

St Paul's
Epistle to
the
Ephesians

Bible Notes
July -
September
2011

50p



July 1st

Ephesians 1 v1

Back to a more conventional Bible Study this month! Ephesians to me is about what the Church is and that is a vitally important subject. There are changes afoot in our deanery – specifically on the Hoo Peninsula. The details are not yet finalised, but what is really going on is that the Church is making cuts to meet the deficit – the deficit both of money and of ministers. It is obvious why governments have to consider cuts in the face of a terrifying financial deficit. If St Paul is right in Ephesians, however, there is no deficit; there can be no deficit. The resources of the Church are infinite. Why then would we be contemplating cuts?

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, who knowest our necessities before we ask, and our ignorance in asking; We beseech thee to have compassion upon our infirmities; and those things, which for our unworthiness we dare not ask, and for our blindness we cannot ask, vouchsafe to give us, for the worthiness of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

July 2nd

Ephesians 1 v1

I suppose I ought to come clean with you and admit that some scholars do not believe that this letter is by St Paul and rather more question whether it was addressed to the Church at Ephesus. New Testament scholars take Romans, I&II Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, I Thessalonians & Philemon as indubitably the writings of St Paul. They then say that the other letters attributed to Paul are written in a different style and theology and that therefore they cannot have come from the same author. People who believe that all the letters attributed to Paul must be authentic because the Bible would not perpetrate a fiction (even a literary fiction) get round the problem of different styles by suggesting that Paul (who was very busy and may have had weak eyesight) may have got a friend or a secretary to write them for him, but expressing his own ideas. Colossians forms something of a bridge between Ephesians and Romans etc. It is between the two in style and content. Some argue that Colossians is Paul's because it is like Romans and that Ephesians must be Paul's because it is like Colossians. The address to Ephesus is dubitable because it doesn't appear in the oldest manuscripts. Some people think this is the lost letter to the Laodiceans.

July 3rd (St Thomas)

Ephesians 1 v1

We will get started! I thought I ought to tell you what many scholars believe about the authorship and address of this Epistle, but I personally don't see that such speculation gets us anywhere. The received manuscripts of The Church treat it as being from Paul to the Ephesians and it seems to me to make most sense if we interpret it in that way. Paul, Thomas and all the apostles are called by God in Jesus Christ and sent to proclaim the Good News to the whole creation. Those who believe and baptised are saved. Those who are baptised are members of the apostolic Church, holy and faithful, as Paul says here. As members of the apostolic Church, they share responsibility for carrying out Christ's command to preach the Gospel to every creature.

July 4th

Ephesians 1 v2

Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. What a wonderful greeting. Here we have a model for the way all Christians ought to greet one another. Good things, grace and peace, come down to us from God. They are ours, but they are only ours if we recognise that they are ours to share. Grace and peace have no reality if we think we can selfishly hang on to them. We can only know grace and peace if we share them, with our fellow Christians and with the wider world with whom we are commanded to share the Gospel message.

July 5th

Ephesians 1 v3

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ. Two thoughts on this verse. What has God done for us? He has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ. This is what it means to be a Christian.

What is our appropriate response to what God has done for us? In the first place it is for us to bless Him – to be thankful to Him, to worship. Everything else in the Christian life follows from worship.

July 6th

Ephesians 1 v4

According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world. When I'm feeling bitter and cynical it often seems to me that some people think that they are doing God a favour by being Christians. It's their choice, proving they are better people than those who don't choose to be Christians. And it's very good of them to find an hour each week to go to Church and some of their hard-earned money to give to charity. God should be very grateful to them. So should the Rector. And, moreover, they ought to be looked up to in the community.

May I'm too bitter and cynical! What St Paul teaches is that it is a wonderful privilege to be a Christian. You didn't choose God. He chose you. He knew you before the foundation of the world. He knows you in all eternity. He has made you His own not because you are particularly good or wonderful. He has made you His own simply because He loves you.

Worship, then, isn't a chore. It's a privilege. Everything you have – time, money, talents – is a gift of God, to be received gratefully. You don't earn merit with God or man by grudgingly sparing some of your loose change or spare time for charitable or church purposes. On the contrary, you feel privileged to be able to share the abundance of good gifts which God has bestowed upon you.

July 7th

Ephesians 1 v4

That we should be holy and without blame before him in love. Nobody is worthy to stand in the presence of God except Jesus. God is pure love and our failure to be like Him makes it impossible for us to come into His presence and live. We have lost that sense of God's holiness and our unworthiness and this loss is very dangerous to us. It blinds us to the reality of life in this world and it imperils our eternal salvation. If we open our eyes to the reality of our situation, however, we see not only that we are unworthy to approach God, unable to do so without being consumed by His love, but also that He has provided the remedy, Jesus. In Him we are without blame. Our sins are forgiven. We are holy because God makes us holy in Christ. We can therefore enter into His presence and live eternally in love.

July 8th

Ephesians 1 v5

Having predestinated us ... according to the good pleasure of his will.

Predestination is a difficult concept but it is inevitable if God is God.

Given that God is omnipotent, nothing can happen outside His Will.

Given that our salvation is wholly by grace, it cannot depend at all on us. It therefore depends entirely on God. Predestination is the other side of the coin (the tails) of which the head side is the doctrine that we do not have to save ourselves. If we have a proper sense of the majesty of God, we have to believe in predestination.

We do not, however, know what or whom God has predestined. It is not for us to say who is not predestined to life, if anyone. It is not for us to doubt our own salvation in Him.

Neither does predestination deny the reality of choice. People do make genuine choices and we are responsible for the choices we make. We make free choices and our choices inevitably result in the outcome God has predestined. I don't understand how this is so but it must be so because the Bible says so and because nothing else makes any better sense of what we know to be true.

I can't explain it. The little I understand of Quantum Theory in Physics gives me some confidence to believe that there is no essential contradiction between on the one hand randomness and unpredictability and on the other hand the possibility of knowing what will come to pass. But I'm not sure if this helps. Physics is nearly as hard to understand as Theology!

July 9th

Ephesians 1 v5

Unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ. We are the people who call Almighty God *Father*. That's something when you think about it.

Our Father, which art in Heaven. The One Who dwells above the cherubim is the One Whom we are privileged to address as Father.

We were made to be the children of God. As prodigals we squandered our inheritance. The Father met us in the Son and restored us to our place in His house.

July 10th

Ephesians 1 v6

To the praise of the glory of his grace.

*We worship you. We give you thanks. **We praise you for your glory.***

Do you ever think about that? Why do we praise God for His glory? If you don't know, I can't tell you!

Our membership of God's family is to the praise of the glory of his grace. The Church is awesome and we are pretty amazing, being members of it.

July 11th

Ephesians 1 v6

Wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. The beloved of course is Jesus – we in Him and He in us. It is by the grace of God that we are in Christ and that Christ is in us. We therefore are the Body of Christ with all that entails for holiness, for fellowship with God and with one another, for effectual prayer and for Christian service.

July 12th

Ephesians 1 v7

In whom we have redemption through his blood. We must never lose sight of the fact that we are what we are because Jesus died on the Cross for us. We've been talking about the heavenly and the spiritual. But we are creatures of the earth, earthy. We live and move and have our being in the physical, material world. We interact with other people through the bodies of our flesh – whether for good or ill. Our human bodies lie and steal and commit adultery, just as they express kind words, offer a helping hand and sing God's praises. We have sinned in the flesh and Jesus takes our flesh to redeem us from those sins. The price of our redemption is the shedding of His Blood on the Cross. We ought never to forget what He suffered for us. We ought to be eternally grateful for the full extent of His Love. Our thankfulness for the pains He bore for us ought to safeguard us from the danger of taking our faith with less than the utmost seriousness.

Draw near with faith. Receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ which he gave for you, and his blood which he shed for you.

Eat and drink in remembrance that he died for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving.

July 13th

Ephesians 1 vv 7&8

Wisdom and prudence. What is the wisdom of God. *The wise man built his house upon the rock.* Wisdom is the principle by which God creates and sustains the Universe. Wisdom is the principle underlying and underpinning God's Law – the perfect law of love. Therefore *the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.* To be a wise man or woman is to act on the principle on which God acts. Rather, the wise person is the person who lives by the principle on which God founds and governs the whole of Creation. Christ, therefore, is the power and wisdom of God. God's grace abounds upon us in His Wisdom. It follows that, as recipients of His grace, we Christians naturally act in accordance with His wisdom. In other words, we Christians naturally lead Christ-like lives of self-sacrificial love.

