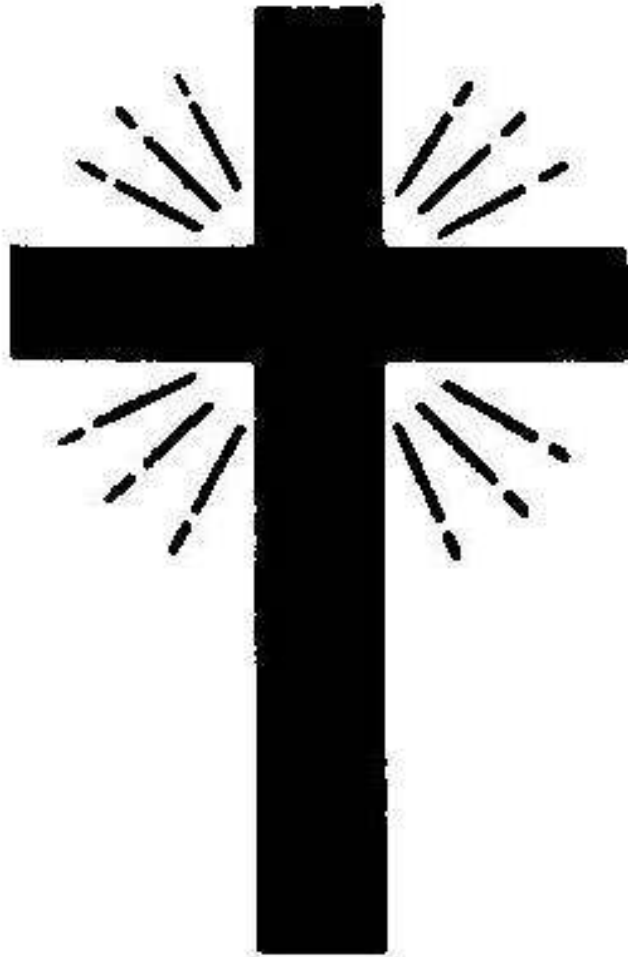


The Eternal Son



Bible Notes July – September 2016

50p

July 1st

Genesis 1 v1

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

Anything you can think of at all is created by God. It isn't just that whatever you are thinking about was created at some time in the past by God. Everything depends for its continued existence on God. This is just as true of spiritual beings, such as angels and demons, as it is for material beings, such as ourselves and animals and plants. It is as true for abstracts, such as justice and mercy and law and love, as it is for concrete realities, such as atoms or rocks or planets or stars. We should live with a continuous sense of our complete dependence on God and, as St Paul says (I Thessalonians 5¹⁸), *in everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.* A recent scientific study has shown that grateful people are happy people. That should be obvious. The very word gratitude has the same roots as grace.

I sometimes tell my confirmation classes that there are only two kinds of being. There is contingent being which always depends on something else for its existence. Ultimately contingent being depends on God. The chair was made by the cabinet maker. The wood grew as a tree. The tree began life as a seed and was nurtured by the soil and the sun and the rain. But ultimately, it all depends on God. The other kind of being is necessary being. Necessary being just is. It depends on nothing else. God alone exists necessarily without any dependence on anything. God alone is self-sufficient and He really is. God exists eternally as three persons and one God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

FATHER LORD OF ALL CREATION, ground of being, life and love;
Height and depth beyond description, only life in you can prove:
You are mortal life's dependence: thought, speech, sight are ours by grace;
Yours is every hour's existence, sovereign Lord of time and space.

July 2nd

Genesis 1 v31

And God saw every thing that he had made, and behold it was very good.
I am very thankful to live where we do. I am thankful for the health and the opportunity to take Tommy out into the woods and fields which I can enter through Cuxton churchyard. There are the grassy slopes of the North Downs. There is the silver river, sometimes glittering in the sunshine, sometimes shrouded in mist. I'm writing this in April, when the woods are carpeted with bluebells – heaven on earth. These are just a small part of the wonders of God's creation – the entire cosmos of time and space and we can scarcely begin to contemplate how much more marvellous must be His heavenly Creation which we cannot yet see. Not everyone is as privileged as we are, but there must be few people with nothing at all to be thankful for – no beauty in their surroundings, no love, no friends, no food, no clothing. That there are people who are in fact very much less privileged than we are should trouble us and lead us to do what we can to look after what is good and to share God's blessings with everybody. Being thankful for what we have makes us better people, more loving towards other people, more concerned to help them, less fearful of letting go of what we have.

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all men; [*particularly to those who desire now to offer up their praises and thanksgivings for thy late mercies vouchsafed unto them.] We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, and that we shew forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives; by giving up ourselves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with thee and the Holy Ghost be all honour and glory, world without end. **Amen.**

July 3rd (S Thomas)

Genesis 1 v26

And God said, Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness.
We've seen how God is utterly different from us. He is necessary Being. We are contingent. Everything that there is He created and He sustains. He is love and beauty. He is holy. He is infinite power and wisdom. He is so utterly different from us that we cannot even say what He is. Indeed, it verges on the blasphemous if we try. Any image we have of God is necessarily false because we cannot imagine Him. So the second commandment is *Thou shalt not make thee any graven image*. And yet the Bible says that we are made in His image, after his likeness. We are different from the rest of creation – different from animals, different from angels; we alone are made in the image of God. Theologians have disputed exactly what this means. Are God's image and likeness the same thing or different things? Might we have lost the image and kept the likeness at the Fall? Are we like God because we are creative? Or because of our special self-consciousness? My belief is that we are like God because we can love and God is love. I also believe that image and likeness are two words for the same thing. Whatever this verse means exactly, however, it makes us very special. It is not inappropriate that the Son of God became the Son of Mary. All human beings were made to be the children of God.

July 4th

Colossians 3 vv 15-19

- ¹⁵ *Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature:*
¹⁶ *For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him:*
¹⁷ *And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.*
¹⁸ *And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.*
¹⁹ *For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell;*

This is what S Paul has to say about Jesus. Jesus is a man. He is the image of the invisible God. This is what you and I would be if we were not sinners. Jesus is God and therefore one with the Creator of everything that is. Everything was created for Him (for us human beings?). We are His Body, one with Him and He with us. In Him dwells the fulness of God, as it does, by grace, in everyone who believes in Him. We are His temple, the dwelling-place of God. Jesus is what we were created to be and we are restored to be like Him through His Death & Resurrection.

July 5th

Genesis 2 v7

And the LORD God made formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living soul.

So human beings are of the earth earthy. We are made of the same stuff as the animals and, indeed, everything else. Yet, we are God breathed. We are living souls because God breathes into us the breath of life. We do bridge the material and the spiritual realms. And so does Jesus, *the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man.* Jesus is an infinitely more secure bridge between heaven and earth than we are. He belongs to both and both belong to Him. We in Him and He in us, we fulfil our human potential as the children of God, the potential we walked away from when we sinned against God. But His merits we are restored to what we are meant to be, the children of God.

July 6th

Luke 3 vv 23-38

Haven't got the patience to read all these names? Well go back and read vv 21 & 22. Then read v 38. When Jesus is baptised, God says to Him, *Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased.* In a way, the following verses show Jesus to be God's Son on His mother's side as well as His heavenly Father's. It takes some thinking about, but what I am trying to get at is the thought that the eternal Son of God, simply because of Who He is, inevitably becomes one of us so that we, who have forfeited our true status as the children of God by rebelling against Him, may be restored to our proper place in our Father's household.

He left His Father's throne above –
So free, so infinite His grace –
Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race.
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;
For, O my God, it found out me.

July 7th

Psalm 8

In this psalm, “son of man” just means human being. It is amazing, however, that God cares so much about us. God is so great, as witnessed by His work in Creation. We are so small, yet He has made us a little lower than the angels, stewards of the rest of creation. No wonder, the psalmist is filled with awe, as we should be too.

At Communion this morning, I was saying the words *It is indeed right, it is our duty, and our joy at all times and in all places to give you thanks and praise, holy Father, heavenly King, almighty and eternal God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.* I thought how obvious this was when Tommy was running and bounding through the bluebells at sunrise this morning, but perhaps less obvious for the member of our congregation attending a serious hospital consultation later today. And yet she can know that God is with her and cares about her and will bring her through whatever awaits us. Another member of our congregation pointed out that we have nothing to fear even in death, because God has promised so much.

Frail children of dust and feeble as frail,
In thee do we trust, nor find thee to fail;
Thy mercies how tender, how firm to the end!
Our maker, defender, redeemer and friend.

July 8th

Psalm 91

This is a wonderful psalm of comfort for all those who put their trust in the Lord. The devil himself quotes it. He quotes it to Jesus at the time of His temptation, challenging Him to cast Himself down off the pinnacle of the Temple because *He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands shall they be thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone* (Matthew 4⁶). Jesus, of course, doesn't yield to the devil's temptation. He is tempted as we are in every respect, but without sin. What we can learn from this, however, is that Jesus is with us. He understands. He sustains and strengthens us.

Have we trials and temptations? Is there sorrow anywhere?
We should never be discouraged: Take it to the Lord in prayer!
Can we find a friend so faithful, who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness ~ Take it to the Lord in prayer.

July 9th

Daniel 3 vv 8-25

Nebuchadnezzar was the Babylonian king who besieged and overran the city of Jerusalem, destroying the Temple, knocking down the walls and deporting much of the population to Babylon. He arranged that some of the Jewish boys so deported would be educated in Babylon so that they might serve him in his court. Among these boys were Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They were quickly promoted to the highest level on account of their wisdom. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. So it is not surprising that these faithful, good men were particularly wise. Other people, however, were very jealous and sought occasion to bring them down. It was their faith in God which offered the best opportunity to do this because it was only their loyalty to God which could trump their dedication to the king's service. In his pride, Nebuchadnezzar had demanded that everyone worship the golden image he had made. Naturally, faithful worshipers of the LORD could not do this and their enemies drew the king's attention to the fact that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had disobeyed the king's command. Note they know that God can deliver them from the fiery furnace, just as God could have delivered Jesus from crucifixion under Pontius Pilate. Whether God, in His infinite wisdom and love, delivers them or not, they will not worship any image. So Nebuchadnezzar has them cast into the fire. There he sees that they are accompanied by a fourth man *and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God*. So says the King James Bible and it is a pretty literal translation of the Aramaic. Some bibles have "a son of God", some have "angel", but I believe that Jesus was with these three young men as he is with all of us in all our trials.

