

The People of God



Bible Notes July-September 2015

50p

July 1st

Genesis 2 vv 4-17

I thought that this quarter it would be good to do a study of what it means to be the people of God. So we shall be looking at a variety of passages from different parts of the Bible.

All human beings are made in God's image. We are all potentially the people of God. The problem is that by sin we alienate ourselves from our Maker. We exclude ourselves from membership of the people of God. However, it is only as members of the people of God that we fulfil our destiny as human beings. Our destiny as human beings is eternal life. Therefore, by alienating us from the people of God, the wages of sin is death.

In today's reading, we see what it means to be human – formed of the dust of the ground, but God-breathed. We see how much God loves us in planting the Garden of Eden for our habitation.

What is man, that thou art mindful of him: and the son of man that thou visitest him? Psalm 8⁴.

July 2nd

Luke 3 vv 21-38

Jesus is the Son of God. He is acknowledged by God the Father at His Baptism. Adam is the son of God. Jesus is the totally fulfilled human being. He is what we are meant to be. Whereas, we have alienated ourselves from God by sin, God reaches out to us in Christ. He reaches out to us to bring us home to Himself. We are the prodigal sons. He is the Father ready to sacrifice the fatted calf to celebrate our return to the family home. In solidarity with us sinners, Christ the sinless One reaches out to us in love and brings us home.

*O loving wisdom of our God!
When all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came.*

July 3rd

I Corinthians 15 vv 1-8

So why (apart from the fact that I am writing these notes in the Easter season) have I gone to this chapter on the Resurrection? The point is that we are one in Adam and we are one in Christ. All human beings were made in the image of God. That reflection determines how we think about ourselves and it determines how we think about other people. This is what human beings are worth. *You shall love your neighbour as yourself.* The human race is a family. We are one with Adam. We were all made to be God's children.

Shockingly, but truly, we are also all one with Adam in sin, in our rejection of God and His commandments. We therefore can expect to receive the wages of sin, which is death.

But, in solidarity with us, Christ suffers our death so that, in solidarity with Him, we are children of the Resurrection from the dead. The gift of God is eternal life.

*O wisest love! that flesh and blood,
Which did in Adam fail,
Should strive afresh against the foe,
Should strive and should prevail.*

July 4th

I Corinthians 15 vv 9&10

Paul regarded himself as the worst of sinners. Before his conversion, he had persecuted the Church of God, the people of God. On the Road to Damascus, the Risen Christ had appeared to Saul and demanded of him, *Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?* What we do to the brothers and sisters of Jesus, we do to Him. He is one with us and we with Him. But, sinner that Saul was, Jesus loved Him and brought him home to God. Saul the persecutor of Christ and His Church became Paul the apostle, witness to the Resurrection of Jesus.

*And that a higher gift than grace
Should flesh and blood refine,
God's presence and his very self,
And essence all-divine.*

July 5th

I Corinthians 15 vv 9&10

Forgive me for repeating these verses, but their message is very precious to me. *By the grace of God I am what I am.* That is as true for you and me as it is for Paul the apostle. God created us the people we are. Christ redeemed us because He loves us. The Holy Spirit gives to each one of us the appropriate gifts so that we can each fulfil his or her vocation and do the good works He has prepared for us to walk in.

We may suffer a grate deal of criticism from other people. Quite probably (like St Paul) we are our own severest critics, but, in the end, each one of us can say, *By the grace of God I am what I am.*

*Father-like, he tends and spares us,
Well our feeble frame he knows;
In his hands he gently bears us,
Rescues us from all our foes:
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Widely as his mercy flows.*

July 6th

I Corinthians 15 vv 11-17

The Resurrection takes some believing! Suppose you sat with someone who was dying until he stopped breathing and the nurse or doctor gently told you that he had gone. Suppose, a week or two later, you attended the funeral and saw him buried in a grave or burnt at the crematorium. Suppose two or three days after the funeral, your friends told you that the person you had buried was not in fact dead and that they had seen him alive. What would you think. It would take some believing, wouldn't it? It's possibly harder to believe than most of the miracles recorded in the Bible. (C S Lewis wondered why some people doubt the other miracles but say they believe in the Resurrection.) The only harder miracle is the Incarnation itself, that the Creator of all that is somehow became a part of His Creation. Yet Paul insists not only that the Resurrection is true as a historical fact because the tomb was empty (which he doesn't actually mention, though the Gospels do) and because there were more than five hundred witnesses, but he insists that there would be no point in our faith if the Resurrection didn't happen.

Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

July 7th

I Corinthians 15 vv 17-19

If Christ isn't risen from the dead, then dead Christians are simply dead. There is no eternal life in Heaven. There is no eternal life on earth. In fact, we might as well eat, drink and be merry, because tomorrow we shall die. But eating, drinking and being merry do not in themselves fulfil us or satisfy us. In fact, knowing that we are bound to die takes the shine off everything that we do on earth. Nothing we achieve will last. We shall not last. Paradoxically, it is only in the context of eternity that what we achieve on earth finds ultimate meaning. It is only in the context of eternity that our mortal lives have meaning. If Christ is not risen, we Christians are living a delusion and bearing false witness. If the Gospel isn't true, there would be more integrity in living as atheists. But, given that it is intrinsic to atheism to declare that life has no ultimate meaning, we can only thank God that the Gospel is true and that Christ is risen.

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

July 8th

I Corinthians 15 vv 20-22

These verses form part of the Easter Anthems which you will find in both 1662 and Common Worship. In 1662, they are only used on Easter Day (at Mattins in place of the Venite). Common Worship allows the worship leader to use them much more frequently. They are glorious. We are back to Adam and Christ here, what drew me to include this chapter in our study of the people of God. All human beings are in Adam and are therefore susceptible to death. We have all sinned. God so loved the world that He sent His only-begotten Son. Those who believe in Him have eternal life. They are in Christ and therefore participate in His Resurrection.

*Christ is risen, we are risen:
Shed upon us heavenly grace,
Rain and dew, and gleams of glory~
From the brightness of thy face;
That we, with our hearts in heaven,
Here on earth may fruitful be,
And by angel-bands be gathered,
And be ever, Lord, with thee.*

July 9th

I Corinthians 15 vv 23-26

Cosmic! Is it still trendy to say *Cosmic*? I'm thinking of the cosmic Christ, the Christ Who formed the cosmos, the Christ Who fills the cosmos, the Christ for Whom the cosmos exists, the Christ in Whom the cosmos finds its fulfilment. By *cosmos* I mean the whole created order. As Christ is the first in creation, so He is the first in Redemption. Christ is not created but He is the firstborn of creation (Colossians 1¹⁵). He is not a sinner, but He is the firstfruits of the new creation, the Resurrection. This cosmic Christ is also the man from Galilee, a human being like you or me, in every respect save sin. This is why I said that the miracle of the Incarnation is the hardest of all the miracles to believe in. God Who is love in love intervenes in His Creation. Everything else follows from that.

*Alleluia! Alleluia!
Glory be to God on high;
Alleluia to the Saviour,
Who has gained the victory;
Alleluia to the Spirit,
Fount of love and sanctity,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
To the Triune Majesty.*

July 10th

I Corinthians 15 vv 27-29

There are two things in these three verses which are very hard to understand. One is the idea that Christ will eventually be subject to the Father. My only approach to understanding this is in the words of the Athanasian Creed, *Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead: and inferior to the Father, as touching his Manhood*. The other is the custom of being baptised for the dead. We don't know what the custom was. St Paul doesn't seem to commend it. It has largely died out. The argument seems to be that, whatever the Corinthians might say about not believing in the resurrection, their customs indicate that they do believe in life after death. In the same way, people today who say they do not believe in the Christian Gospel arrange funerals, decorate graves, make shrines and talk about their departed loved ones in a manner which demonstrates that they clearly do believe that they are living somewhere. We need to distinguish, however, between vague hopes and expectations about an afterlife and Christian truth.