If the theory seems different from the actuality here in that so many of us Christians do not appear to be much better people than we probably would have been had we not known Christ, I suggest that the remedy lies in the contemplation of God's Wisdom – a deeper prayer life, a more faithful reading of His Word, a more faithful participation in the Sacraments. Practice really does make perfect when you are cooperating with the grace of God.

July 14th

Ephesians 1 vv 9&10

Paul was a Jew and became a Pharisee. He believed that the Jews were the chosen people and had a special relationship with God. Before he was converted, he thought that Jesus was a perverter of the Jewish faith and regarded it as his duty to destroy the early Church.

On the Road to Damascus and no doubt subsequently, God revealed to Saul, as he then was, that the Salvation of God is for all human races, not just for the Jews. It encompasses not just humanity, but the whole of the material universe. It includes not only the material universe, but also the heavens. The Salvation of God includes the whole creation.

All this is summed up in one Man, Jesus Christ. The carpenter from Nazareth turned preacher turned condemned criminal is the answer to the question of life, the universe and everything!

July 15th

Ephesians 1 vv 11&12

Let's try disentangling this. Everything that happens is the work of God. He does whatever He does in accordance with His own Will – His Wisdom. God therefore always acts in accordance with His Nature as revealed to us in Jesus because Christ is the wisdom and power of God.

Saul had persecuted the Church, assisting at the stoning of Stephen and imprisoning many of the first believers. The other apostles had not had a very impressive record in the Gospels, usually misunderstanding Christ, lacking faith and deserting Him in Gethsemane. Yet they were not chosen for their evident merits. God knew before He created the universe that He would call these men. They were predestined. They were chosen by God in accordance with His Will, His Wisdom, which finally passes our understanding. These men were chosen by God to be the first believers and witnesses of the Resurrection of Christ. It is all of God, not of them. That is why Paul says, *By the grace of God I am what am*. We don't know why they were chosen. They didn't know themselves why they were chosen. But as in choosing us, the choice was God's, not ours or theirs. God graciously acts in accordance with His own wisdom. Our part is to accept thankfully the place He assigns to us.

July 16th

Ephesians 1 v13

My favourite King James Bible: *In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed...*

The NIV we use in church: *And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed...*

The Greek begins this verse *In whom you also*. It's so laconic that the KJV can't help adding *faith* and the NIV can't help adding *Christ*. You think about it. Paul has been going on about the apostles being chosen and called to be the first believers. Now he is writing to his readers (the Christians at Ephesus and all we members of God's Church who have read this epistle as Scripture ever since) and he says to us *You too. You too are in Christ by His grace, His choice, His Cross, you too belong*.

July 17th

Ephesians 1 v13

In whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise. God has extended to us this wonderful invitation to be in Christ. We accept this invitation by faith. Having put our faith in God through Jesus Christ we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. God seals us with the Holy Spirit. A seal marks ownership. We belong to God in Jesus Christ. A seal guarantees authenticity. Everyone who believes in Him is truly in Christ. A seal protects what is sealed. *We are safe and secure in the Rock of all Ages and his banner over us is love.*

July 18th

Ephesians 1 v14

Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.

There are two truths about being a Christian and mostly we believe one or the other instead of holding to them both. For some Christians, it is all about what happens when we get to Heaven. This life is just something to get through, maybe some sort of preparation for what there is to come when we die. More common these days are the Christians who don't think much at all about what is to come in Heaven. They see their faith as being about the way they live on earth and may have only the haziest idea about what they think of as an afterlife.

The truth is that we become heirs of eternal life when we first put our faith in Jesus. From the first day we believe, we live as children of God, praying to *Our Father, which art in Heaven*, trying to live by His Wisdom, enjoying belonging to His family. We have the Holy Spirit and we enjoy the gifts of the Spirit here and now.

But all this, wonderful as it is and thankful as we ought to be to have it, is but a foretaste of the joys God has laid up in Heaven for those who believe in Him. We rejoice in the gifts of the Spirit here and now but they are only a foretaste of what we shall have in Heaven when, we are told, we shall no longer see as through a glass darkly but shall know as we are known.

July 19th

Ephesians 1 v14

Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.

Redemption is buying back. You redeem your mortgage when you win the lottery. You redeem your suit from the pawnbroker when there's a family funeral. In the ancient world you might redeem someone who had been sold into slavery. An earnest is a deposit or first instalment of the purchase price.

The thought is that by rejecting God's love and disobeying His perfect law of love, we have sold ourselves into slavery – slavery to the Devil, to sin and to eternal death. The price of our redemption is the Blood of Christ. (This concept explains many hymns whose meaning is I suspect otherwise obscure to a lot of modern congregations.) So we are God's purchased possession, bought with the price of Christ's Blood shed on Calvary. We are set free from slavery to sin and adopted as children of God. We are coheirs with Christ and our inheritance is Heaven. We have not yet come into our inheritance, but the Holy Spirit as we enjoy Him now is the deposit, the first instalment, the pledge, of that inheritance.

July 20th

Ephesians 1 vv 15&16

In my last parish we took up an idea from a church in Deal. Every year (I think it might have been at Easter) we all wrote our names on a piece of paper and put them in a box. Then we each drew out a name. That was the person we were supposed to pray for without telling them for the coming year. Some people might feel that such an arrangement was somehow contrived and artificial. Whether it was or not, it is important that, as church members, we are thankful for one another and pray for one another. If we could practise being more thankful for one another perhaps we would concentrate less on what annoys us about our fellow Christians and more on what good people God has made them and what gifts He has given them, and praying for other people would be so much more positive than criticising them. Our fellowship would be healthier and we would be building one another up in the Lord as we are supposed to.

July 21st

Ephesians 1v17

The spirit of wisdom and revelation. Please help me fight the good fight. So many people think that faith and reason are opposed. So many people believe that Religion and Science are contrary to one another. Belief is defined as an unprovable matter of opinion, a private matter which should have no place in the realm of public discourse. Religion is for the heart, the home, the family and maybe the faith community, but it has nothing to say to society at large. Government policy, the passage of laws etc. ought not to be influenced by religious belief. The spirit of wisdom and the spirit of revelation are contradictory. Wisdom is a rational thing which you can share with any other rational being of whatever religious persuasion. Whereas revelation is something personal to you, quite possibly imaginary or delusory and not something you can reasonably expect anyone else to accept.

Please help me to fight the good fight. There is Truth out there. It is not always easy to discern the Truth but there genuinely is Truth to be discerned. No human science, philosophy or academic endeavour is infallible or even free of presuppositions which ultimately have to be taken on trust. Different disciplines have very different methodologies. Science is not the same as history is not the same as music is not the same as mathematics. These are all aspects of the Truth and can only be pursued in ways appropriate to each of them. Another route to Truth is religion, faith. There is rational deduction and there is revelation. Because we are humans both our rational deduction and our understanding of revelation are limited and often wrong. Nevertheless, the Truth is big, the Truth is infinite. We need to use every resource we have to discern the Truth and to share what we can discern of the Truth by what ever means are available to us – equations, experiments, music, drama, painting, literature, witness, whatever. Just because you don't know the formula for something doesn't make it untrue or put it outside the range of comprehensibility.

July 22nd (St Mary Magdalene)

Ephesians 1 vv 18&19

I think the best thing is simply to meditate on these two verses.

Almighty God, whose Son restored Mary Magdalene to health of mind and body and called her to be a witness to his resurrection: forgive our sins and heal us by your grace, that we may serve you in the power of his risen life; who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

July 23rd

Ephesians 1 v20

The main thing about the Resurrection of Jesus is not the fact that His tomb was found empty on Easter Sunday. The tomb would have been empty if the body had been stolen, as some of the Jews thought. It would have been empty if Jesus was a zombie (a walking corpse) as one of our children suggested. The thing about the Resurrection is that the disciples encountered Christ risen from the dead. They knew Him by His Voice. They experienced Him in their fellowship. They discovered that the Scriptures bore Him witness. They recognised His Presence with them in the Breaking of Bread. He gave them His Holy Spirit and promised to be with us always. The Ascension is the crowning glory of the Resurrection. Jesus takes the seat which is rightfully His in the highest place in Heaven. The Resurrection is Jesus taking His place in Heaven much more than it is an empty grave and much more even than the fact that He had fellowship with His disciples on earth for a further six weeks after the Crucifixion.