July 10th (Trinity7)

Hebrews 2 vv 1-18

There is just so much in this. First of all, we are so privileged to know God in Jesus Christ. It is disastrous if we neglect our fellowship in Him. Why should we expect to escape the consequences of our carelessness of His grace? Then we see Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, in reality by nature exalted far above the angels, yet *made a little lower than the angels*. In other words (the words of Psalm 8 which we looked at on 7th) made one of us. As one of us, on the Cross Jesus becomes the victim of all human sin and also suffers the punishment of every human sinner. So we are His brothers and sisters and in Him we have the victory over sin and death.

July 11th

Hebrews 4 vv 14-16

Forgive me that I've used this analogy before. Which is the better school teacher, the one who understands his subject so well that he has no understanding of pupils who can't grasp what he is trying to teach them, or the one who really struggles himself with the subject, can understand why his pupils are having difficulty, but doesn't know enough about the subject to advance them very far? Jesus incorporates the virtues of both. Only He fully understands what it is to be truly good. He alone truly knows from His own experience how we struggle. So we can learn everything we need to know from His teaching and example and we can receive all the support we need from His understanding of us.

Yesterday, today, for ever, Jesus is the same;
All may change, but Jesus never, Glory to His Name!
Glory to His Name! Glory to His Name!
All may change, but Jesus never, Glory to His Name!

July 12th

Genesis 3 vv 1-24

The story of the Fall. Those who were made a little lower than the angels, those to whom God committed the rest of His creation exercise the freedom He has given them to reject Him. The consequence is alienation from God. In our rejection of God, we cut ourselves off from Love, from Life and from Joy. God doesn't give up on us. It says that He supplied our naked forbears with coats when He cast them out of the garden. It is also prophesied that the descendant of the woman, Eve (*man that is born of a woman*), will bruise the serpent's head. At one level, this is simply a reference to the bad relationship between human beings and snakes in general. At a much more profound level, however, it is about Jesus, Son of Mary, eternal Son of God, defeating evil and death, personified as the devil, represented by the snake.

For Judah's Lion bursts his chains,
Crushing the serpent's head;
And cries aloud through death's domains
To wake the imprisoned dead.

July 13th

Revelation 12 vv 1-17

In a parish in which one of our churches is dedicated to St Michael & All Angels we cannot omit this description of the fulfilment of the prophecy in Genesis 3. The woman is Eve or Mary. The child is humanity or Jesus. The dragon is the devil, who would destroy everything if he could, who would extinguish life in universal eternal death. His warfare is against Adam, who represents humanity. His fight is against all humanity. He tries to kill Jesus, Who represents humanity, Whose life and death and resurrection will actually redeem humanity, contrary to the devil's purpose and expectation. Michael is the leader of the heavenly host, the champion of the army of the Lord of Hosts. His victory is Christ's victory, on earth as it is in heaven. The devil is utterly defeated by the love of Jesus, by the sacrifice of overwhelming love, the shedding of the Blood of the Lamb of God. Those who believe in Him are perfectly safe from the devil, just as the ancient Hebrews were protected from the angel of death by the blood of the lamb applied to the doorposts of their houses on the first Passover night. Nevertheless, defeated though he is, the devil is still active on earth, not least in attempting to undermine the Christian Church, the people of God.

The Cross he bore is life and health, though shame and death to him;

His people's hope, his people's wealth, their everlasting theme.

July 14th

Genesis 12 vv 1-5

In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

God's promises to Abraham. In the first instance, they refer to Abraham's descendants possessing the Land of Canaan and dwelling there for ever. The full consummation, however, is in Jesus, the seed of Abraham in whom all the families of the earth are blessed. This full consummation includes everybody – Jew and Gentile – who shares the faith of faithful Abraham. All Christians are children of Abraham. We are all the children of God. So where does that leave the Jews and the promise that they would possess the Land of Israel? Some people believe that that first meaning of the promise still applies and that, therefore, the Jews still have a right to possess the Promised Land. Some people think that the promise is swallowed up and fulfilled in the much more comprehensive promise that all Abraham's children are citizens of heaven. I'm not quite sure about this, but I am sure that the people of God cannot fulfil their vocation if they persecute the Palestinians. *O pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee.*

July 15th

John 8 vv 47-59

Before Abraham was, I am.

Being a descendant of Abraham after the flesh doesn't make you righteous. What you must do to be right with God is to believe in Him. God makes Himself known in Jesus Christ. Jesus fulfils the promise made to Abraham. Indeed He is the promise of God to Abraham and to the whole human race. He is not yet fifty years old at the time of this discussion with the Jews and yet Abraham (who lived a thousand years earlier) rejoiced to see His day. Jesus is the eternal Son of God as well as the descendant of Abraham, both after the flesh and in that He was faithful even unto death.

Thou art the King of Glory: O Christ.

Thou art the everlasting Son: of the Father.

When thou tookest upon thee to deliver man: thou didst not abhor the Virgin's womb.

When thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death: thou didst open the Kingdom of heaven to all believers.

Thou sittest at the right hand of God: in the Glory of the Father.

We believe that thou shalt come: to be our Judge.

We therefore pray thee, help thy servants: whom that hast redeemed with thy precious blood.

Make them to be numbered with thy saints in glory everlasting.

July 16th

Genesis 22 vv 1-19

This is a terrible story! Imagine being Abraham or Isaac when all this happened or even the men left waiting at the foot of Mount Moriah. This is supposed to be the same mountain as Mount Zion, where the temple is built and you can see the rock where it is claimed that Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son. The plain meaning of the story is that Abraham's faith is tried to the utmost and doesn't fail. It would be even harder to sacrifice your child than to sacrifice your own life. Because of Abraham's faith, God confirms the promise *in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice*. It is also often believed that God was demonstrating to Abraham that human sacrifice is not required. The pagans did sacrifice human beings in their worship. The people of God do not offer human sacrifice. And yet *My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering*. The Lamb of God is the Son of God. If Abraham was faithful, how faithful is God. Romans 8³¹ *He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with also freely give us all things?*

July 17th (Trinity 8)

Galatians 3 vv 16-29

S Paul is explaining to the Galatian Christians why we are not justified by keeping the Law. We cannot be good enough to deserve the love of God. Thankfully, He loves us as we are. What we receive from God is not what we deserve (to be banished from His sight in eternal punishment) but what He freely gives in accordance with His promises (eternal life in Christ). We receive God's promises by faith. *Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness*. The children of Abraham are not the people who keep the Law, which was given by God to Moses 430 years after the promises to Abraham. The children of Abraham are those who share Abraham's faith in God. They are the children of the covenant with Abraham and his seed (singular). The seed of Abraham Who fulfils the promise is Christ. In Christ, we are all the seed of Abraham, whatever our race or gender or social class. The Law is for the immature, for bad people. Good people, mature Christians, don't need the law because they are good by nature. A good tree produces good fruit. We only need law insofar as we are not yet made perfect in Christ. We don't need the Law to make us right with God. We aren't good to get God to love us. We're good because God loves us. We are His children, citizens of heaven, heirs of the promise by grace through faith. Say the Magnificat in this light. (I'm sure you will see why I object to modern translations which substitute the necessarily plural *children* for the ambiguously singular or plural *seed* in the last verse. MY soul doth magnify the Lord : and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

For he hath regarded : the lowliness of his hand-maiden.

For behold, from henceforth : all generations shall call me blessed.

For he that is mighty hath magnified me : and holy is his Name.

And his mercy is on them that fear him : throughout all generations.

He hath shewed strength with his arm : he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seat : and hath exalted the humble and meek.

He hath filled the hungry with good things : and the rich he hath sent empty away.

He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel : as he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed, for ever.

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.

July 18th

Genesis 49 vv 8-12

This chapter is often read on one of the weekdays before Christmas and congregations are puzzled as to why. It is the story of Jacob in Egypt at the end of his life prophesying what will befall the tribes of Israel who will descend from his sons. The prophecy regarding the Tribe of Judah has been interpreted by Christians as referring to Jesus. The lion is a symbol of strength. It talks about the sceptre – the symbol of kingly rule. It speaks of a law-giver. Certainly Jesus teaches us the way of God. He summarises the Law as love. He explicates the meaning of love in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Jesus is the Way. The passage also refers to the shedding of blood, the sacrifice of self than which there is no greater love.

July 19th

Revelation 5 vv 1-14

The book is God's blueprint for His Creation and its redemption. Only Jesus can unlock God's plan. He makes God known because He is the Word of God. The Word of God effects what it communicates. He does what He says! Jesus is God's Will for the world and Jesus makes God's Will happen. The original prophecy in Genesis very likely first referred to King David of the Tribe of Judah and his anointed descendants reigning in Jerusalem. Jesus is the Lion of Judah and the Root of David, the anointed king, not just of Israel, but the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, *God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, begotten not made, Being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made: Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man.*

And the Lion of Judah, the King of Kings, is also a Lamb as it had been slain. *And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried.*

And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, And ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of the Father.

Well might we join in worship with every creature which is in heaven, on earth, and under the earth.

July 20th

Isaiah 11 vv 1-10

Recently I've read a couple of articles about whether animals suffer. We can observe that they experience pain and pain is necessary to prevent them and us from carelessly injuring ourselves. But do animals suffer in the sense of the enduring fear and distress caused by pain in the same way a human being suffering from a long term disease or undergoing torture or punishment would experience it? We can't really know because it would depend on how similar to our consciousness animals' self-consciousness might be. What is more, there would surely be a huge difference between the self-consciousness of a slug and that of a pet dog. It has been said that we will never know what it feels like to be a bat. It has also been said that if a lion could talk we wouldn't understand him because we've no idea how a lion thinks. There is an interesting story about the missionary David Livingstone when he was mauled by a lion. He said it didn't hurt as much as you might expect. C S Lewis pointed out that animals probably don't fear future pain as we do because they can't imagine what might happen tomorrow. A part of the brain particularly significant in the way human beings experience pain is the pre-frontal cortex. Some people with terrible intractable, chronic pain, have had the connections to the pre-frontal cortex surgically removed. Many of them have felt very much better. Some have talked about still feeling the pain but it no longer troubling them. Animals don't have a pre-frontal cortex like ours and therefore may not suffer the same way as we suffer. However, it isn't safe to rely on that. Some people who have their pre-frontal cortex connections severed find that the pain comes back worse.