July 11th

I Corinthians 15 vv 30-34

To know God and Jesus Christ Whom He has sent is to have eternal life. As Christians, we have eternal life here and now. We dwell in Him and He in us. This eternal life will only be perfected in Heaven, but it is the context in which we live here and now. Our life in Christ, our life as members of the people of God, determines how we live from day to day. Our membership of Christ heals us, nourishes us and sustains us. Our life in Him decides what we do with our lives. Sometimes our membership of the people of God may put us in conflict with the world. We may face persecution. We may have to renounce things that the world would think of as good and we may be required to do things that the world would not understand. We have to deny ourselves and follow Christ in the Way of the Cross. We know that this is right because we experience the power of His Resurrection and we draw our strength from this fact. So the lives of Paul and of you and me and of all the millions of Christians throughout the world and in every age is evidence that Christ is alive today and living in His people.

*God of God, the One-begotten,
Light of Light, Emanuel,
In whose Body joined together
All the saints for ever dwell;
Pour upon us of thy fulness,
That we may for evermore
God the Father, God the Son, and~
God the Holy Ghost adore.*

July 12th

I Corinthians 15 vv 35-38

I Corinthians 15 vv 20-58 is the 1662 Burial Service reading. Even I hesitate to use it because so many people would say that it is too long and complex for our modern biblically illiterate congregations with their short attention spans. If we do use it and if people listen, however, they often find this analogy helpful in understanding what resurrection means. You plant a seed in the ground. It looks dead. If you didn't know better, you would think it was finished with it. But, in the power of God, it grows into a new plant, in appearance quite different from what was buried but the same thing, the same DNA.

July 13th

I Corinthians 15 v39

God makes different things. Even in the realm of the flesh, human beings are different from animals. Fish and birds are different again. Given Who God is, the Creator of everything that is, from atoms to galaxies, mortals and angels, is it unreasonable to believe that He creates for us a resurrection body, different from our body of flesh, but consistent with our being the same person we always were. *I believe in the Resurrection of the body, And the life everlasting. Amen.*

July 14th

I Corinthians 15 vv 40&41

Look up into the sky at a night. Amazing, isn't it. So is the sky in the daytime, but we can't even look directly at the sun because it is so bright. Pagans worshipped the sun, the moon and the stars. Superstitious people believe that astrology determines (or at least reveals) our destiny. Biblical religion recognises the glory of the sun, the moon and the stars as the creation of God, their motions determined by His Laws. We praise God for them. They sing God's praises by their very existence. In this context, scientists developed the science of astronomy. The heavenly bodies were not gods which it would be impious to analyse. Neither did they exist by chance in a random universe. The universe makes sense, a sense accessible to human minds, because it follows the laws of God, Whose mind, while infinitely greater than ours, is the pattern in the image of which we are made. Many scientists then went on to believe that the universe and its laws actually needs no ultimate explanation, that God is an unnecessary hypothesis. Atheism is as much an error as paganism, because both deny the one true God, without Whom wisdom does not exist. (See last quarter's notes!)

What Paul is doing here is the same as what he did in the last verse. Given that God creates such an amazing and wonderful variety of things in the physical world, is it so hard to believe that He can raise the dead and give them a new resurrection body?

*Eternal Ruler of the ceaseless round of circling planets singing on their way;
Guide of the nations from the night profound into the glory of the perfect day;
Rule in our hearts, that we may ever be guided and strengthened and upheld by
thee.*

July 15th

I Corinthians 15 vv 42-44

When you read the Easter stories, you see that the Risen Lord Jesus was both different from what He had been before and the same. His friends did not always at first recognise Him. He travelled from place to place in little or no time. He could appear in locked rooms. On the other hand, He could eat. He could be touched. Above all, people recognised Him as soon as He spoke to them. He was the same, but different. And so shall we be. In the Resurrection, we shall be the same people as we are now, but we shall no longer suffer the limitations of the flesh. We shall be like Him. We shall not be susceptible to pain or weakness or suffering. We shall not be susceptible to death. We shall be recognisably ourselves, however, to ourselves, to God and to one another.

Am I being fanciful now? People also recognised the risen Christ is their Christian fellowship, in prayer, in the pages of Scripture, in Holy Communion. I find that I sometimes feel close to the dead in Christ, to my loved ones who have died, in Christian worship, when I say Morning & Evening Prayer, when I participate in Holy Communion. I don't think I am being fanciful. Don't we say *Therefore, with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of Heaven?* Aren't all the Christian dead part of the company of Heaven?