July 24th

Ephesians 1 vv 21-23

So Jesus is above everything. He is God. He is the second person of the Holy, Blessed and Glorious Trinity. He is above everything in the universe. He is above the angels and everything else in Heaven. All things exist by Him and for Him and in Him. And yet He is also a human being, a human being Whose love in His death on the Cross has redeemed the whole of creation, especially the human creation. *He has opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers.* This human being has earned the right to sit at the Right Hand of God. His Body is the Church. The Church's breath is the Holy Spirit. We Christians partake of His Nature and inherit His vocation to redeem Creation.

July 25th (St James)

Ephesians 2 vv 1-3

We used to have a poster at All Saints Orpington which said *If it were a criminal offence to be a Christian in this country, would there be enough evidence to convict you?* It often seems to me that there is not much difference between the way people who go to church live and the way other people in this country live. Is that because England really is a Christian country and even those who don't attend church always act in a Christian manner? Or is it because there really is nothing distinctive about a Christian lifestyle? Or is it that we Christians have effectively assimilated with the world outside the Church – our priorities being career, home, family, shopping, etc., just like everyone else's?

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

July 26th

Ephesians 2 vv 4-7

Dead in sins. How bad would you have to be to be described as *dead in sins*? I guess most of us think you would have to be pretty bad, someone like Hitler. We know the difference between good people and bad people and we and the people we know are mostly good people. Surely God must be reasonably satisfied with us. The trouble is that we and God judge by different standards. To us being good means avoiding the grosser sins like theft and adultery, being as generous as most people and maybe attending church when we feel like it. From God's point of view people either accept His love totally and unequivocally or they don't. Those who don't are, as a matter of simple fact, *dead in sins*. Such a radical definition of sin requires a radical remedy, the Death of Jesus on the Cross. On our complacent, human definition of sin, a fine or a prison sentence might seem an adequate expiation for our sins even if we ever admitted to anything serious, but, from God's point of view, our rejection of love can only be expiated by the supreme sacrifice of love. If we can accept God's radical definition of sin and radically repent, we have a freedom in Christ, through His radical remedy, which the merely conventionally good can never comprehend.

July 27th

Ephesians 2 vv 8-10

On God's radical definition of sin, no one is good enough. None of us deserves Heaven. Only Jesus deserves Heaven because only He lives a life of perfect love. Our part isn't to make excuses for our failings. It isn't to exculpate ourselves or to justify ourselves. It isn't to boast that we're no worse than most people and better than some we could mention. It is not to say that we ought to be allowed into God's presence because we are conventionally good by human standards. By God's standards, we aren't half the people that we ought to be. We are not worthy to come into His presence. If we just marched in, trusting in our own righteousness, we should be consumed in the fire of His love. We are utterly lost because we fall so far short of God's holiness. Thankfully, it doesn't depend on us. It all depends on God. God has provided the remedy in Jesus. In Jesus He puts our sins to death on the Cross and exalts us to His Right Hand in glory. All we have to do is to have faith and faith itself is a gift from God. God gives us the faith to receive His free gift of forgiveness and a place in Heaven.

This is not to say that God doesn't care how we live, that it doesn't matter what we do in our lives. God sets us free from sin so that we are free to live Christ-like lives, completing the work of Jesus on earth to bring in the Kingdom of God of love and justice and peace.

July 28th

Ephesians 2 vv 11&12

Having no hope, and without God in the world. We Christians so often won't let go of the world's priorities. We come to church if we aren't busy with something else. We offer to God some of the money we have left over when we've met all our expenses and paid for all our leisure activities. We find time for activities associated with the Church when we've nothing else to do. But do these worldly things really bring us happiness, fulfilment or satisfaction? Is life really nothing more than food and raiment? Is it nothing more than going to work, keeping the house clean and decorated, shopping, keeping fit and having nicer things than your next door neighbour and a clean car? Surely there is more to life! And yet, Jesus says, you can't serve God and Mammon.

July 29th

Ephesians 2 vv 13-16

Part of the time I was a theological student at King's London, I lived at Crouch End and worshipped in the parish church, Christ Church. I remember our church study group looking at this passage and looking to me as a trainee minister to explain it. So this isn't my first go at it!

Paul is dealing with two alienations here. God is alienated from humanity by sin. Jews are alienated from gentiles by race and religion. The gentiles didn't have the revelation God had given to the Jews through Moses and the Prophets. The Jews, Paul explains, had the Law and the Prophets, but they were blind to their true meaning. So neither Jew nor gentile was right with God and Jews and gentiles were prejudiced against each other. God deals with both alienations by the Cross of Christ. It is human sin that alienates human beings from God. Through the Cross our sins are forgiven and we all may know God as our heavenly Father. Both Jews and gentiles can only come to God on the same terms – through the Cross of Christ. That being so, Jews and gentiles are one in Him. Having the same heavenly Father, Jews and gentiles are brothers.

July 30th

Ephesians 2 vv 17&18

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Risen Christ. He is the Spirit of the Son of God. Thus He is also the Spirit of adoption, of our adoption as the children of God. When the Holy Spirit dwells in our hearts we acknowledge God as Abba, Father. It follows that everyone who participates in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, every member of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, is a brother or sister of every other member. We in the Church are family. Some of us meet together every week or every day in the same place. Some of us rarely meet and many millions never meet with us because they live far away or in other countries. Many more of our brothers and sisters are in Heaven, the Communion of Saints. So the Church is family and our relationships within the Church are family relationships. We often talk about Christ's commandment to love one another. We sometimes even use the NT Greek word agape αγαπη. There is another word for love in the NT, used to describe this relationship. It is philadelphia, φιλαδελφια, which quite literally means brotherly love.

July 31st

Ephesians 2 vv 19-22

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.

Elect from every nation,
Yet one o'er all the earth,
Her charter of salvation
One Lord, one faith, one birth;
One holy name she blesses,
Partakes one holy food,
And to one hope she presses
With every grace endued.

Yet she on earth hath union
With God the Three in One,
And mystic sweet communion
With those whose rest is won:
O happy ones and holy!
Lord give us grace that we,
Like them the meek and lowly,
On high may dwell with thee.

So a popular hymn summarises St Paul's teaching on the Church.

August 1st

Ephesians 3 v1

We're earthed again. Paul is writing this letter as a prisoner. Jesus was executed by the Roman state. Religion isn't all in the mind or even the spirit. It has practical physical consequences. We use our bodies in our Christian service. Our bodies may suffer pain or deprivation because we are faithful to Christ. We may suffer for our faith and it is worth it!

August 2nd

Ephesians 3 vv 2-7

I was talking to some Christian children the other day and I was very surprised to find that they did not know the story of Jonah and the Whale. I should have thought that would have been pretty basic. There is very much less bible teaching in schools than there used to be. Hardly anyone goes to Sunday School anymore, though half the population did so in the 1950s. How many families have Bible stories read out loud at home?

The Bible is a very precious resource and it will be to our cost that we neglect it. There is always something else to do – homework, sports, visiting granny, shopping, catching up on sleep even. The things of the spirit come last in our children's busy, over stimulated, overactive lives and most adults could hardly be said to set them a good example.

So when these children grow up they will not have a clue what Paul is talking about here, about how people of all races, backgrounds, cultures, personal histories, etc., can find their peace in Christ. Their lives will be very little more than food and raiment – sporting prowess, leisure activities, a job, money, selfish, exploitative relationships, a house, a car and finally a plot in the cemetery or at the crematorium. Surely there must be more to life than that.

August 3rd

Ephesians 3 vv 8&9

Paul describes what these children (and too many of their parents) are missing as *unsearchable riches*. Is this your experience of Jesus Christ? If it is, why aren't you proclaiming in season and out of season that Christ is all in all? And if this isn't your experience of Jesus Christ, why are you a Christian?

August 4th

Ephesians 3 vv 10-13

What Paul is exalting in here is the fact that it is the eternal plan of the One Who created and sustains everything that exists, that as many human beings as are prepared to receive His grace, have eternal life in glory with Him forever. This Paul has realised to be true in Christ. And it's such a wonderful truth that it is worth suffering for.