I thought of this passage because Jesus is portrayed both as lion and lamb and the prophecy is that they shall all lie down together when the rod of Jesse's stem (Jesse being David's father), the Messiah reigns in His Kingdom. The prophecy indicates to me that every kind of violence and suffering in nature as well as in the human realm, have no place in the coming Kingdom of God.

Hail to the Lord's Anointed, great David's greater Son!
Hail, in the time appointed, his reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression, to set the captive free,
To take away transgression, and rule in equity.

July 21st

Psalms 110 vv 1-7

This is a psalm appointed for use on Christmas Day. Jesus Himself referred this psalm to Himself as the Messiah. The psalm is addressed by David to the coming King, but the coming King is far more than David's great, great, great, grandson, far greater than David himself. David addresses Him as Lord. It is the LORD who places David's Lord (and ours) on the eternal throne, not merely of Jerusalem, but of heaven itself.

The psalm also hails the Messiah as a priest. Israelite kings were most definitely not priests, so what does this mean?

July 22nd (S Mary Magdalene)

Hebrews 7 vv 14-28

Moses appointed hereditary priests of the Tribe of Levi (his own tribe). A priest of the Tribe of Judah is a fresh start, something utterly new and yet with its roots in God's eternal purposes. Melchizedek was king and priest in Jerusalem in the time of Abraham, 450 years before God gave Moses the law. Melchizedek's priesthood is prior to the priesthood of Aaron and all the Israelite priests who ministered in the Temple at Jerusalem. Melchizedek's priesthood prefigures Christ Who is the great High Priest. His offering of Himself for sin is unrepeatable. It is *full, perfect, and sufficient*. It fits us for eternal life in Him

July 23rd

Numbers 22 vv 1-15

You'll have to wait to see what this has to do with animals and the Messiah, but it's one of those stories that was once taken for granted and perhaps is now little known. The Israelites are now in the mountainous lands west of the River Jordan. They need food and water for themselves and for their flocks and herds. They are also looking for a place to settle. So naturally, the existing inhabitants are worried. I can't help thinking of the reaction in many settled, prosperous countries to the influx of thousands of migrants, fleeing war zones and abject poverty. Balak's reaction is to curse the migrant hordes. If you are like me, you are torn both ways. I can't curse the migrant hordes. I can't honestly say that they shouldn't try to get away from bloodshed and hardship. Yet I don't really want to see this country becoming more crowded and more multi-cultural. There's a topic for prayer.

July 24th (Trinity 9)

Numbers 22 vv 16-21

Here's a good prayer for us in these circumstances, today's collect:
Grant to us, Lord, we beseech thee, the spirit to think and do
always such things as be rightful; that we, who cannot do any
thing that is good without thee, may by thee be enabled to live
according to thy will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now the donkey comes into the story.

July 25th (S James)

Numbers 22 vv 22-35

Wittgenstein maintained that we wouldn't be able to understand a talking lion, but Balaam understands a talking donkey. The implication in II Peter 2^{15&16}, one place where this is discussed in the New Testament, is that Balaam's scruples about cursing the Israelites were overwhelmed by his desire for the gifts Balak offered. Peter calls them *the wages of unrighteousness*. Of course Peter (and James whose feast is today) left their gainful employment as fishermen and followed Jesus to become fishers of men. We could be distracted by wondering whether or not a donkey could and did speak. That would be to miss the point, however. The point is do we obey God or do we disobey God in the hope of gain in this world?

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

Numbers 23 vv 36-41

You can obviously read more of this story if you wish. What happens now is that Balak obviously expects Balaam to curse the Israelites for him. Balaam, however, has learnt his lesson. He now knows that he can only say the words which God puts into his mouth. Instead of cursing the Israelites, he blesses them. I wonder if we are always alive to the uncompromising nature of the Gospel? Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. We live in a world in which many people think that there are no absolutes and tolerance is everything. But there are truth and falsehood and there is no place for the tolerance of evil.

July 27th

Numbers 24 vv 15-19

Well, we've had the animal, now the allusion to the Messiah. This reading is sometimes regarded as prefiguring the Epiphany. In its original context, of course, it refers to the Israelite leader and his army defeating their enemies on their Eastern border. Later it came to be interpreted in terms of Jesus and His victory over the powers of evil. Note that He is not overcome of evil, but overcomes evil with good (Romans 12²¹). In the original context, the Moabites and Edomites are gentiles, excluded from the people of God, personifications of rebellion against God and its consequences, but in the Epiphany story, we see the star manifesting God's glory to us gentiles that our rebellion may be forgiven and that we may be incorporated into the people of God.

O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles: Mercifully grant, that we, which know thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of thy glorious Godhead; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

July 28th

Deuteronomy 18 v15

The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken.

Moses was special. In Exodus 33¹¹ it says *And the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend*. Moses was astonishingly privileged to be entrusted with the Word of God for the people of God. He communicated to them the design for the tabernacle which was modelled on the reality of heaven itself. He gave them the Law of God. He ministered the covenant. He led them to the border of the Promised Land. But what would they do when Moses died? God would raise up a prophet. A prophet is a messenger of God. A prophet is commissioned to speak the Word of God. The Word of God effects what it communicates. It does what it says! Hebrews 4¹² *For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.* ¹³ *Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.* There were many prophets down through the ages, but the prophet like and infinitely greater than Moses is Jesus, Who is also the Word.

July 29th

Malachi 3 v1 and 4 vv 1-6

Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament. Turn over the page and you start Matthew with our Lord's place in the genealogy of the people of God, His annunciation by the angel to Joseph in a dream and His birth at Bethlehem. Christians reading this will know that the Lord, whom ye seek, coming suddenly to His temple is Jesus. They will also remember the Christmas Carol about Jesus the Sun of Righteousness risen with healing in his wings. Then there is the reference back to Moses who received the Law on Mt Sinai (also called Horeb) and the promise that Elijah (who also had a vision of God on Mt Horeb, when he heard the still, small voice of calm) will come to prepare the Day of the LORD. Elijah represents the prophets, those, like Moses, who bring the Word of the LORD to God's people and to the world in general.

July 30th

Luke 9 vv 28-36

Who appeared in glory and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem.

The word Luke uses for decease is Exodus. So Jesus fulfils the Law and the prophets. In Him the mission God gave to Moses and Elijah, to the entire people of God, is fulfilled. Jesus is the Son of God, the Word. *Listen to Him*, says God Himself.

July 31st (Trinity 10)

Hebrews 3 vv 1-6

This isn't as complicated as it looks. Moses served in the household of God. He was a faithful servant, one of the most privileged men ever to live. *And the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend.* But Moses was, in the end, just a servant. Jesus is the Son in the household. He is of *one substance* with the One Who built the house, the One Who created everything that is. The heavens are the dwelling-place of God. The earth is His footstool. Even the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him. The fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily in Jesus. The Church is the Temple of the Holy Spirit. We are the Temple of the Holy Spirit. God dwells in us. We Christian people are the house of God and we are the household of God. We dwell in Jesus and He dwells in us. He is our brother. We are co-heirs with Him of all the promises of God. Moses was one of the greatest men who ever lived. Jesus fulfils everything that Moses imperfectly stood for (God's perfect Law of Love, His promise of salvation, His presence with His people) and we, you & I, inherit all that as members of His Church.

August 1st

Matthew 17 vv 1-13

This is Matthew's account of the Transfiguration, which differs in some respects from Luke's. It's such a wonderful story that it's worth reading it again if only to bask in the glory of the Saviour. I'm including it today because Luke omits the debate about Elijah which follows after their tremendous spiritual appearance. Elijah could be thought of as personifying the prophet like Moses who, after Moses' death, will bring God's Word to His people. The reading we read at the end of Malachi indicates that Elijah will return *before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD*. This the Day of Justice, when the innocent are vindicated and the wicked receive what they deserve. The prophets warn the people of God about complacency regarding the Judgment. Judgment begins with the household of God. After all, we ought to know better. Our only hope on the Day of Judgment is faith in Jesus Christ, the only truly innocent, Who bore in His Body the sins of the whole world. Those of you who have shared in our Passover suppers will know that a seat is kept for Elijah and, at the end, a child is sent to see if he is coming. John the Baptist fulfils Elijah's vocation, *to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.* (Luke 1¹⁷). *Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.* (Matthew 3², John the Baptist & 4¹⁷, Jesus. They come with the same Word of the Lord.)

August 2nd

Deuteronomy 34 vv 1-12

There was never was never a prophet quite like Moses (*And the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend.*) until Jesus Who so far transcended even Moses. *No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son; he hath declared him.* (John 1¹⁸). In fact the early Church puzzled over what the OT could mean when it speaks of people seeing God. That would be impossible for a human being. The holiness of God would consume us. The OT itself is measured and speaks of people seeing God in very cautious terms. Even Moses is restricted in what of God he is allowed to see (Exodus 3²⁰⁻²³). It looks like a contradiction but the apparent contradiction is really simply a reflection of the limits of human understanding of our relationship with God. Jesus alone really knows God and He alone makes God fully known. The early Church concluded that even in the OT, when people see God, they see Jesus, not the fulness of the Deity. As leader of Israel, Moses is replaced by Joshua. It is not insignificant that Joshua and Jesus are both versions of the same name. יהושע IHESOUS.

August 3rd

Joshua 1 vv 1-9

One of the notable things about the bible story is that the heroes are all flawed. Only God is perfect. All the leading characters in the bible make mistakes. They experience doubt. They sin, sometimes very seriously. The only character in the bible worthy of worship is God Himself. He is the only one worthy of unqualified admiration. He is the only one we can entirely trust and imitate all the way. Even S Paul says *Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.* (I Corinthians 11¹). In other words, the bible is a very human story. The great leaders are not people to respect from a distance as infinitely greater than we are. They are people like us, trying their best to walk in accordance with God's Will for their lives. They fully share our humanity. So we can learn from their stories how we can follow Christ in our own imperfect lives. Even Moses lost his faith (and his temper) and therefore didn't actually make it to the Promised Land. So it was Joshua who led the people into the Promised Land.