July 16th

I Corinthians 15 vv 45-49

The people of God. All human beings are one in Adam. God *hath made of one blood all nations to dwell on the face of the earth* (Acts 17²⁶). By grace through faith, we are all one in Christ, the second Adam. Life on earth is very wonderful. It is marvellous that we are alive at all. There is so much in our lives for which to be thankful. Yet our lives without Christ are earthbound. Our sin, our original sin, the sin which clings so closely to us all, impairs our life on earth. It alienates us from God and from other people. It sets us the wrong goals in life. Because of sin, our earthbound lives end in death, the legacy of Adam. What Christ, the second Adam, brings, however, is freedom. It is transformation. In Christ, our sins are washed away. We are born again. We are crucified with Christ so that we might live with Christ for ever. In this context of eternal life, our life on earth too is transformed. We know Whom to thank for everything. We know where to find help. We know how to live!

July 17th

I Corinthians 15 vv 45-49

There is far too much in these verses for just one day's meditation. *The last Adam* (Jesus) *was made a quickening spirit*. People sometimes ask why there is relatively little about the Holy Spirit in our creeds and in our formal worship. Part of the answer is that the Spirit does not bear witness to Himself, but to the Father and the Son. The work of the Spirit goes unmentioned because everything else depends on it. Without the work of the Spirit, we would not be able to know God. There would, therefore, be no eternal life. There would be no Christian fellowship, no fellowship with God, no fellowship with one another. The best analogy I can think of is the atmosphere. We are very seldom conscious of the air. We don't often talk about it, but without it, we wouldn't be talking at all about anything! *I believe in the Holy Ghost* is not the isolated single line in the Apostles' Creed which it may appear to be. Everything which follows depends on it.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; The holy Catholick Church; The Communion of Saints; The Resurrection of the body, And the life everlasting. Amen.

July 18th

I Corinthians 15 vv 50-56

Christ's work in us is transformative. Transformation is the *sine qua none* of our eternal life. Without Jesus we are dead in sin. The law is the strength of sin because it reveals just how far short we fall of the glory of God. We cannot inherit the Kingdom of God in our unredeemed state. But Christ changes us. By grace, through faith, our sins are forgiven. We are born again. We are crucified with Christ and buried with Him in Baptism. We are dead to sin. We are set free to live His risen life.

The strife is oe'r, the battle done; now is the Victor's triumph won;

O let the song of praise be sung: Alleluia.

Death's mightiest powers have done their worst, and Jesus hath his foes dispersed;

Let shouts of praise and joy outburst: Alleluia.

On the third morn he rose again glorious in majesty to reign;

O let us swell the joyful strain: Alleluia.

Lord, by the stripes which wounded thee from death's dread sting thy servants free,

That we may live and sing to thee: Alleluia.

July 19th

I Corinthians 15 vv 57&58

What I like about the last verse of this chapter is where S Paul says *forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord*. The victory is God's, not mine or yours. We may feel pretty helpless, even useless. We may feel that we can't see that we have achieved anything. But it isn't the point. It isn't what other people think of me. It isn't even what I think of myself. It is what God thinks of me and He is merciful. I Corinthians 15 is the lesson at a 1662 burial. One of the psalms is Psalm 90.

Shew thy servants thy work: and their children thy glory. And the glorious Majesty of the Lord our God be upon us: prosper thou the work of our hands upon us, O prosper thou our handy-work. Psalm 90^{16&17}.