August 5th

Ephesians 3 vv 14-21

Wow! Paul prays for his congregations and asks for their prayers. This is the appropriate relationship between ministers and their people – a prayerful one. And what a prayer – that you and I might know/experience/understand everything that Christ is; that we might have His power working in us; that we might have such faith and love ourselves that we know the love of Christ and are thus filled with the fulness of God. Wow! This is why I chose Ephesians this quarter. How come the Church in this country is in decline? How come we are contemplating cuts even in our own Deanery of Strood? I think the reason is that we English Christians are not the people Paul prays we should be. I think further that the reason we are not is not that the power of prayer is in any way diminished but that we don't really want to be what Paul prays for. Imagine being prepared to go to prison for your faith. Imagine putting infinitely more time and effort into your Christian commitment than you put into your career or even your hobbies. Imagine putting a sum of money in the collection plate each week commensurate with the true cost of a living Church. These suggestions sound wholly unreasonable in C21 Church of England. In fact we would probably be worried by a fanatic who regarded a tithe as a minimum offering, refused to go to work or even out for the day if to do so would clash with a religious observance, or who defied the authorities as they increasingly try to ban Christian symbols from public space. Yet Jesus said: *For whosoever will save his life will lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it.*

August 6th (The Transfiguration)

Ephesians 3 vv 20&21

The other day I became rather fanciful when I noticed that the time as projected on my ceiling by the bedroom clock vanishes when the morning sun shines brightly. I thought of time swallowed up in the light of eternity. That is what will happen when we die or when Jesus comes again. I was also reminded that all the things in this material world of time and space only truly make sense when seen in the light of eternity. As I have to get up when I can't see the time for the light, I was also reminded that the vision of God inspires and empowers our earthly life as well as our heavenly.

August 7th

Ephesians 4 vv 1-3

Those of you who know me know that *walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called* is one of my favourite scriptural quotations. As a priest, I have a tremendous sense of vocation to a particular ministry. But simply to be a Christian is an infinitely high calling. You are called as a child of God. It is a wonderful privilege and a tremendous responsibility to be a Christian. Some of the implications are spelt out here – humility, patience, love, peace, unity. You know what it means to be a Christian. We see Jesus. *Walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called.*

August 8th

Ephesians 4 vv 4-6

We have this reading quite often in church and I'm always pleased when we do. This is the essential nature of the Church. The unity of the Church is not simply a matter of holding joint services with other churches. It is not just about ecumenical conversations between denominations and common statements on doctrinal, ethical or social issues. It is not even only the reason why we deplore divisions and factions within our own congregations. The unity of the Church is the unity of Christ. We are one because God is one. Each one of us belongs to the people of God on the same terms; we are all individually in the one Christ. We have one calling. We participate in one Holy Spirit. We have one goal – eternal life in eternal love. We are all the children of the same heavenly Father and are therefore brothers and sisters. If we claim to love the God we cannot see, surely we must love the brother we can see. We are united with God in love and God is love. Nothing less than love – unity in love – will do for our relationships with our fellow Christians. And that is why we deplore divisions within our own congregations and we reach out in love to other churches and other denominations, seeking to reconcile our differences and work together to the glory of God.

August 9th

Ephesians 4 vv 7-16

More student memories. When I was at Cuddesdon, I was asked to preach on this passage (I think at All Saints, Headington on St Mark's Day). To be a Christian is to be called by God. It is to have a vocation. We are called to be the children of God. We are called by God to dwell in Him eternally. We are called to glory. We are called to be one in Him.

We are not, however, all called to be the same. The Son of God came down from heaven and assumed human flesh. He became one of us and shared our life. He was lifted up on the Cross for our salvation. He effected our atonement with God the Father. He rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven. Seated at the Right Hand of the Father, He poured out His Holy Spirit on each one of us, the Spirit of adoption whereby we call God *Father* and Jesus *Lord*, and the Spirit Who gives to each one of us the gifts we need to do the particular good works He has prepared for each one of us to walk in. You have a unique place in God's plan and the Holy Spirit endues you with the gifts you need in order to take your part. You don't have to be afraid or to doubt your ability. You can do what God is calling you to do. He supplies the means.

If you think of the Church as the Body of Christ, you can imagine Jesus as the head and all of us Christians as cells or tissues or organs or muscles or limbs or whatever in His Body. We all derive both our vitality and our sense of direction from Him. Our vocation is body-building – to make the body fitter by training and nourishing ourselves and developing as Christians and by helping other people (other parts of the body) to grow. We are also into body-building by witnessing to the world outside so that additional cells are added to the body. What builds the Body of Christ is not anabolic steroids, but Christian love.

Keeping close to Christ, we continue in the Truth.

August 10th

Ephesians 4 vv 17-24

Lord, by your cross and resurrection you have set us free. You are the Saviour of the world.

When we become Christians, our sins are forgiven. We are set free from bondage to sin, the world and the Devil. We are set free from the fear of death. We are born again, born from above. There is no reason to live as if we were still sinners. There is no reason to live like people who don't know God. We know we don't need what they think they need.

August 11th

Ephesians 4 vv 25-28

To be renewed in the spirit of your mind has very practical consequences such as the examples Paul gives here. We know perfectly well how we ought to behave. We see Jesus. Why do we give in and conform to the ways of the world, often living no better lives and having no higher priorities than the people around us who don't apparently know Jesus?

August 12th

Ephesians 4 v29

Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.

To the use of edifying. Our words as Christians are supposed to edify, to build people up, especially our fellow Christians. But how often what we say is a put down. We criticise. We gossip. We make fun of. We show off our own superiority, verbal or otherwise. We put people down relative to ourselves because we ourselves lack confidence in Christ.

August 13th

Ephesians 4 vv 30-32

Paul describes here what a Church ought to be like. We ought to treat one another the way Christ treats us. To do less is to grieve His Holy Spirit, Whose work is to sanctify the whole Body. If our fellowship is infused with the love of Christ, such love must overflow into the world, commending the Gospel to all who hear.

August 14th

Ephesians 5 vv 1&2

It is more than I can express. We are to be followers of God. What can that mean? It means to walk in love? What love? It is the love of Christ on the Cross. His love inspires us and empowers us. It transforms us. It makes us what we are. It makes us people of love. It makes us people of such love that we would lay down our lives.

The heart muscle pumps all of your blood around your body. The heart muscle itself depends on its blood supply and the blood the heart uses to stay alive and keep pumping is the blood that flows in the coronary arteries. If these become totally blocked you die. If they become hardened or partially blocked, you experience chest pain, breathlessness and a general inability to function properly.

Can I draw an analogy? You are the heart muscle. The blood is the love of Jesus. His love flows copiously in the world. Your task (and mine) as heart muscle is to keep the love flowing. We in turn, like the heart muscle, are kept alive and healthy by the love, the blood in our coronary arteries. But if our coronary arteries are sclerotic or partially blocked, we are unable to function properly. If they are completely blocked, we die. How many Christians are suffering from a spiritual arteriosclerosis? The channels that allow Christ's love into our hearts are scarcely open. We are unhealthy Christians and failing the Body. We need to open our hearts to the love of Jesus.

August 15th (Blessed Virgin Mary)

Ephesians 5 vv 3-6

Two thoughts. The person who might try to deceive Christians into thinking it was all right to behave in these ways was probably the person who suggested that, if we are justified by faith, if God always forgives us our sins, it doesn't then matter how we behave. Actually, of course, forgiveness is being set free from all that so that we don't have to live any more in these sins which destroy us and other people.

Secondly, a thankful disposition is a good antidote to all these negative things. All these horrible things we do we very often do because we are feeling so negative, so alienated. If we are thankful – *count your blessings* if you like – the need to be so horrible goes away.

August 16th

Ephesians 5 vv 7-14

Every year it seems we have a debate about whether or not we should put back the clocks in the Autumn. We don't like losing an hour's daylight at the end of the afternoon. On the other hand, when for three years we tried sticking to Summer Time all the year round, many of us objected to the dark mornings. We'd rather not be living in the dark, but, unfortunately, there are only so many hours of daylight to go round.

Happily, the Light of Christ is infinite. So everyone can walk in His Light all the time if he so chooses. Light makes it possible to see what you are doing. It reveals everything that is good about you. It shows up what is wrong. Think of the sun shining on the windows you thought you'd cleaned and the sideboard you thought you'd dusted.

What have you got to hide? Why don't you walk in the light? Don't you want to see? Or are you ashamed to be seen? Paul says that we Christians are children of light. We walk in the light of Christ. There is no room for fellowship with the darkness if we have fellowship with the Holy Spirit of goodness, righteousness and truth.

God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and has given us a place with the saints in light. You have received the light of Christ; walk in this light all the days of your life. Shine as a light in the world to the glory of God the Father.