August 4th

Joshua 24 vv 1-25

We've skipped to the point where the people are more or less settled in the Holy Land and Joshua is an old man who will soon die. He gives them a choice. This choice seems to me to be the choice which confronts us today, as a Church and as a nation. First of all, Joshua reminds people of God's goodness to them in time past and how He has brought them to where they are today. Abraham's family were led to leave Mesopotamia and make their home in the land of Canaan. Under Abraham's grandson Jacob, they went down into Egypt to escape the famine. God had prepared the way for them in what happened to Joseph, Jacob's favourite son. Later, however, they had been enslaved in Egypt and after, four hundred years, God had sent Moses to set them free and lead them through the wilderness to their home in Canaan. Now they were settled, they had a choice. Would they serve the LORD Who had brought them to where they were today? Or would they adopt the culture, customs and religion of Canaan? Or would they revert to the ways their ancestors had worshipped in Mesopotamia and Egypt? If they served the LORD, said Joshua, they would have to serve Him wholeheartedly or else they would face a terrible judgment. Now do we thank God for everything that He has done for us and serve Him? Or do

we adopt the customs and of contemporary British society? Or do we perhaps (like some British people have) revert to paganism or adopt some other religion such as Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism? If we are going to follow Christ, we have to be whole-hearted about it and take up our cross and follow Him.

August 5th

Psalms 95

Now it does get complicated. Psalm 95 is the Venite, said every day except Easter at prayer book Mattins. So at least I am very familiar with it. It's a marvellous psalm. We worship God because of His wonderful works in Creation. We worship Him because He has redeemed us and made us His people. We are prepared for the remaining psalms and the lessons which follow at Morning Prayer with this warning to listen to the Word of God and to obey Him. If we don't, disaster follows. The particular example of a disaster which follows disregarding the Word of God used here is the occasion in the Wilderness when the children of Israel complain that there is no water and Moses is told to speak to the rock and the waters will flow. Instead, Moses loses his temper and his faith and strikes the rock with his staff. This is the reason that he does not finally lead the people into the Promised Land. The complicated bit is that the psalmist uses the word *Today*. Fair enough, we should be ready to hear and act upon the Word of God every day. But, as we shall see tomorrow, this use of the word *today* implies that the people of God had not yet entered God's rest at the time that this psalm was composed, many centuries after the time of Joshua. In other words God's promises were not finally fulfilled when Joshua brought the Israelites into the Promised Land. *There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.* (Hebrews 4⁹).

Who is on the Lord's side? Who will serve the King?
Who will be His helpers, Other lives to bring?
Who will leave the world's side? Who will face the foe?
Who is on the Lord's side? Who for Him will go?

By Thy grand redemption, By Thy grace divine,
We are on the Lord's side; Saviour, we are Thine.

August 6th

Hebrews 3 vv 7-19

Today if ye will hear his voice.

The Epistle to the Hebrews takes these words of the psalm from the OT and applies it to Christians like us living under the NT dispensation. The generation who were redeemed from slavery in Egypt and passed through the Red Sea all died in the wilderness (except Joshua and Caleb). It was their children who eventually entered the Promised Land. Even in those days, it didn't take forty years to get from Egypt to Israel. The reason God kept them in the wilderness was because of their unbelief. It is just the same as when Jesus couldn't do many miracles in Nazareth because of their lack of faith (Mark 6¹⁻⁶). So all that faithless generation died in the wilderness. Today, we have the opportunity to hear and obey God. But what of tomorrow?

August 7th (Trinity 11)

Hebrews 4 vv 1-3

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.
(James 1²²).

These readings have been about our response to God. God is either everything or nothing. If He is nothing, we might as well give up on church, on prayer, on reading the bible, on trying to live a life which is qualitatively different from the lives of the people around us. *A man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, drink, and to be merry.* (Ecclesiasts 8¹⁵). If God is everything, then we cannot do less than to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Jesus cannot be a part of our lives. If we truly believe in Him, He is our life. If we don't believe in Him, we might as well stop pretending to be Christians.

August 8th

Hebrews 4 vv 4-10

Again forgive me for repeating something I often say. Traditional fonts have eight sides because God creates the world in six days, rests on the seventh, and then there is a new Creation. Jesus rises from the dead on the eighth day, which is the first day of our redemption. What this passage is saying is that what we are promised is that we shall share in God's eternal rest. The promise is not fulfilled when the Israelites establish their home in Canaan. That is a foretaste, an earnest, of what God has prepared for His people. (The Jesus in v8 in some versions is Joshua.) Today we have the opportunity to enter that rest, but what of tomorrow?

August 9th

Hebrews 10 vv 11-16

Two choices and both wrong. One is to assume that it doesn't matter what we are like as people. God is a decent old cove and we shall probably all finish up in heaven whatever. The other is to assume that God is an impossibly harsh taskmaster and that there is nothing about us which He could possibly love and that we are therefore doomed to eternal death. The truth is that God sets the very highest standard. The standard is Jesus. None of us attains to Christ-like perfection and therefore none of us can enter into the Presence of God. The truth is also that the remedy is Jesus. Through faith in Jesus our sins are forgiven and we are brought into the divine Presence. This does not mean that our sins don't matter. They matter so much that Jesus died for them. What it does mean is that our sins have no power against us. We are called neither to complacency nor to despair. We are called to dwell in Him and He in us. And now some personal thoughts. We mentioned yesterday God's sabbath rest. That we should take the same rest is one of the Ten Commandments. We have seen how the sabbath rest is a foretaste and an earnest of our eternal rest. What Christians traditionally do on the Christian sabbath (the first and eighth day) is to participate in Christian fellowship, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, to proclaim and to hear the Word of God, to perform that rite by which He instructed us to remember Him until He comes again. This weekly foretaste of heaven sustains, heals, guides, supports us for the six days of the working week. It isn't called re-creation for nothing. So what happens when even Christians treat church attendance as an optional extra rather than as a fundamental aspect of their relationship with Jesus? They become more and more of the world as Christian friendships play a relatively smaller part in their lives. They know less and less of the Scriptures. They miss out on what Christ imparts to us when we obey His commandment *Do this in remembrance of me*. In particular, they fail to pass on their faith to their children, who are far too busy playing sport or going shopping or even lying in bed to find time for God. With fewer and fewer committed supporters, the Church plays a less and less significant part in our national life, till we become a post-Christian, multicultural or secular society. But then there is so much to do in the modern world that it would be unreasonable to waste our precious time on God, wouldn't it?

August 10th

Judges 13 vv 1-14

We're often told that the Bible is a collection of 66 books and so it is. They are very different from one another. It is also the Word of God and it coheres. I think we can lose that sense of the Bible as a unique and coherent revelation of the Word of God if we don't read it enough, if we only read certain parts of it (the parts that we find congenial or the lessons that are appointed for Sundays in Church), or if we don't read it in the right spirit, with proper respect for what it is and prayerfully. The Scriptures bear witness to Jesus, the Word made flesh. The thing about today's story is that the people of God have sinned yet again and brought disaster on themselves. God is going to send them a deliverer. There will be a special child, born to a couple which had hitherto been barren. He will be a lifelong Nazirite. He won't touch alcohol or any fruit of the grape. He won't cut his hair or shave. This is announced by an angel. So when, centuries later, an angel tells a barren couple that they will bear a son who will abstain from alcohol all the days of his life, the signs are there that God is going to deliver His people. This child, of course, is John the Baptist, who will come in the spirit and power of Elijah. Samson of course will be a mighty warrior and will deliver God's people by shedding much Philistine blood. It is not the sinners' blood, however, which will bring about the final consummation but the shedding of the Blood of the Sinless One Whose way John will prepare.

August 11th

Judges 13 vv 15-25

Some years ago a BBC programme about archaeology in Israel claimed that it was an astonishing discovery that the ancient Israelites worshipped all sorts of pagan deities and indeed images of the LORD and His imagined wife. Nobody who read the bible should have been astonished. Time and time again, the people worshipped idols, images and pagan gods, just as people today worship money, power, status, possessions. In these days, the Israelites had become weak and feeble precisely because they were not worshipping the LORD exclusively and whole heartedly. Manoah doesn't at first recognise the angel as coming from the LORD and thinks he might be a pagan god or an emissary of a pagan God. But there is only one God and He alone is worthy of worship. We must not worship anything else, even angels.

August 12th

Ruth 4 vv 13-22

Ruth is one of just four women mentioned by Matthew in his account of the genealogy of Jesus, beginning from Abraham. The others are the Blessed Virgin Mary; Bathsheba, with whom King David had committed adultery before marrying her; Rachab, who was a harlot by profession; and Tamar, who was a wronged woman who took desperate remedies (Genesis 38). Ruth, of course, was a Moabitess. So they are quite a mixed bunch. The virtues of Ruth are her loyalty to Naomi, her widowed mother in law, even in her own widowhood, her willingness to adopt Naomi's faith in the LORD, and her impeccable behaviour when gleaning for a living and her demure conduct with reference to Boaz. So Ruth becomes the ancestress both of David and of great David's greater Son.

August 13th

I Samuel 8 vv 1-9

ALMIGHTY God, whose kingdom is ever-lasting, and power infinite: Have mercy upon the whole Church; and so rule the heart of thy chosen servant *ELIZABETH*, our Queen and Governor, that she (knowing whose minister she is) may above all things seek thy honour and glory: and that we and all her subjects (duly considering whose authority she hath) may faithfully serve, honour, and humbly obey her, in thee, and for thee, according to thy blessed Word and ordinance; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth, ever one God, world without end. **Amen.** is a collect which probably summarises the Church of England's official teaching about monarchy. The New Testament teaches that *the powers that be are ordained of God* (Romans 13¹) and that therefore we should honour and normally obey them and pay our taxes. We would only disobey them when they are quite clearly demanding that we disobey God. The *powers that be* in NT times, however, were not Christians. In Israel, the Jewish priests had quite a lot of power. Elsewhere, the world was ruled by pagans. Even so, Christians were to respect their rules. Christian England went further than that, however. We had a Christian monarch, who should know his or her duty towards God in Christ. This is more like the OT view of monarchy where the king knows that he is the LORD's viceroy. There is an even more fundamental biblical doctrine, however. The only true King is God Himself.