July 20th

Luke 15 vv 11&12

This parable possibly suffers from being too well known. We know longer have to think about it. Or if we do think about it (and have to preach about it!) we might be too "clever" in trying to find something novel to say about it. So let's just read the story with an open mind. An apparently prosperous farmer has two sons. The first born is dutiful, if dull. This isn't unusual. First born children get all their parents' attention and tend to respond by trying to please them. When other children come along, firstborns may feel the need to compete in the goodness stakes in order to keep their parents' favour. They may have to take responsibility for the younger children. They will certainly have to take more responsibility for themselves as their parents time is taken up with babies. Second children, on the other hand, may feel that they need to be different. They might be spoilt as babies. They are more likely to go their own way when the firstborn follow in their fathers' footsteps. These are not universal rules, but common enough for the story to make sense to the hearers. Nevertheless, we may feel that the younger son here is uncaring and ungrateful. He wants the money that's coming to him, but he doesn't want his family's company. Neither does he want to help run the farm. He's being selfish. He wants make his own way, glad enough to use the old man's money, but to do so on his own account. This is how human beings treat God. We take what He has give us (everything) with very little gratitude and we go our own way heedless of our heavenly Father and our brothers and sisters.

July 21st

Luke 15 v13

He wasted his substance with riotous living.

Here's the thing. We live in a wonderful world and God has given us many wonderful gifts. There is so much beauty. We enjoy good food and drink. We enjoy other people's company. Most of us have nice homes and can afford to dress well. There is pleasure to be had in hobbies, sports and pastimes, not to mention pets, even though my puppy is just now trying very hard to distract my attention from these notes by biting me. Many people have satisfying employment and enjoy the respect of others. However, none of these things in themselves can satisfy. If we thank God for them and make use of them to His glory and for the benefit of other people, they can bring us great joy. But, if they become ends in themselves, if we forget that all good things come from God, if we use them selfishly, if we devote our lives to acquiring them, if, in effect, we make idols, false gods, of all these things, then we waste them. We don't appreciate them. They can't satisfy us.

*All my hope on God is founded; he doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance he guideth, only good and only true.
God unknown, he alone calls my heart to be his own.
Pride of man and earthly glory, sword and crown betray his trust;
What with care and toil he buildeth, tower and temple, fall to dust.
But God's power, hour by hour, is my temple and my tower.*

July 22nd

Luke 15 v14

Here's the thing. Not only do these gifts of God not satisfy if they are not received thankfully and used unselfishly; ultimately, living as if they could fulfil us as human beings brings disaster. Selfishness in relationships destroys both friendships and marriages. The belief that food and drink might make me feel better leads to obesity and health problems. The belief that acquiring possessions will make me happy leads me into debt (and possibly crime) and ruins the environment as scarce resources are unnecessarily used up to produce goods destined for landfill long before they are worn out. The desire to get on may lead me to work too long hours for my own and my family's well being and my ruthless ambition will be detrimental to the people I work with. Conversely, too much time spent on hobbies and pastimes may lead to penury.

July 23rd

Luke 15 v14

Still on this verse. I've just been listening to a radio 'phone in in response to a recent study which suggests that teenage girls are unhappier than they used to be. Why ever should they be? My mother was a teenager during a world war. My grandmothers were teenagers when being poor could mean being barefoot, wearing rags and going without food (not that they did, but it was hard work that kept them a bit above that line when so many of their school friends fell below it). There are millions of teenagers in the world today living in war zones or places where hunger is an ever present threat. So why should our teenagers be unhappy? They've got everything and more! Here are the answers of a somewhat old-fashioned clergyman. Today's teenagers are not brought up to know God. They do not, therefore, have that sense that they are infinitely valuable because they are loved by God, whatever their so-called friends may say. They matter as people not because they excel in exams or sport or because they are well-dressed or popular or beautiful. They matter simply because they are who they are. Because they don't know God, they don't know the power of *a little talk with Jesus* when things aren't right. They are taught that life is about acquiring all those things we looked at yesterday which are good in themselves but cannot ultimately satisfy. The breakdown of traditional sexual morality has separated sex from its true context at the centre of family life. What was once almost a sacrament has been devalued to the status of a recreation. Family is subordinated to career, the common good to individualism. Education is no longer about nourishing souls; it is about achieving measurable outcomes on the path to becoming producers and consumers. And of course, in the secular mindset, the only end to this futile life on earth is death and annihilation. No wonder teenagers are unhappier than they used to be!