August 17th

Ephesians 5 vv 15-17

KJV: *Redeeming the time.*

NIV: *Making the most of every opportunity.*

The King James is nearer to the original Greek. The dictionary says it is impossible to be sure what the Greek means, but suggests the meaning in NIV is most probable! The sense of all these verses is both a sense of the importance of living as Christians and of the urgency of doing so. Being a Christian really matters. In Christ, God transforms your life. Only as a Christian are you truly alive. There can be no backsliding, to your old pre-Christian ways. Neither can there be any compromise with the way of the flesh, of ordinary unredeemed human nature. We are children of light. We can have no fellowship with the darkness.

August 18th

Ephesians 5 v18

This was a verse we often used to quote at college. Some who were teetotallers wanted to say that Christians ought not to drink alcohol at all. Those of us who thought it OK to drink in moderation pointed out that St Paul forbids *excess*, not any wine at all. We would counter with Ps 104 v15 God gives *wine that maketh glad the heart of man*. We see all the news footage of young people binge drinking, behaving outrageously, sexually promiscuous, ruining their own health, making life a misery for other people. Do you ever think this is the other side of the coin of a modern upbringing without God? The more privileged kids have passed their exams, got into university, excelled at sports, learnt musical instruments, and the less privileged have left school at 16 and gone into a minimum wage job or joined the ranks of the unemployed. Either way, they've no knowledge or experience of what really gives meaning to human life – a living relationship with the living God. Worth thinking about if you're one of these parents who thinks probably your children ought to go to church or Sunday School, ought to know the Bible stories and take time to pray, but somehow the time is never right. *The homework or football or music practice are always a higher priority. We mustn't seem to force even young children to do what they say they don't want to do. We mustn't ask our children to be different.* There is a price to be paid for being too busy for God.

August 19th

Ephesians 5 v19

Christians don't need to get drunk to enjoy themselves. Drugs and rock and roll are quite unnecessary and the place for real sexual fulfilment is in the context of life-long Christian marriage. Christians are happy singing *psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*. And if we aren't happy praising God, why aren't we? Do we take part in worship with the right attitude? Some people think that worship is far too serious to be happy when you're worshipping. If they think that, they haven't read their bibles and they don't the meaning of either *seriousness* or *happiness*. Some of us are just too negative. We don't like this or that hymn. We don't like this or that authorised form of service. We don't like the way someone leads informal worship. Well accentuate the positive. Concentrate on what is good about what happens in your Church. If you don't like the tune, think about the words and *vice versa*!

August 20th

Ephesians 5 v20

Giving thanks always for all things. Thankfulness is one of St Paul's favourite themes. It is so easy to list all the things that are bad about your life, all the things you have to complain about. If you want to, you can make yourself really miserable and you can make miserable the people around you. Or you can accentuate the positive. You can think about all the things you have to be thankful for and give thanks for them. You'll be a brighter person and you'll brighten up other people's lives. Often whether something is a cause for complaint or a cause for rejoicing depends as much on our attitude as on the thing itself. When we really have got genuine troubles or problems, share them with God in prayer and trust Him for the outcome. Cast your cares on Him *for he careth for you*.

August 21st

Ephesians 5 v21

When I first began this job I naively imagined that the councils of the Church would be holy places, that Christians would meet together in brotherly love to consider thoughtfully and prayerfully the subjects on the agenda in the light of biblical principles and the teaching of the Church. In fact the councils of the Church often turn out to be no different from the boards of companies, the committees of voluntary organisations and the councils of state, such as local authorities and parliament. There is too little about prayer and Christian teaching and too much about personality, politics and power. People take positions in a bid to be noticed, a bid for power. Then the rest of those present line up as their supporters or opponents. A big consideration is who is too important to be offended. Another is who are the major benefactors to whom we ought to kowtow. Often it seems that the actual subject under discussion is beside the point. If Mr X says we ought to do such and such, Miss Y will inevitably say we shouldn't, but had Mr X opposed the very same thing, Miss Y would have insisted we must do it. Equally, Mr X would never have agreed to anything Miss Y proposed. I'm torn between feeling I ought to exercise the authority with which the Church has entrusted me and the need not to provoke an argument.

Ponder St Paul's words: *Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of the Lord.* What would this mean in PCC or synod?

August 22nd

Ephesians 5 v22

The 1928 Prayer Book made it optional for brides to say *obey*. This remained the case in 1980 with ASB, the vows including and omitting *obey* being given equal prominence. In *Common Worship* it is assumed that the bride will not say *obey*, though she can if she wants to and the vicar can find the appropriate words lost among the supplementary texts.

Whether or not brides should say *obey* is sometimes still a matter of discussion as in the recent marriage of the Duke & Duchess of Cambridge.

What is generally now forgotten is that the old 1662 prayer book's words for the husband to say were once regarded as more highly controversial than the bride's *obey*. He had to say, *With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship*. Scandalised Puritans pointed out that we ought only to worship God! In 1928 & ASB the man says *worship* only if the bride says *obey*. *Common Worship* makes no provision for the man to say *worship* even if the woman does say *obey*.

What does all this say about what we think marriage really means?

August 23rd

Ephesians 5 v23

This is the doctrine of headship, which is much discussed in evangelical circles. But, before we get on to that, we need to think what St Paul teaches that marriage really means. Paul is saying that the relationship between husband and wife is analogous to the relationship between Christ and the believer. When we are baptised we become one with Christ. When we marry, we become one with our husband or wife. In both Baptism and Marriage there is a mutual giving of self. Christ gave Himself for us on the Cross. We offer ourselves back to Him. We offer our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice. In the modern marriage service husband and wife not only promise to honour one another and to share their worldly goods. Each promises the other *All that I am I give you*. The Christian understanding of marriage, then, is much more than a contract or an agreement entered into by two people to their mutual advantage.

August 24th (St Bartholomew)

Ephesians 5 v24

Now this is one of those bits of Paul's teaching that really rile some modern readers. So what do we do with it? Do we know better than St Paul? Have times so far changed since Paul's day that his teaching on marriage is totally out of date? Is it possible to discern the principles underlying St Paul's teaching and to apply them in our modern context in a way different from the way Paul applied them in his own context? I mean can we hold a sacramental view of marriage, the view that *the two become one flesh*, the doctrine that *God hath joined* husband and wife *together*, that Christian marriage is analogous to the relationship between Christ and the Church, without concluding with St Paul *so let the wives be subject to their own husbands in everything*? I'm not sure that I can. It seems to me that someone has to be head of the household. Someone has to decide finally. There cannot be a situation in which husband and wife have an equal vote and the vote is tied on every major issue so that they cannot decide, for example, where to live or what sort of education the children should have. But perhaps you can see how to preserve the principles of God joining the couple in one flesh in a relationship analogous to that of Christ and the Church without the man assuming the headship.

What I hope you won't do is to discard Paul's teaching on this as simply irrelevant. Christians really cannot acquiesce in the secular belief that marriage is just a partnership of two separate and independent people, which provides both parties with certain benefits and which can be ended if those benefits cease to be provided. Furthermore, there is serious risk that if we cease to believe that *all holy scripture is written for our learning*, we very soon come to a point where we no longer believe that any scripture is holy.

August 25th

Ephesians 5 v25

It might be hard for wives to obey their husbands, but look what St Paul demands of husbands – that they should give up their lives for their wives, just as Christ gave up His for the Church. Take up your Cross daily for Jesus, He tells all His would be followers. Offer your life daily to your wife, Paul tells husband. I think this is what BCP means by *I thee worship*.

August 26th

Ephesians 5 v26

We sometimes read Ephesians 5 as the lesson at weddings. For couples who don't know their Bibles Paul's sudden switch here to Christ sanctifying the Church and washing it with water is the point where they get lost. But isn't it awesome what this says about marriage? Marriage is not just an arrangement between two people. It is a cleaving of souls. And I suppose that is the point. Human beings are of the earth earthy. We have physical bodies. Adam was made of the dust of the ground. But God breathes into us the breath of life and makes us living souls. We are not only physical beings; we are also spiritual. Marriage has both a physical and a spiritual dimension and both are within the purposes of God Who has made Heaven and earth, body and soul. It just isn't good enough that people casually enjoy sex in one night stands, move in together informally, start referring to each other as partners after a while and then formalise their partnership by forming a marriage contract to last so long as they have no occasion to divorce. Such a casual approach to relationships is so much less than what God offers us in celibacy on the one hand or Christian marriage on the other.