August 14th (Trinity 12)

I Samuel 8 vv 10-22

Power brings with it its own temptations. Every human ruler is subject to temptation and might well abuse the power with which he is entrusted by God and the people. Human society needs order. It needs leadership. But it is dangerous to entrust anyone with power. So what do we do? Deuteronomy 17 says that the king should be a student of the Law of God. Our kings and queens are presented with a Bible at their coronation. Nevertheless we have contrived that our heads of state are largely deprived of the temptations of actual power. Power is exercised by ministers. The word minister means "servant". Are ministers servants of God, servants of the Queen or servants of the people? They ought to be all three. The power of ministers is limited by their accountability to parliament, one house of which is elected, the other hereditary or appointed. Churchill said, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." He's probably right, but democracies can get it badly wrong too. Hitler was elected. The courts impose limits on parliament, interpreting the law in the light of the traditions of our Common Law and various international agreements and conventions. It is all very difficult. St Paul tells us to pray for kings and all in authority (I Timothy 2^{1&2}).

August 15th (The Blessed Virgin Mary)

I Samuel 16 vv 1-13

Saul started off well. He recognised his own inadequacies. He was merciful to his enemies. He was humble before God. As time went on, however, Saul became arrogant. He seems to have fallen out with God. He is at a loss to know what to do. He doesn't obey the prophet. He comes to think that everyone is against him. So God makes a fresh start with David. David will turn out to be far from perfect too, but David, however badly he sins, cleaves to God, whereas Saul shuts himself off from grace. It is like the two disciples, one of whom betrayed Jesus and the other who denied Him. Judas went away and hanged himself. Peter leapt out of the boat and ran to Jesus on the shore, where three times he was given the opportunity to say that he loved Him, matching and cancelling out three denials. So David becomes the archetypal King of Israel under God, *made of the seed of David according to the flesh*, born of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

August 16th

I Samuel 16 vv 14-23

On the face of it, this is simple enough. The anointing of a king (or priest) symbolises the gift of God's Holy Spirit for the task which he has to perform. Saul has proved unworthy. So the Spirit is taken away and given to David, who will eventually become king. It is noteworthy, however, that in the succeeding chapters, however badly Saul treats him, even when he tries to kill him, David continues to regard Saul as the Lord's anointed and will not lift a finger against him. Rebellion against however bad an established authority tends to lead to bloodshed and chaos far worse than any existing order. So, while the Church has generally taken the view that there is such a thing as a just war (in which a sovereign state makes war on another sovereign state for a just cause, fighting fairly and with a reasonable chance of success), she has been much more cautious about identifying any conditions for a just rebellion.

What becomes harder to comprehend is that the text says that, as well as transferring the Holy Spirit to David, God sends an evil spirit on Saul. Now we might read Saul's behaviour as the consequence of mental illness. Indeed, Saul's alienation from God and from other people before chapter 16 could be ascribed to a developing psychopathology. So, could it be that God is punishing Saul for behaviour he couldn't help because of illness? Even more worryingly, could it be that God made Saul ill or evil? On our world view, we tend to envisage that chance plays a big part in what happens to us or at least that much of what befalls is caused by agencies other than God, such as a good diet or knowing the right people or living in a good place. We also tend to imagine God and the devil or good and evil as two opposed forces, absolutely contradicting one another, and perhaps not far from equally powerful. The Bible does contain elements of both of those world views, but its predominant understanding is different from either of them. That is that God is in control of everything. Evil happens because He permits it (or even causes it). The devil and evil people only get away with what God lets them get away with and their wicked schemes are somehow incorporated into God's plans for ultimate salvation. There is no room for chance. If God is in control of everything, that seems to make Him responsible for a lot of things which we (in our ignorance?) would regard as unacceptable. But what if God were not in control?

August 17th

Psalm 2

In the Old Testament this psalm refers to the King of Israel. Maybe it was used at his enthronement or at some regular festival. Maybe it was composed for a particular occasion in the nation's life, when Israel or Judah was threatened by its enemies. God says to the King, *Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee*. So maybe it was used at the enthronement or when he was first anointed if that was on a different occasion. What is interesting to us Christians is that the King is regarded metaphorically as the son of God. Jesus we know to be literally the Son of God and He is affirmed by God the Father in these very words when He is anointed with the Holy Spirit at His Baptism. Human kingship points us to a deeper understanding of Jesus. Human kingship (and any human authority ultimately derives from Him and is accountable to Him.

V9 about wielding a rod of iron to destroy God's enemies like breaking them in pieces like a potter's vessel is applied in Revelation 2²⁷ to faithful Christians. We are kings and priests, anointed with the Holy spirit, sons and daughters of God, sharing in what it means to be Jesus.

August 18th

II Samuel 7 vv 1-11

Eventually Saul died fighting the Philistines. David then became King of the tribe of Judah and the rest of Israel was ruled by Saul's son Ishbosheth, but Ishbosheth was a weak man and was soon murdered by his less than loyal followers. The whole of Israel then embraced David as King. David established his kingdom in Jerusalem, which had hitherto not been part of Israel and had been ruled by priest kings like Melchizedek, whom we remember from the time of Abraham hundreds of years before and as a type of Jesus the only true King and High Priest from Whom all authority and grace proceed. David wanted to build a house for God – a temple. If he had a palace in the capital city, God, he thought, ought to have a temple. (Temple and palace are the same word in Hebrew (הֵיכָל). God doesn't, however, need a house and any house we might build for Him would in any case be inadequate. David won't build a house for God. For one thing, he has too much blood on his hands. God will build David a house (a household) and David's son will build God a house. The son in question is Solomon – whose name means peace.

August 19th

II Samuel 7 vv 12-17

The promise is that David's seed will rule for ever. This will not be like Saul, who fell from grace and lost the kingdom for himself and his descendants. The house of David will sin, but they will be forgiven and David's seed shall rule forever. This promise is ultimately, of course fulfilled in Jesus. He is the eternal seed of David. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom. He indeed is without sin and He will reign forever. He is the temple in Whom the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily. He is the eternal High Priest. He is *one offering, single and complete*. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In Him we too are all these things. I'm writing this note on Ascension Day.

Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that like as we do believe thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens; so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with him continually dwell, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

August 20th

II Samuel 7 vv 18-29

Over the last few weeks, there have been several examples of anti-Semitism. Why do people hate the Jews? Come to that, why should anyone hate anyone? Yet it does seem that the Jews have had more than their fair share of hatred. Why should that be? Jesus and the apostles, nearly all the great characters in the Bible were Jews. We sometimes think that it began with the Jews handing Jesus over to Pontius Pilate to be crucified and Jewish persecution of the early Church, but it goes back long before that. In the Book of Esther, perhaps 500 BC, they want to wipe out the Jews, to commit genocide as Hitler tried to 2,500 years later. If it was simply crucifying Jesus and persecuting the early Church, surely the Romans would be the ones to hate. But Jesus said, *Love your enemies*. So we shouldn't hate anyone. Today's passage reminds how blessed the Israelites were. They were delivered from Egypt. They received the Law and the prophets. They inherited the Holy Land. Perhaps other nations are jealous. David thanks God for the privileges He has given Israel. These privileges bring responsibility. Those whom God has chosen to be His people ought to act like the people of God. St Paul makes the point for Christians. We are infinitely more privileged than the Jews of the OT. What Jesus has done for us what ought we to be for Him.

August 21st (Trinity 13)

Daniel 1 vv 3-21

Because of their love of the Law of God, Jewish people set a high value on literacy and education in general. The Law teaches them family and community solidarity. It sets high standards of ethics and personal integrity. It is not surprising, therefore, if Jewish people get on in the world. They are well-educated. They work hard. They support their families and their wider community. They can be trusted. So, in the normal course of events, they would be expected to prosper in the world. That in itself may cause jealousy and persecution. Persecution often brings poverty and it is likely to force communities to turn in on themselves, to protect themselves. Moreover, high personal integrity in itself may result in conflict. These boys won't eat what isn't kosher, however much that annoys everybody else. Later they will rise high in the court under Kings Nebuchadnezzar and Darius and other courtiers will become very jealous of them. Their enemies will get to them by forcing them to choose between duty to God and duty to the king. Their integrity will allow them only one answer even though it means being cast into the burning, fiery furnace or the den of lions. Maybe these are some of the reasons why Jews are often disliked by people who themselves live by lower standards. Might it not be the same for Christians when we live up to our calling. Jesus said, *If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also. But all these things will they do unto you for my name's sake, because they know not him that sent me.* (John 15¹⁸⁻²¹).

August 22nd

I Kings 3 vv 5-15

The king is David's son. Metaphorically at least, he is God's son. The true King of Israel is always God. The man on throne is God's viceroy. Not a bad way to look at any human being entrusted with authority. What we need to exercise authority and to take proper care of the people for whom God has made us responsible is wisdom. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. More than that, Christ is the wisdom and power of God.

August 23rd

Isaiah 9 vv 1-7

Solomon eventually went wrong. He allowed his pagan wives to seduce him into permitting pagan worship. After him, the kingdom was divided. Generally speaking, neither half was well governed. Ultimately the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom, based around Samaria, and the Babylonians destroyed the southern kingdom with its capital Jerusalem. In both kingdoms the problem was that people did not cleave to God, worshipping Him whole-heartedly, and that therefore they treated other people selfishly, violently and dishonestly. It is only in recognising God as our Father that we see other human beings as our brothers and sisters. The kingdom was bound to fall when the people turned away from God, just as any kingdom would, not least the UK. But God is faithful, even though we are not. He sends Isaiah the prophet with the promise of redemption – initially the restoration of Israel with its capital at Jerusalem and a descendant of David on the throne there, but much more wonderfully and completely with the coming of Christ our King to redeem by His Blood men and women from all nations to establish eternally the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice, mercy and peace.

Hail to the Lord's Anointed, great David's greater Son!
Hail in the time appointed, his reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression, to set the captive free;
to take away transgression, and rule in equity.