July 24th

Luke 15 vv 15&16

And no man gave to him. It is hard sometimes to believe the hardness of the human heart. I'm writing this in the week we have seen the consequences of deciding not to rescue drowning migrants in the Mediterranean for fear of tempting other desperate people to attempt the journey – more fatalities than when the *Titanic* went down. *We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done.*

July 25th

Luke 15 vv 17-19

The Old Testament word for *repent* is *bws* (Shuve). It means *turn* or *return*. Repentance is to return to God. The younger son comes to his senses. He realises that he has wasted his substance. He realises that the world won't help him. He realises that he can't help himself. The only job he can get is feeding pigs and the pay is so poor that he is hungry enough to want to eat the pig food. I presume that his willingness to go back as a servant indicates that he realises that he doesn't deserve to be called a son. We don't deserve to be called the children of God. We have rebelled against Him. We have wasted the gifts He has given us. We have worshipped false gods by devoting our lives to created things rather than to the Creator. It is we who have alienated ourselves from God. It is our experience that, alienated from God, our life is essentially meaningless. Unworthy as we are, the only thing we can do is to return, to repent. *And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders.*

July 26th

Luke 15 v20

When we were studying this story at Gillingham Grammar School, I remember the headmaster saying that we would never understand this until we became fathers. Well, I never became a father, and it is probably true that I cannot understand this verse in the sense of feeling for myself the relief and joy which a father would feel in circumstances such as these. Of course, there are earthly fathers who would be indifferent. There are earthly fathers who would refuse to forgive. There are earthly fathers who would quite understandably think that the full restitution of the prodigal son would be unfair to the older brother who had stayed at home working on the farm. What do you think? I'm sure my father would have welcomed me back if I had ever done anything like this and I'm sure I would have welcomed back any son I might have had who had behaved like this. I think decent human fathers would. The message is that God is our Father and His response is infinitely more loving than even the best of earthly fathers could be. Jesus said: *After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven.*

27th July Read Psalm 122, 28th July Read Psalm 133

July 29th

Luke 15 vv 21-24

The prodigal son recognises that he is not worthy to be called a son and asks to be treated as a hired servant. The actual Son of God, Who was in the form of God and thought it not robbery to be equal with God, made Himself of no reputation and took the form of a slave (Philippians 2^{6&7}). The prodigal son's father restored the young man to his position as a son in the household. God the Father highly exalted Jesus, giving Him the name which is above every name. With Jesus, He exalts us, setting His Name upon His people, blessing and keeping us, showing the light of His countenance upon us. Or as Paul puts it in Galatians (4⁴⁻⁶): *But when the fulness of time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God hath sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.* So, for us who are not worthy to be called sons and would be pushing our luck to be taken on as hired servants, the Son becomes a slave and suffers our punishment in order that we should be fully restored as members of the Household of God.

July 30th

Luke 15 vv 25-32

With whom do we identify in the parable of the prodigal son? I've suggested that all human beings are like the younger son in that we have all abused our Father's goodness. This interpretation fits in very well with the other two parables in Luke 15 – the lost sheep and the lost coin. I have invited you to imagine being the father in the story as we have tried to come to some understanding of the fatherhood of God. But aren't we tempted sometimes to think like the older brother? I expect that most readers of these notes are decent, god-fearing folks. Some of us are the people who keep the Church going, with what can seem like a lack of support from the wider community. We don't get shown any appreciation apart perhaps from formal thanks at the annual meeting. Is it really fair that we should be taken for granted and the prodigal rewarded? Maybe the risk is that, like the scribes and the Pharisees in the Gospel, we have become complacent. We don't see that we too need forgiveness because we don't recognise our sins, our lovelessness. I'm not inviting you and me on a guilt trip, but we need to be honest. We haven't earned a place in the Household of God and we don't have to. Like everyone else, by the grace of God we are what we are.

July 31st

Genesis 2 vv 18-23

And so, after that digression, we return to Genesis. To be human is to be both formed of the dust of the earth and to be God-breathed. It is to be a child of God. God is love. God is three persons in the unity of the Trinity. The relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is love. The creation of the universe is the outflowing of love, as is the creation of the choirs of angels, and whatever else there might be, far beyond our comprehension. Love relates. So God relates to man, made in His image, and man relates to God. God shares with man the care of His Creation. It is not good that he should be alone. God brings Adam the animals and he names them, asserting his dominion and thereby accepting responsibility. But it is not enough. This study is not the person of God. It is the people of God. My communion is very precious to me, but if I do not recognise that my communion is the communion of all the people of God, our fellowship with God the Holy Trinity, and our fellowship one with another, then my understanding of communion is utterly inadequate. God creates another human being for Adam to love and their love will create many more.