August 27th

Ephesians 5 v27

Most brides wear white. Because we are supposed to use a special registration ink, we sign the marriage registers with a fountain pen. Very few people are used to using fountain pens these days and there is always a risk of spots and blemishes of ink finding their way onto the dress. This passage then seems particularly appropriate. Of course Paul is really talking about Christ's care for the Church, for you and me, and, by extension, the loving care a husband ought to show his wife. I don't care what the feminists says. Men are different from women, usually physically stronger, and they can either use their masculine qualities to cherish their wives or to abuse them. The Bible and the Church teach men to cherish their wives and women to cherish their husbands. If people don't want to be cherished, because perhaps it threatens their independence, maybe they ought not to get married.

August 28th

Ephesians 5 v28

Men are often accused of being selfish. Maybe they expect their wives to wait on them hand and foot. Maybe they expect their wives to mould their own lives around their husband's demands and aspirations. If men listened to St Paul, however, they would take so seriously what both Adam and Jesus say (*that the twain shall become one flesh*) that they would have as much regard for the needs and wishes of their wives as they have for their own needs and wishes, that they would treat their wives as they would treat themselves.

When we first started reading this section, it seemed as if Paul was asking a lot of wives – that they should be obedient. He seems, however, to me to be demanding a lot more of husbands.

August 29th

Ephesians 5 v29

I suppose we do look after ourselves. We certainly seek pleasure and avoid pain. To that extent we cherish our bodies – though I strongly doubt that Paul had ever thought about exercise regimes, diets or weekends spent at health spas! Looking after yourself in Paul's eyes was much more basic. He says *And having food and raiment let us therewith be content*. Husbands are certainly to look after their wives as they look after themselves. I like the thought too that Christ *nourisheth and cherisheth* the Church. It gives you a warm feeling. We don't have to worry for the Church or for ourselves who are members of it. Christ nourisheth and cherisheth us. He nourisheth and cherisheth the Church.

August 30th

Ephesians 5 v30

His flesh and His bones. In the story of the creation of Eve, Adam describes his new wife as *bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh*. That is the point of the story of the spare rib. Adam and Eve, husband and wife, are that close. And Christians are that close to Christ. He belongs to us and we belong to Him. We are *His flesh and His bones*.

That's something to remember when we pray, something to think about when we're worried, something to bear in mind when we feel we can't be bothered.

August 31st

Ephesians 5 v31

Sometimes parents have mixed feelings about their children's choice of partners. In some cases that is understandable! Even when the chosen young man or young woman seems ideal, there can be a reluctance to give up your "baby". And of course this explains a lot of the tension there sometimes is with in laws. What is made clear here, however, as it is in other parts of the Bible, is that the married relationship takes precedence over the parent/child relationship. Although we always remain close to our parents and they remain responsible for us and we for them to some degree, once we are married our principle relationship (after our relationship with God) is with our wife or husband.

We often hear of marriages ending in divorce and sometimes of grown up children neglecting their elderly parents, but we seldom hear of parents, especially mothers, stopping caring for their children how ever old they may be. So "for better for worse, till death us do part" relationships are possible in C21. We so often turn to our parents when our marriages fail. It's good that we can but it seems to me to indicate a sickness in society that it happens so often. We ought to be worried that people seem to give up on marriage so easily. And personally I think we ought to be worried about the infantilising of young adults, who seem these days to remain their parents' dependents almost into middle age! Can't we trust them?

September 1st

Ephesians 5 vv 32&33

Even St Paul realises that what he is saying about marriage is very deep and hard to grasp. He emphasises that his teaching on marriage is grounded in the relationship between Christ and the Church. Obviously marriage is very special. *Go forth and multiply* is the first of God's commandments and *a man shall cleave to his wife and they twain shall become one flesh* comes shortly afterwards. But how about other areas of our life? How about our careers? Our other family relationships? Our friendships? Where we choose to live? How we spend our leisure? What we do with our talents? Ought not all these things too to depend on our relationship with Christ? Shouldn't we seek to live the whole of our lives in His strength and in accordance with His Will?

September 2nd

Ephesians 6 v1

It is sometimes suggested that modern parents have lost confidence in their own authority. They can't say *No*. So children get away with refusing to eat proper food and eat too much junk. They are given the toys and games they demand. They are not made to do the things they don't want to do – like show politeness to neighbours and relatives they don't like. Maybe I listen to too many grumpy old men and perhaps I am one myself. Parents do, however, have a responsibility for the way their children grow up and God has given them the necessary authority first to impose discipline and then to instil self-discipline, which is much more important. It is much better to be a good person who does what is right because he is a good person than it is to be a bad person who does what is right only because he is afraid of being punished if he doesn't. So religious education is fundamental. It is not an afterthought for when homework, physical fitness and leisure activities are completed. Of course we want our children to get on in the world, but it is much more important to be a Christian than it is to earn a six figure salary or to have the body of a god.

Proverbs 22 v6: *Train up a child in the way that he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.*

September 3rd

Ephesians 6 v2

St Paul takes for granted the importance of the Ten Commandments. Rather naughtily the other day I suggested that most people nowadays only take two of them at all seriously. In the name of tolerance and multiculturalism, we feel unable to assert that the LORD is the only God and that He alone should be worshipped. Neither can we condemn the beliefs of idolaters, we think. Taking the LORD's Name in vain is just casual swearing. Keeping the Sabbath means no more than coming to Church occasionally if God is lucky. The rest of the day is just like any other day and we'd be quite annoyed to find shops etc closed because workers asked for a day of rest. If we honoured our parents and their generation, care of the elderly in this country would have a much higher priority. Adultery is regarded as not all that serious. How can you not have sex with someone with whom you have fallen in love? Lying is nowadays the standard response to any embarrassing question from politicians, officials and businessmen to the ordinary man in the street. Our whole economy is based on people wanting what they haven't got. So that leaves just two commandments we take seriously. Is the Bible wrong, then

September 4th

Ephesians 6 v3

St Paul points out the blessing of keeping the commandment to honour your parents. Our society is built on family life. Our families care for us and teach us our values. We have responsibilities towards them. God the Holy Trinity is three persons in a unity of love and the love of the three persons of the Trinity overflows to create and sustain the universe. A Christian home is a number of persons united in love and that love overflows into the world so that we all care for one another in society.

I am slightly troubled by the professionalisation of care and education. Quite young children are looked after for most of their waking hours by professional carers. This continues when they go to school. At the end of our lives we may again find ourselves cared for by professional carers and maybe find ourselves institutionalised. I am not saying that this is necessarily all wrong. Professionals can provide care that we amateurs can't. We may not have the skills. We can't care 24/7 for a highly dependent person. But professionals don't love us and I think it is also important to be looked after by people who love us i.e. family and friends. I also dare to suggest that it might be more personally fulfilling to care for the people we love ourselves rather than to pay for professional care so that we can go out to work in some humdrum job. Finally, I don't want the state determining the values our children are brought up with. Church and family ought to be the source of our values – not the secular state.

September 5th

Ephesians 6 v3

50 years ago it was widely assumed that people were religious because they were ignorant and poor. It was assumed that religion would die out when people became educated and reasonably well off. Britain and Western Europe were considered to be models for what would happen eventually in the rest of the world. There are three problems with this view of secularisation. The first is that, having allegedly outgrown religion, most people still feel the need for "religious" rituals. Hence civil marriages in castles and humanist funerals. The second is the resurgence of religion in Europe with immigration (Christian and other religions). The third is the USA. The wealthiest country in the world with an excellent education system is one of the most religious. This may be because Americans still base their social support around the Church while we rely increasingly on the secular state.

September 6th

Ephesians 6 v4

Power and authority bring responsibility. Physically parents are obviously much stronger than children. They have a great deal of control over their children's lives. Most abuse occurs within the home. The Bible is absolutely clear that power necessarily implies responsibility.

I attended a lecture a little while ago given by the Attorney General. He made the point that people in government are not above the law. They have an even greater responsibility than the rest of us to obey the law. This is why it is intolerable when we have these sordid little cases in national or local government when officials or politicians use the powers entrusted to them for their own ends rather than in the public interest.

September 7th

Ephesians 6 v5

And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord, giving thanks to God and the Father by him. (Colossians 3 v17).

It might not be easy to respect the people you work for. They might be bullies or fools. Thankfully, we have employment protections far better than anything in Paul's day. Nevertheless we might have no choice but to work under people we find it hard to respect. The Colossians verse teaches us the secret of managing it.

September 8th

Ephesians 6 v6

Whom are you trying to impress? It is often pointed out that you often find beautiful carvings in mediaeval cathedrals in obscure places where nobody ever sees them. Presumably they were done by some unknown craftsman purely to the glory of God. Do you do a good job to be thanked or admired? Do you do a good job in the hope of a bonus? You may or may not be appreciated by human beings for what you do. You may or may not be rewarded in this life. Surely, however, the point is to please God – and that is equally true of what you do in your profession, what you do on a voluntary basis and what you do for your family.