August 24th (S Bartholomew)

Psalms 24

What do you think of when you say or sing this psalm? Do you think of Jesus entering into Heaven on Ascension Day? Do you think of yourself coming to a religious service? Do you think of yourself, by the grace of God, finally entering into Heaven? We don't know the original context. Maybe this psalm was sung when the Ark of the Covenant (representing the presence of God Himself) was brought into the temple. Maybe it was at some great festival, perhaps performed annually, at which the king came into the temple, representing the people. Or was it focussed on all the people entering the temple for worship? Or just the high priest on the Day of Atonement entering the Holy of Holies? All these interpretations are possible, but the temple signifies heaven and only Christ is fit to enter its glories and we in Him.

August 25th

Haggai 1 vv 1-15

This is centuries after David brought the Ark to Jerusalem and Solomon built the temple. The kings, priests and the people had proved not to have clean hands and a pure heart; they had lifted up their mind to vanity (idols) and sworn to deceive their neighbours. So Nebuchadnezzar had been able to destroy the temple and take the people into captivity in Babylon. Decades later, as Isaiah had prophesied, God had enabled the exiles to return. Haggai is exhorting them to rebuild the temple. The people's priorities had been to look after themselves first, to build up their businesses, to look after their homes, to restore their material prosperity and then perhaps, when they had time and a bit of spare cash, they would attend to God's work. The prophet warns them that they will never be satisfied until they put God first in their lives.

August 26th

Haggai 2 vv 1-9

Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest, and all the people are discouraged. What they are building, they think, is nothing like as good as what there was before. Religious people are always tempted to think that things were better in the past. But God reminds them that everything belongs to Him, everything comes from Him. He is in charge. So we don't have to feel inferior to our predecessors. We don't have to feel that it is beyond us to build God's Church. It is God Who is building His Church. We are just working with Him and that is a privilege, not a burden.

O God we have heard with our ears, and our fathers have declared unto us, the noble works that thou didst in their days, and in the old time before them. *O Lord, arise, help us, and deliver us for thine honour.* 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.

August 27th

Nehemiah 8 vv 1-12

For the joy of the LORD shall be your strength.

This is also about the return from exile, the public reading of the Law. Again, the people (quite rightly) feel inadequate, but there is not ever any reason to despair. It is God Who is in charge. The joy of the LORD shall be your strength.

August 28th (Trinity 14)

Zechariah 4 vv 1-14

Kings and priests are anointed with oil, specifically olive oil. So represented here by the two olive trees are the governor, Zerubbabel the descendant of David, and Joshua, the high priest. The lamps, also fed by olive oil, represent the Spirit of God. The Spirit cleanses, heals and empowers. The Spirit observes the world, judging the wicked, preparing hearts to receive mercy. The eternal realities of heaven sustain the ephemeral realities of earth. In other words the Guarantor of the success of what Zerubbabel and Joshua are doing is God. It is He Who brings peace to the earth and builds His Church. Zerubbabel and Joshua are His instruments, as we are, cherished instruments of God. It is Jesus Who fulfils in the final consummation the vocation of king and priest and those of us who are baptised into His Body, the Church, are kings and priests too.

And he shall reign forever, His throne and crown shall ever endure
And he shall reign forever and we shall reign with him. (Graham Kendrick.)

August 29th

Revelation 11 vv 1-13

So yesterday's reading is taken up in the New Testament. Evil is very powerful. The early Christians were persecuted, but the whole context was the sinfulness of humanity. The Roman Empire was built on war, subjugation of peoples, exploitation, cruel punishments, ruthless government and, never forget, widespread slavery. This was the background to Rome's great achievements. This has been generally true of human society and it is only too true in the world today. We are very privileged to live in a free, prosperous country in a time of peace and we ought to be thankful for that and to remember the part the Christian religion played in bring us to this point. Good is more powerful than evil, but it is a tremendous struggle. Hence the horrors described in Revelation. Judgment and mercy go together, two aspects of love. The temple is measured out to mark the fact that it belongs to God and His people. The witnesses are martyrs. It's what the word means. They are the dual messiah of yesterday's reading. They are Jesus. They are all God's people. Possibly they are specific individuals. They are empowered by the Holy Spirit. The power of evil is so tremendous that the witnesses are put to death by it, but they rise again. Good cannot be defeated by evil and justice will not be denied.

August 30th

Revelation 1 vv 4-8

Jesus is the witness. The Greek is martyr (μαρτυς). The imagery we have been looking at in Zechariah comes together here – the sevenfold spirit of God, kings and priests. He is the beginning and the end. He brings judgement. The terrible wickedness perpetrated on earth deserves to be punished. Christ is one with the victims of human wrong-doing, of sin. Him they pierced when they nailed Him to the cross. Him we pierced when we nailed Him to the cross. Christ takes on Himself all the sins of all the sinners who have ever lived and bears their punishment. Thus the Cross is judgment. It is justice and mercy. It is love.

Every eye shall now behold him, robed in dreadful majesty;
those who set at nought and sold him, pierced, and nailed him to
the tree,
deeply wailing, deeply wailing,
deeply wailing, shall the true Messiah see.

Those dear tokens of his passion still his dazzling body bears,
cause of endless exultation to his ransomed worshipers;
with what rapture, with what rapture,
with what rapture
gaze we on those glorious scars!

31st August

Colossians 1 vv 12-20

The Jesus the people of Galilee and Judaea knew was the carpenter in the small village of Nazareth. They came to know Him as a great preacher, a teacher, a healer and a caster out of demons. Great crowds saw Him die a terrible death. Several hundred saw Him risen from the dead. Something (the story of His Birth, His own personal teaching, the Holy Spirit He bestowed on His Church, etc.) revealed to them that the carpenter from Nazareth is in fact the very image of God, the One Who is the reason for everything that exists, the One Who restores a universe defiled by human sin to a state of holiness acceptable to the thrice holy God.

1st September

Colossians 1 vv 12-20

I very seldom read a book twice. Mostly, once is enough. Sometimes a good book with a complex plot repays rereading. But the Bible you can read again and again. There is always something more. The Bible is the Word of the infinite God. This passage is well worth reading again. We have been shown something of Who Jesus is, although He is far beyond our comprehension. We are also confronted with the magnitude of what He has done for us.

And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain, for me, who Him to death
pursued?

Amazing love! how can it be that Thou, my God, should die for me?

Amazing love! how can it be that Thou, my God, should die for me!

'Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies! Who can explore His strange
design?

In vain the firstborn seraph tries to sound the depths of love divine!
'Tis mercy all! let earth adore, Let angel minds inquire no more.

He left His Father's throne above, so free, so infinite His grace;
Emptied Himself of all but love, and bled for Adam's helpless race;
'Tis mercy all, immense and free; For, O my God, it found out me.

Long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with
light;

My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth and followed
Thee.

No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in Him is mine!
Alive in Him, my living Head, And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne, and claim the crown, through
Christ my own.

Some hymns really put the Gospel into human words so far as it is possible.

2nd September

Isaiah 42 vv 1-9

The OT Book of Isaiah has been called the fifth Gospel. In it there are four passages (of which this is one) which have been identified as servant songs. Christians have always taken these to refer to Jesus. Jesus is the servant of God. He makes Himself a slave even for the suffering of death. He brings the Good News not just to Jews, but also to Gentiles. He is gentle. He draws people to Himself by love rather than by violence. He says that when He is lifted up on the Cross (the perfect expression of divine love) He will draw all men to Himself. (John 12³²). We know that the prophecy is authentic because it has come to pass as it was foretold. We know that the prophecy is trustworthy because it is guaranteed by God.

3rd September

Isaiah 45 vv 1-4

Today is the anniversary of the date in 1939 when England declared war on Germany in WWII. This passage is not one of the four formally identified servant songs, but it is interesting because it identifies the Persian Emperor Cyrus as the Lord's anointed, the Messiah. A pagan king the Lord's anointed? The point is that there had been terrible wars for a century or so, first with the Assyrians conquering much of the near East and then the Babylonians. The Babylonian empire falls to the Medes and Persians and there will be peace. Cyrus will begin the process of allowing the exiles to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple. God really has got the whole world in His Hands and pagans may serve His purposes just as His own people do and it is right to pray for all rulers, not just the Christian ones. (I Timothy 2^{1&2}).

4th September (Trinity 15)

Isaiah 49 vv 1-13

It wasn't until the New Testament that people realised that the role of the Lord's servant is Jesus is finally and completely fulfilled in Jesus. Before that, it was partially fulfilled by Isaiah himself and other servants of God (even Cyrus). The whole people of Israel collectively are the servant of God. The role is to proclaim the Good News to the whole earth. Christ sums up in His own person what it is to be Israel, the people of God, the LORD's servant. In Christ the whole Church constitutes the Servant of God.

5th September

Isaiah 49 vv 14-17

These verses too are not technically part of the servant songs, but I can't resist including them. There may be times when you feel that things are so bad that God must have forsaken you and that, therefore, there is no hope. That is never true. God's love is unfailing.

Hark, my soul, it is the Lord! 'Tis thy Saviour, hear His Word;
Jesus speaks, and speaks to thee, "Say, poor, sinner, lovest thou Me?"

"I delivered thee when bound, and, when bleeding, healed thy wound;
Sought thee wandering, set thee right, turned thy darkness into light.

"Can a woman's tender care cease toward the child she bare?
Yes, she may forgetful be, Yet will I remember thee.

"Mine is an unchanging love, higher than the heights above,
Deeper than the depths beneath, free and faithful, strong as death.

"Thou shalt see My glory soon, when the work of grace is done;
Partner of My throne shalt be: Say, poor sinner, lovest thou Me?"

Lord, it is my chief complaint that my love is weak and faint;
Yet I love Thee, and adore: O for grace to love Thee more!

6th September

Isaiah 50 vv 4-11

The Servant of the LORD comes with a message of comfort. Comfort is offered to everyone. But the Servant is despised and ill-treated. It is the extent of His love that He is prepared to put up with all this for us. God is with Him in the valley of the shadow of death. I am sure that God was there even when Jesus was brought to the point where He cried, *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me*. The psalm He quotes (22) puts His torments into words; it is a prophecy of His pain and death, pain and death shared with the whole of suffering, sinful humanity; it concludes in hope and restoration. God raises Jesus gloriously from the death. He will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. The Cross brings judgment – justice and mercy, aspects of love.

