we offer throughout the day. We also sustain one another by our mutual prayers. Pray for our ministers. Pray for one another. Pray especially for the Christians you find it hardest to like!

September 29th

Ephesians 6 vv 19 & 20

We can pray for missionaries overseas. We can pray for the persecuted, for hostages and captives. People who have been in these positions often speak of how they felt sustained by the prayers of other people during their ordeal. Sometimes prayer is the only thing we can do and it is a very significant and worthwhile thing to do. Sometimes, however, God uses us as part of the answer to our prayers. We can send money or gifts. We can write letters, sign petitions. It would be odd to pray if we were not at least open to the possibility that God might ask to do something towards making our prayers come true.

September 30th

Ephesians 6 vv 21 – 24

We finish with that sense that *Paul's Church is a fellowship, a group of Christians who really care about one another, growing together in the love of God, supporting one another in their spiritual growth and committed to sharing their faith with the world. I am sure that the same principles still apply and modern English parish churches should be close fellowships in which people grow in Christlikeness, support one another in their shared faith and bear witness to the love of God in the world. That is what I try to support by my teaching, my preaching and by my presiding at the Sacraments and I pray that you support me and one another in this common purpose.

* I know that some scholars believe that Paul is not the original author of Ephesians. I haven't worried about that here. If he wasn't the writer, someone close to him was!