September 9th

Ephesians 6 v7

With good will. It's so easy to get resentful, so easy to begrudge doing the things we have to do. We may get fed up with the demands of other people and bored with what we do to earn a living. You must get the feeling I get. You cut the grass or wash the bed linen and then think *It'll all want doing again in a week or two. What's the point?* Well you can go through life resentful and begrudging. Far better, however, to things *with a good will*, do them as for the Lord. You feel better and you do a better job – which might even be appreciated by other people, not that that would be the reason for doing it.

September 10th

Ephesians 6 v8

Bond or free. Are you a slave or a free worker? Well of course you're free. That's one big improvement since Paul's day. Slavery has been officially abolished (not that it doesn't go on still in some dark corners of the world). It's worth remembering sometimes how much easier our lives are than were the lives of most earlier generations and are the lives of many people in the world today. Sometimes people tell me they haven't got time for Church or religion; it's all too hard with all the pressures of modern life. Pressures of modern life! They ought to try life in an African or Indian village or as a migrant labourer in an Arab oil state. They ought to try living as a Roman slave. Paul taught and millions have people have found it to be true in their experience that a right attitude, a mind centred on God, transforms any situation no matter how bad. That is no reason not to try to change society for the better, but it is a source of strength until such time as we succeed in making this world a better place. Paul and the New Testament do not teach us to be complacent about social evils such as slavery. They teach us both how to manage them and to change them.

September 11th

Ephesians 6 v9

The slaves can transform their lives by offering their bondage to the Lord. The masters, however, are reminded that they have a Master too Who will hold them to account for the way they treat their slaves/servants/employees. Decent working conditions and fair wages for employees and emancipation for slaves equally follow from this realisation that people in power are responsible to the Omnipotent!

September 12th

Ephesians 6 v10

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord. What would that mean? I would start with being in a close relationship with God in prayer. Pray every day at least once in an ordered way. Make a point of being thankful for what is happening in your life. Confess your failings. Pray for yourself and for those for whom you feel responsible. Stay close to God and offer up *arrow prayers* whenever you feel like it. God is always with you and you can always talk to Him. Don't fail to take part in public worship. The preaching and fellowship and sharing in the Sacrament are an essential aspect of your Christian life. The popularity of that old saying *you can be a Christian without going to Church* has diluted many people's faith to the point where it hardly makes any difference to their lives and has led to a situation in which a weakened Church is being forced to withdraw from many communities. Read the Bible. Keep close to God. Moreover, so long as you are able, live by Christian principles and do not compromise with the ways of the world.

September 13th

Ephesians 6 v11

*Let us pray for the whole state of Christ's Church **militant** here in earth.*

Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war.

We hardly ever mention the Church militant anymore and some modern hymnbooks omit *Onward Christian Soldiers*, which is one reason I won't agree to purchasing them! Of course we don't fight evil with evil. Christians aren't called to shed the blood of their enemies. But we are called to fight against sin, the world and the devil. We fight evil effectively only with self-sacrificial love. I was feeling militant yesterday. I attended a meeting which discussed the withdrawal of ministers and the possible closure of churches in some country districts. I said I could never vote for or support cuts in the Church and I was told I was unrealistic. But the Church ought not to have to cut. We don't face a deficit. God's resources are infinite. Here are some of my militant ideas.

1) Stop treating church-going as a hobby to be fitted in when you're not busy. Make worshipping in fellowship with your fellow Christians, obeying Christ's Commandment to break bread and hearing a sermon every Sunday your top priority, the keystone of your week.

- 2) Think about what you put in the offertory each week and make it a sum which suggests that you really do value your faith more than anything else you spend your money on.
- 3) When you allocate your time in the week, make what you do for Jesus your number one priority.
- 4) When you do something for the Church, give it your best. The RSCM principle that church choirs have an even greater responsibility for excellence than secular choirs applies to everything we do for God.
- 5) Take seriously your Christian calling to commend the faith to other people by what you say and do and above all by what you are.

There have been churches in this part of North Kent for the best part of 1500 years. For most of that period, our villages have been much less populous than they are now, certainly a great deal poorer. Most people were a good deal less well-educated than we are and had far less leisure time. We've survived plagues, famines and wars. I cannot believe that we do not have the resources to continue our mission in C21. We have the resources of people. We have time, talents and money. It's just that we'd rather keep them to ourselves than offer them back to God.

All things come from you, and of your own do we give you!

September 14th (Holy Cross Day)

Ephesians 6 v12

It is a spiritual battle. It is the devil who tempts people away from God to their own ruination. We have to fight. We have to fight for ourselves and for God's Church and for the world outside the Church, but there is only one way to fight, the way of self-sacrificial love. *Take up your cross and follow me.*

September 15th

Ephesians 6 v13

The armour is God's. We don't have to be afraid. We don't have to feel overwhelmed by the challenge which is facing us. The resources of God are infinite. The armour is God's armour. We only have to collect it from Him. Here's a thought. Suppose the whole congregation prayed together for the solution to our financial problems. Unrealistic? What if the answer the Holy Spirit gave us was that we should all tithe? Someone calculated that we need £8 per week per person. So even if we were all pensioners, we'd have more than enough if we all tithed.

September 16th

Ephesians 6v14

So let's have a look at this armour. Our loins are to be girded with truth. *Speak the truth and shame the devil.* Christians ought to be honest. We should be trustworthy in all our dealings. We should have no part in the sordid world of lies and half truths which surrounds us. We don't need to gossip, or to put other people down. We are called to use our tongues to build up – to encourage, to support other people. Our parish counsels should not be disfigured by any kind of parish politics.

Speak the Truth. Tell other people the Good News about Jesus. Stand up for everything that is *honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, etc*, in all your conversations with people inside the Church and outside the Church.

Let your loins be girded with truth. Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Live in Him and He in you. You will stand strong and you will be a faithful witness.

September 17th

Ephesians 6 v14

The Christian's breastplate is righteousness. This is the righteousness which is the free gift of God. When we put our faith in Christ crucified our sins are forgiven. We are justified. We are made righteous. This rebirth in Christ sets us free to live righteous lives. Again we are confirmed in our discipleship and our righteous lives commend Christ to the world. Because we are made righteous, the devil can't touch us. Because we're made righteous we shine as lights in the world.

September 18th

Ephesians 6 v15

Your feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace. I take this to mean that we are always ready. The Good News of Christ engrafted in our hearts makes us ready to serve God. It makes us ready to act with love in the world. It prepares us to treat other people properly, to share the peace of Christ with others by the way we live. To have the Gospel indwelling us makes us ready to give to our friends and families, our colleagues and the world in general a reason for the hope that is in us.

September 19th

Ephesians 6 v16

Faith is the gift of God. Faith enables us to resist all the trials and temptations that sin, the world and the devil put in our way. When we are feeling low, faith helps us to keep praying and to remain strong. When we are tempted by the things of this world, faith teaches us to have a proper perspective on things. When we doubt our ability to do God's Will, faith encourages us to persevere. Faith teaches us that God does not let us down. All that is required of us is that we remain faithful. Faith teaches us that we can make sacrifices in God's service, because we won't really miss anything we give up for His sake.

September 20th

Ephesians 6 v17

One of my quirks is that I won't wear a cycle helmet. In fact I'm dreading them being made compulsory because I think I'd rather give up cycling than wear a helmet. To me cycling is about freedom and you're not free if you're enclosed in plastic. Neither are you free if you have to obey some rule or regulation that some bureaucrat has imposed on you. Of course the reason we're told we ought to wear helmets is for protection. Well salvation does protect us. It protects us from sin, the world and the devil. It protects us from the fear of death. It protects us from the wrath of God. Salvation quite literally is what keeps us safe and safety is the gift of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Salvation is about freedom. We are free of the fear of death. We are set free to serve God and His service is perfect freedom. We can discuss and argue about what laws human beings should impose on themselves and one another. Sometimes we get our human laws right; sometimes we get them wrong. But the Law of the LORD is *perfect, sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb*.

September 21st St Matthew

Ephesians 6 v17

The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. How many sermons have you heard in which it is pointed out that the Word of God is the only offensive weapon available to the Church militant. Jesus is the Word of God, the epitome of self-sacrificial love. If we are to be soldiers in His army, we must take up our cross and follow Him. If we are to be effective soldiers, we need to be familiar with the Word of God made flesh to Whom God's written Word in the Bible bears witness.