7th September

Isaiah 52 v13 – 53 v12

This is the Servant Song which everyone knows. I don't feel I can comment more than to suggest that we read it in the light of what we know of the story of the Crucifixion of Jesus. The emotions we experience are awe and love and penitence and peace and joy.

8th September

Acts 8 vv 26-40

This is a well loved story. The angel of God puts Philip in the way of meeting a pious Ethiopian returning home from Jerusalem. It so happens that he is reading the passage we studied yesterday. Philip explains to him to what and to Whom these words refer. The Ethiopian's response is to put his faith in Jesus and to be baptised. His sins are washed away. He receives the Holy Spirit. He is an adopted child of God, an heir of the Kingdom of heaven. Was he the first to take the Gospel to Africa? Quite probably.

How many people have picked up the Gideon bible in a hotel room or a hospital ward or even a prison cell and come to know Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit and faithful Christian witness. We pray for the Scriptures to be made available to everybody, free or at a price they can afford, translated accurately into a language they can understand, free to read and share without persecution, and we pray for those whose hearts are hardened against reading the bible and therefore cannot profit by its message.

9th September

Philippians 2 vv 5-11

Here St Paul develops the theme of Jesus the servant, a slave even. He is the same as God, entitled to all the worship and glory, the renown which is God's due. Yet He becomes one of us. He becomes one of the humblest of us. He takes obedience to its limit, death. Such obedience can only stem from utter faith. Think back to Abraham's preparedness to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. The death that He dies is the horrible death inflicted on the worst common criminals. He dies with us and we die with Him. Isaac was restored alive to Abraham and God rewarded Abraham's faith with the promise that in his seed (Isaac, Israel, Jesus, us) all the nations (gentiles, races) of the earth will be blessed. Jesus exalted to God's Right Hand and, in him, so are we.

10th September

II Chronicles 36 vv 11-23

These are the final convulsions when the Babylonians finally destroy Jerusalem and the temple. They were terrible times as war is always terrible. The consistent message of the OT is that all this had befallen the people of God because they were unfaithful to God, they worshipped false gods and, therefore, they behaved unethically towards one another. What do you expect to happen when you disregard the Maker's instructions? Unlike the account in II Kings, however, Chronicles finishes with restoration. After 70 years, Cyrus will allow the exiles to return.

And that is what I wanted to focus on, 70 years to make up for all the Sabbaths missed when the people disregarded the commandments of God. They couldn't take time off to rest and worship. They couldn't allow their families or their servants a day of rest. They had to exploit their land, their cattle and every other resource they had to the uttermost. They wanted nice homes, healthy bank balances, nicely toned bodies, well educated, polite children, the respect of their neighbours, to make the most of their lives, to engage fully with human society. They didn't feel able to trust God to look after them. They didn't rate spiritual values very highly. Religion was a crutch when they were in trouble. It gave them a good feeling sometimes to participate in the big festivals. But put God first in your everyday life or even once a week? Don't be silly. We're not religious maniacs. And so they forgot God. They increasingly neglected His Way. Losing sight of the Way of Life, there was no alternative to the way of death. And so it turned out. And so it will turn out for any human society which has no time for the Eternal.

11th September (Trinity 16)

Hebrews 4 vv 1-11

We've looked at this passage before. Even God takes a Sabbath rest. One day in seven is consecrated. It is a foretaste of heaven. When our time on earth is over, we shall enjoy endless rest, endless worship, eternal love for God. Sunday is a foretaste of that. Our Eucharistic worship, the preaching of the eternal Word, the fellowship of the Church, speaking with God in prayer, all these are a foretaste of what is to come. They are more than that; They are means of grace which help us on our way. It is a grave mistake to neglect them for earthly considerations.

12th September

Isaiah 5 vv 1-7

In this parable God draws attention to His own faithfulness to His people and their faithlessness towards him. It is like a farmer who plants a vineyard and takes all possible trouble over it. Only the vines fail to produce fruit. They are faithless. The interest for us is not so much that this was the case in ancient Israel, but to ask ourselves how true this is for present day in England and the Church of England. Count our blessings – God’s faithfulness to us. And how have we responded? A multicultural, post-Christian, secular society in which the things of God are not a priority even for many who call themselves Christians. So what are the likely consequences?

13th September

Isaiah 5 vv 8-19

The people of God have become materialists. Their first priorities are wealth and possessions. This leads to a hardening of the hearts of the rich and greater poverty for the poor. People seek consolation in alcohol and other drugs. They make a mockery of religion. Nothing satisfies them. Nothing can satisfy them. We were made for the glory of God and nothing but God can give us what we really need to be fulfilled as human beings. So, without God, we are doomed. We have doomed ourselves. Only through Jesus, the eternal Son of God becoming the Son of Man can we be saved.

14th September

Isaiah 5 vv 20-30

People even cease to know the difference between right and wrong. They are not taught the Bible and prayer and the value of Christian fellowship as children. Their consciences are formed in an environment in which there are supposedly no moral absolutes. They learn to despise religion and to regard those who are valiant for truth as intolerant bigots. There can be no future for such a society.

O LORD, we beseech thee, let thy continual pity cleanse and defend thy Church; and, because it cannot continue in safety without thy succour, preserve it evermore by thy help and goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

15th September

Isaiah 6 vv 1-13

Men and women were made in the image of God. There should not, therefore, be this contrast between the holiness of God glimpsed in Isaiah’s vision and the filthiness of sinful humanity as described in the last chapter. It is the case because we sinful human beings have alienated ourselves from God by our rejection of His love. Even people like the prophet Isaiah are not fit to come into His presence, but He Himself sets us free from sin; He cleanses and purifies us. He makes us fit to serve Him. The proper human response is to approach God in awe and trembling and an honest acknowledgement of our unworthiness to stand before Him, graciously to receive from Him atonement and to take up our cross and follow Him, to offer our lives in the service of God. This is what Isaiah does, though he is warned that it will be hard. *That we being delivered from the hands of our enemies: might serve him without fear.* (Luke 1⁷⁴). People will not listen to the preaching of the Word. Of Jesus and Isaiah and everyone of us who seeks to serve God, it can be said, *He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.* (John 1^{11&12}).

16th September

Psalms 80

One thing we tried when I first came here was an Advent Carol service on Advent Sunday, four weeks before Christmas. It didn’t really work out. Some people came expecting a Christmas Carol Service (swallowing up Advent in Christmas as people so often do, missing the significance of both). It is a lot of work for the choir to put on two carol services in a month. And, I’m sorry to say, there isn’t the support. If you do, however, attend an Advent Carol Service, verses from Psalm 80 feature. The vineyard theme is taken up again. God’s people, His vineyard, are desolate. We know why we are desolate from Isaiah 5. We cry out to God for forgiveness and restoration. In Advent we ponder judgment. We are very conscious of our sins and their consequences. Yet we look to God in faith and hope. We look to God in love. He has promised and His promises are sure. We are certainly only too often faithless, but He is always faithful. The light shines in the darkness. The light grows. He will send first John the Baptist to prepare the Way and then Jesus, Who is the Way, to visit and redeem His people.

17th September

Mark 12 vv 1-9

Another take on the vineyard theme. The people of Israel, especially their leaders, have failed to offer the fruit to God. It isn't too fanciful to think of the fruits of the Holy Spirit - *love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law*. These are the qualities expected of God's people, our response to His love for us. God has sent his servants the prophets to lead them into repentance, but they have largely disregarded and even maltreated God's spokesmen. So God sends not a messenger but His Son. Instead of sending men to speak God's Word, God sends the Word Himself, the Word made flesh. Sinful humanity crucifies the Messiah. The people of God reject the One whom God has sent. The world rejects Him. The people of Israel reject Him. The priests reject Him. Even, at times, His closest friends and His own family fail to accept Him for Who He is. Sometimes it seems that the Church rejects Him when we don't show love to all those who come to us. So God makes a fresh start. The Good News is not for those who close their ears and harden their hearts. Even if they seem to be very religious; they are rejected because they reject the Son of God. The Good News is for everyone who will listen, for the Gentiles, for people who have never been very religious, for everyone who is open to God. *Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage.* (Matthew 22⁹).

18th September (Trinity 17)

John 15 vv 1-16

Another variation on the theme of the vine. Jesus is the vine. He is Israel, the servant of God. He is the Church, the servant of God. We are the branches. Only so long as we abide in Him can we bear fruit. If we are cut off from Him we wither and die. Jesus cannot be an optional extra in a busy life largely dominated by the things of this world. He is everything to us or He is nothing and, if He is nothing, we are nothing.

Lord, we pray thee that thy grace may always prevent and follow us, and make us continually to be given to all good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prevent, of course, means go before. We are praying to be surrounded by God's grace.

19th September

Isaiah 7 vv 1-16

I'm going to be a bit controversial here. Matthew quotes this passage as a prophecy that Christ will be born of a virgin and asserts that it is fulfilled by Jesus. Scholars quite rightly point out that the Greek translation of Isaiah (which the early Church tended to use because more of them spoke Greek than Hebrew), like the NT, uses the word *virgin* for the mother of the child Immanuel (God with us), but that Isaiah's original Hebrew just had *a young woman*. Of course a young woman may be a virgin but she could equally be a young wife or even a woman of easy virtue. Some people then insist that this passage is actually about an almost forgotten middle-Eastern war and its real point is that in the time it takes for a child to be conceived and weaned, two rather useless kings (Rezin and Pekah) will fall. This may well have been its original significance, but some people would go further and say that Matthew and Luke and the early Church misunderstood it and that it does not apply to Jesus, that it does not require that the Messiah should be born of a virgin and even that Mary was not a virgin when Jesus was born. This line of reasoning totally undermines the use of Isaiah in our Christmas services. Indeed reasoning like this tends to reduce the Old Testament to a set of not very reliable texts about things that happened a long time ago and a long way away from here. It also undermines the New Testament. The New Testament interprets Jesus in the light of the Old Testament, which the Church believes He fulfils. If Isaiah 7 is not about Jesus and His virgin birth, Matthew too has got it wrong. If we don't trust the OT or the NT as witnesses of Christ, what can we know about Him? What the Church as a whole believes is firmly rooted in Scripture. If we don't trust the Bible, we can't trust the Church either. What we are left with is a religion we ourselves make up to suit our own predilections. Such a religion is obviously useless except to confirm us in our prejudices.