September 22nd

Ephesians 6 v18

The secret of the armour of God is prayer. If we are to be Christians, we need to stay close to God in prayer. It is our relationship with God which sustains us. It is our relationship with God which inspires us. It is our relationship with God which enables us. If we are to be Christians, we need to be constant in prayer both for ourselves and for other people. God is with us at all times and in all places. So we can always pray. If we remember God's omnipresence with us, we can turn all our thoughts into prayer.

September 23rd

Ephesians 6 v19

Over the years, we've had a number of link mission partners through the Church Mission Society and I've always felt slightly guilty that we haven't done more about them. We should perhaps have taken a closer interest in the specifics of their work, describing what they're doing in special meetings or in the parish magazine. Maybe our Saints Alive (Sunday School) or Thursday's Children could have studied the places in the world where our mission partners work and the churches there. Definitely we ought to have raised more money for them. So I was very pleased to be thanked by one of our partners for the strength of our support. We have prayed for them and that is the beginning of all the support that they and we need.

September 24th

Ephesians 6 v20

In this parish we have a daily Eucharist (except Monday which is my day off). The early Christians seem to have broken bread daily in a fellowship meal with one another and with the Risen Christ. In the Old Testament there were daily sacrifices in the Temple and many in the early Church saw the Christian Eucharist as the fulfilment of Malachi's prophecy of a pure offering made in every place. On Fridays, the day of the Crucifixion, we remember at that service all those who are persecuted for their faith in the world today. Christians do suffer disadvantage, actual persecution and even martyrdom in a great many places in the world today. We ought to pray for them, to use what resources we have (letters to MPs, appropriate donations, etc) to attempt to secure their release and to use our freedom and prosperity to do what they can't – worship and witness freely.

September 25th

Ephesians 6 vv 21&22

There was a good deal of toing and froing in the early Church. The first missionaries obviously travelled from place to place and set up churches where there was a response to the Gospel. Sometimes they revisited these churches. Members of the churches travelled from one place to another. Messengers and helpers were sent. A collection was taken up by the churches Paul founded for the people in Jerusalem where there was considerable hardship. The churches wanted news of one another. They wanted news for human interest's sake and to inform their prayers. Letters were sent with up to date teaching, warnings and encouragement. Some of these have been preserved as Epistles within our Bibles and still talk to us down through the ages.

The local Church is extremely important as a centre of worship, a fellowship in which individual Christians are built up into the full stature of Christ and as the base for mission and service. Local churches can act as the yeast in the community, the salt or the light, transforming society by their prayers and their love. In C of E theory, the local Church is the diocese, but in practice it tends to be the parish and I am very committed to the parish which is why I resist church closures and I am suspicious of mergers to form teams or groups which I fear might lead to the loss of the local. I've always done my best to recognise that Cuxton and Halling each has a local church, to which I am called to be the minister, and that each has a distinctive identity and mission to its community while at the same time fostering friendship, fellowship and the desire to work together as equals.

But the Church is not confined to the parish. We are a fragment of the *whole state of Christ's Church, militant here in earth*. The Church in other parts of the world is responsible for us and we are responsible for them. There is a fellowship of prayer, an interchange of personnel and ideas, a sharing of money and other resources. We cannot pull up the drawbridge and cut ourselves off from the rest of the Body.

Moreover we members of the *Church militant here in earth* are in fellowship with the saints in heaven, that great multitude which no man can number. Their love and their prayers sustain our ministry.

September 26th

Ephesians 6 vv 23&24

We say *Goodbye* and we're told that it means *God be with you*. I don't know about you but I don't often think of that when I say *Goodbye* to someone. Some people say *God bless* which is a bit more explicit. The greetings and endings of these New Testament letters generally make explicit that we are all one in the Lord and specifically ask for His blessing on one another. Might be worth remembering in our conversations with one another within the Church.

September 27th

Isaiah 49 vv 1-6

And that he might reconcile both (Jews and Gentiles) unto God in one body by the cross.

One of Paul's themes is that it was always God's plan that people of every nation should become His people and share in His Salvation. It was never intended to be for the Jews only and not for the Gentiles too. Paul declares that this is a mystery only made plain through Jesus, but that it is there in God's eternal plan. This promise to the Gentiles can be seen in the Old Testament if only we have eyes to see. The Book of Isaiah has in fact sometimes been called the fifth gospel. It speaks of the LORD as Lord of all things and Lord of all people. The gentiles must be included in all people! Nothing and no one can be outside the mercy of the One Who is Lord of Heaven and Earth. Isaiah prophesies about the Servant of the LORD. These prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus, the One led like a lamb to the slaughter, by Whose stripes we are healed. It would be too small a thing if the Servant of the LORD ransomed only Israel. He is a light also to the Gentiles; He is God's salvation unto the ends of the earth.

September 28th

Song of Songs 2 vv 1-17

Husbands love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it.

I read recently that Pope John Paul II thought and wrote a great deal about the doctrine of marriage in Ephesians and the Old Testament love poem we call the Song of Songs or the Song of Solomon. We don't often read it out loud in Church though, in recent years, it has featured at some of the Easter services and in the list of suggested readings for weddings. Some of you may have noticed in today's passage a couple of verses of a chorus we sing with the children. One of the reasons that worship leaders hesitate to read the Song of Songs is that it is so passionate; some would say erotic. But the love of a man and woman is blessed by God. It is a good thing. Like everything else, it is the abuse not the use of passion which is sinful. Obviously fornication, adultery, exploitation, cruelty and such like are sinful, but Christian marriage is blessed and is indeed ordained by God.

A husband and wife are passionate about one another – or at least they ought to be – and so are those who have fallen in love and are contemplating marriage, though I would maintain that, whatever has become the norm, the privileges of marriage ought not to be anticipated during the courtship. Such a closeness implies a genuine lifelong commitment.

There is also a place for passion in our relationship with God. Surely we are deeply in love with Him. Our relationship with God is not a passionless relationship of acquaintances and certainly not a dull routine of duties done. We must be passionate about our faith.

It follows too from this that we ought to be passionate about our fellow Christians and our fellowship with them. Agape is not as cold as charity. Philadelphia is not indifferent good manners. Christian love is passion for God and passion for His people, passion for His Church. You can't really say *I love you but I don't care about you* and I'm not happy with saying *I love you though I don't like you*. There might be a great deal about you that I don't like, but if I don't like you as a person I don't see how I can claim to love you.

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

Total war. There is a conflict on earth between good and evil, a battle raging in the physical universe. We see the effects of evil all around us in the wars and famines we read about, the crime on our streets, the infidelities, dishonesty and violence we come across in our daily lives. We also see much good. We live in a beautiful world. In this country we do enjoy reasonable security and reasonably just laws and a stable, democratic political system. Our world is so organised that most of us are well fed, reasonably well educated and looked after if we are sick or destitute. Our world is far from perfect, but it is certainly not all bad. We experience individual acts of kindness and human love. The earth is a battleground between good and evil. We know we are privileged to live in a prosperous and peaceful part of the world, but there are signs of hope in many countries which in recent times have endured oppressive governments and poverty.

Total war. There is a parallel conflict in the spiritual realm – the devil and his angels versus Michael and his angels.

The Victory however has already been won. The key to victory in the conflict between good and evil is self-sacrificial love. The decisive Victory of good over evil is our Lord's offering Himself on the Cross as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. It is by His love that Jesus conquers the devil. It is by love that life triumphs over death.

Christians are baptised into His Death so that we may share in His Resurrection. The Victory has been won, but there are many minor battles to be fought before the war is over. *The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.* Until then we Christians fight with Jesus in the power of His Spirit using only the weapons of self-sacrificial love until all the power of evil has been overcome by sheer goodness. That is the magnitude of our task, but we know that the victory is ours because we are on the Lord's side and His Crucifixion has mortally wounded our immortal foe and nothing can prevent the coming of His Kingdom.

September 30th

Psalm 150

*Be filled with the Spirit; Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns
and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the
Lord.*

O praise God in his holiness: praise him in the
firmament of his power.

Praise him in his noble acts: praise him
according to his excellent greatness.

Praise him in the sound of the trumpet: praise
him upon the lute and harp.

Praise him in the cymbals and dances: praise
him upon the strings and pipe.

Praise him upon the well-tuned cymbals: praise
him upon the loud cymbals.

Let everything that hath breath: praise the Lord.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son: and to
the Holy Ghost.

As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall
be: world without end. Amen.