So, reading the OT in the light of the NT and the NT in the light of the OT, while I accept that Isaiah's original audience were mainly concerned with the Syro-Ephraimite War, this reading for subsequent generations and for people all over the world is fulfilled in Jesus. It is therefore an appropriate reading for Christmas and I will, in my own personal devotions, read it in the KJV, which says *Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*

20th September

Matthew 1 vv 18-25

How do these verses make you feel? In a way, it's like coming home to the truth. If you've been a Christian for a long time, they are just so wonderfully familiar, and yet there is always more to them. If you are new to the faith, you must be awestruck by such an amazing story.

The Collect for Christmas Day

ALMIGHTY God, who hast given us thy only. begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and as at this time to be born of a pure virgin*; Grant that we being regenerate, and made thy children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by thy holy† Spirit; through the same our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit ever, one God, world without end. *Amen.*

21st September (S Matthew)

Matthew 9 vv 9-13

You don't seem to hear old fashioned sermons anymore about the call of Matthew and the other apostles. It's partly because we preachers don't want to risk being tedious by telling congregations what you already know. Only, of course, there comes a time when you don't know. You've forgotten or there are new people who've never been told the old, old story. There's also a tendency to focus on the soft side of this passage, the fact that Jesus sides with the despised outsider. It chimes nicely with the modern emphasis on inclusivity. And that's fair enough. A big part of our Lord's ministry was to show that the love of God extends to everyone, especially, perhaps, to the unloved and the unlovable. That's a comfort to us if we feel unlovable. It's also an example. If God loves everybody and we are His children, made in His image, brothers and sisters of Jesus, how can we do less? There is a harder side to this story, however. Matthew was told, *Follow me*. Jesus didn't say, "Because I love you just as you are, you can carry on living just the way you have always done." He said, "Follow me." The old-fashioned sermons of my childhood would have said that meant that Christians had to be prepared to leave behind the ordinary and the mundane, they couldn't just live like everybody else except that they went to church more often. Christians are called to forsake all and follow Jesus. That's not true only for ministers and missionaries but for all the baptised.

22nd September

Luke 5 vv 1-11

Peter's reaction to Jesus is similar to Isaiah's reaction to God in Isaiah 6. Confronted with the awesome holiness of God, the fisherman, like the prophet, realises his own unworthiness, repents, is cleansed and receives his commission to proclaim God's Word. Most of us are not called to be prophets or apostles, but we are all called to forsake everything else and to follow Jesus. For most of us, that doesn't mean leaving our families, our homes or our jobs. What it does mean, however, for all of us is that whatever we do, all our relationships with other people, etc., are in the context of our relationship with Christ. God isn't fitted into our busy schedules. Neither is He only consulted when we are desperate. God comes first and everything else in the light of His lordship of our lives. *And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.* (Colossians 3¹⁷).

The Collect for Peter's Brother.

ALMIGHTY God, who didst give such grace unto thy holy Apostle Saint Andrew, that he readily obeyed the calling of thy Son Jesus Christ, and followed him without delay; Grant unto us all, that we, being called by thy holy Word, may forthwith give up ourselves obediently to fulfil thy holy commandments; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

23rd September

Matthew 2 vv 1-15

Hosea 11¹: *When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.* This, of course, refers to the Children of Israel being redeemed by God from slavery in Egypt, led out to be baptised in the Red Sea and brought into the wilderness to encounter God and to receive His Law. The Egyptians had been killing the sons of the Hebrews to keep down their numbers. The final plague was the death of the Egyptian firstborn on Passover Night and then the Hebrews, saved from the angel of death by the blood of the Passover Lamb, were set free to go to the Promised Land. Jesus personifies the people of Israel. He is God's Son, called out of Egypt. As Moses escaped Pharaoh, Jesus escaped Herod. Later, He would be baptised, enter the Wilderness and proclaim the Law of God in the Sermon on the Mount. He would not destroy the Old Covenant, but fulfil it. Through death the Lamb of God would open the Kingdom of Heaven to all God's faithful people.

24th September

Daniel 7 vv 9-14

Here we are treated to yet another vision of heaven. The preceding verses in the chapter refer to earth's great empires. They have attained and retained power by violence and exploitation of the poor. The cries of the oppressed, the prayers of the saints ascend to the Throne of God. There will be judgment. There will be justice and mercy. There is love, a love which demands justice and yet requires mercy, a love which must see the perpetrator punished for the suffering he has inflicted, a love which yet loves the perpetrator and must make a way for redemption, justice and mercy, contradictory demands of love, resolved only on the Cross of Christ.

The Son of Man is singular, an individual, Jesus, the Son of God. The Son of Man is plural, a corporate figure, the whole people of God, first Israel and then the Church. Jesus represents humanity at the Throne of Grace, the victory of justice and mercy at the achieved by His dying with the oppressed and for the oppressor.

So be it, Lord, thy throne shall never, like earth's proud empires, pass away;
Thy kingdom stands, and grows for ever, till all thy creatures own thy sway.

25th September (Trinity 18)

Ezekiel 1 vv 1-25

We can't imagine the glory of God. In fact, the word *imagine* implies the word *image* and we are forbidden to make images of God. Certain people in the Bible were permitted a glimpse of His infinite holiness and do their best to convey something of the sense of their experience. This is yet another of those visions. We can only meditate on it in awe.

26th September

Ezekiel 1 v26 – 2 v5

I really wanted to read these two chapters of Ezekiel because of the contrast between the way the phrase the *Son of Man* is used in Daniel and the way it is used in Ezekiel (and Psalm 8). Here it means an ordinary, mortal man who can't presume to gather up the crumbs under God's table, entirely reliant on God's mercy to come into His presence and to serve Him. In Daniel the Son of Man is a heavenly figure. The Gospels seem to mean both OT uses when they refer to Jesus as the Son of Man and so He is, save without sin. As an aside, I note the words *whether they will hear or whether they will forbear*. The Word is to be proclaimed whether people obey it or not. True for all preachers!

27th September

Mark 14 vv 53-65

What contrasts there are in this passage which draws together so much of what we have been thinking about. They are determined to get rid of Jesus, but they can't find anything against Him. He is the Truth. False witnesses claim He proposed to destroy the temple. In fact it is in Jesus that God dwells in all His fulness rather than the stone temple in Jerusalem. The temple of which He speaks is His Body, which will be broken, but He will rise on the third day. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed, in a sense more profound than any of Israel's kings or priests. He is anointed with the Holy Spirit. He is the Son of the Blessed One in a much more literal sense than any of the Kings of Israel who enjoyed that title in the past. *And Jesus said, I am*. Jesus acknowledged that He is all these things, but, as so often in the Gospel, there is always the sense that *I am* on Jesus' lips means infinitely more than that. He is I AM as God told Moses that was His Name at the burning bush. He is the One Who is, the One Who causes everything else to be.

And the contrast is that they treat Him worse than we should treat a common criminal.

28th September

John 19 vv 1-22

The eternal Son of God, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. They mock Him because they believe He is just pretending to be what He actually is. So the King of Kings, the Son of God, is the suffering Servant. *Behold the Man*. The Son of Man? The Man Who stands for all humanity? The Man Who represents the people of God at the Throne of Grace? The greatest Man Who ever lived. The Man Pilate just doesn't know what to do with? The Man the people followed. The Man they now, stirred up by their rulers, wish to see crucified. How could anyone want to see anyone crucified? *Whence art thou?* Jesus is the eternal I AM. He has no origin or beginning. He is eternally begotten of the Father. There is no answer to Pilate's question which Pilate could understand. He is the Son of God and the King of the Jews. His kingdom is not of this world. It will not, like earth's proud empires, pass away. *Thy kingdom stands, and grows for ever, till all thy creatures own thy sway*. Yet they crucify Him, yet somehow Pilate won't relinquish His title.

29th September St Michael & All Angels)

Acts 7 vv 51-60

Read the whole of chapter 7 if you like. Stephen, the first martyr after Jesus the archetypal Martyr (or witness), explains Jesus in terms of the OT history of the way God deals with His people (faithful) and how His people have always responded (faithless). Jesus resolves the paradox of the faithfulness of God and the faithlessness of humanity, the paradox of mercy and justice, in His sacrifice of Himself in love, Son of God and Son of Man. Jesus had promised to send the Holy Spirit on His church so that we should be His witnesses (martyrs). By that same Spirit, Stephen was inspired to preach the Gospel and now receives comfort as he stands before his persecutors. In the power of the Spirit, Stephen sees Jesus as He is now and in all eternity at the Right Hand of God. This very vision seems to antagonise his persecutors even more and they stone Stephen to death, but his words are almost the same as the words of Jesus from the Cross. The work of the Holy Spirit is to give us grace to follow Jesus to the uttermost.

30th September

Matthew 25 vv 31-46

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

He is the Omega, the end. Everything exists by Him and through Him and for Him. He is the culmination and the consummation of the whole story of this universe of time and space and, indeed, of the heavenly realm. The entire history of the human race is summed up in Him. He shall reign for ever. There is mercy. There is justice. Everything ultimately makes sense. The sense our lives make is Jesus, the Logos, the logic of God. It will all come right in the end.

So we shall be judged. All humanity will be judged. Jesus is one with the victims of human sin. He is the model for our behaviour, the standard against which our lives are measured. We shall all receive justice. Mercy is freely on offer to everybody who comes to Jesus in faith. This is the Good News we have to proclaim to the whole earth.

And he shall reign forever, His throne and crown shall ever endure
And he shall reign forever and we shall reign with him.

BLESSED be the Lord God of Israel : for he hath visited and redeemed his people;
And hath raised up a mighty salvation for us : in the house of his servant David;
As he spake by the mouth of his holy Prophets : which have been since the world began;
That we should be saved from our enemies : and from the hand of all that hate us.
To perform the mercy promised to our forefathers : and to remember his holy Covenant;
To perform the oath which he sware to our forefather Abraham : that he would give us;
That we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies : might serve him without fear;
In holiness and righteousness before him : all the days of our life.
And thou, Child, shalt be called the Prophet of the Highest : for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways;
To give knowledge of salvation unto his people : for the remission of their sins,
Through the tender mercy of our God : whereby the day-spring from on high hath visited us;
To give light to them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death : and to guide our feet into the way of peace.
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.