1st August

Genesis 3 vv 1-9

Where art thou?

Another very familiar story, which it is perhaps too easy to read without taking in all the implications. Adam and Eve disobey God. They become ashamed of their nakedness. Sex ceases to be simply an expression of their love and the means of procreation and becomes tainted by human sin, as all God's gifts are spoilt by our selfish misuse of them. The remedy they attempt is pretty pathetic – aprons made of fig leaves. But the thing is that God still loves them. Even when they are hiding, He calls out to them.

Heavenly Father, whose blessed Son was revealed that he might destroy the works of the devil and make us sons of God and heirs of eternal life: grant that we, having this hope, may purify ourselves even as he is pure; that when he shall appear in power and great glory we may be made like him in his eternal and glorious kingdom; where is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

August 2nd

I John 3 vv 1-3

The prayer we used yesterday draws heavily on this, one of my favourite passages in the Bible. Imagine! That we should be called the children of God! Brothers and sisters of Jesus, co-heirs with Christ. This is what it is to be a Christian and it is God's gift to us. We don't have to ask whether we are worthy. We aren't. We certainly don't have to ask whether other people are worthy. They aren't either and that is God's business, not ours. We are the children of God. We are therefore God's family and our vocation as Christians is to love as brothers and sisters. What we are now, however, is but a foretaste of what is to come. We shall be like Him? Knowing this, having this hope, having this sure and certain hope, our calling must be to purify ourselves even as He is pure.

We believe in God the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. We believe in God the Son, who lives in our hearts through faith, and fills us with his love. We believe in God the Holy Spirit, who strengthens us with power from on high. We believe in one God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

August 3rd

Genesis 3 vv 10-21

In Adam, our basic human nature, the flesh, as St Paul calls it, we rebel against God and there are consequences. We no longer live in Eden. Our lot is death. We have to work hard to survive. Sex and childbirth cease to be uncomplicated expressions of love and the means of procreating the next generation. Even when God passes this universal sentence on humanity, however, there are two signs that He still loves us, that He does not give up on us, and maybe a third. We'll come to the "maybe" tomorrow. The smaller sign that God still loves the human race is that He makes Adam and Eve coats of skin to replace the ridiculous fig leaves. The sign, however, is that the woman's seed will crush the serpent's head. The Son of God, Son of Mary, daughter of Eve will destroy the serpent, Satan, by His Death on the Cross. This is why we have this reading as part of the Nine Lessons and Carols at Christmas and why it comes also in our Easter celebration.

Ye choirs of new Jerusalem, your sweetest notes employ,

The paschal victory to hymn in strains of holy joy.

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

August 4th

Genesis 6 vv 9-22

The story of the Bible is the story of God's faithfulness and human faithlessness. The God of love pours out His blessings on creation. We are ungrateful and abuse His gifts selfishly. The result is violence, dishonesty, infidelity, etc., and the suffering they cause. The God of Justice must punish the guilty. The God of mercy must restore the sinner. Mercy and Justice are both necessarily aspects of love. So, time and time again in the Bible story, humanity, the people of God, so mess things up that we bring disaster on ourselves, and, time and time again, God saves a faithful remnant and through the remnant saves His people. Ultimately the only truly faithful man is Jesus and He bears the iniquity of us all. I saw a TV programme claiming to disprove the Old Testament. Archaeologists, they said, had found evidence that the people of Old Testament times worshipped gods other than the LORD, worshipped the LORD in unacceptable ways and even believed that the LORD had a female consort. If they believed that this evidence disproved the Bible, they obviously had not read the Bible, which quite clearly castigates the people of God time after time for these very infidelities. This evidence actually proves the Bible. Unfortunately, too many people don't read the whole of the Bible and therefore remain substantially ignorant of its message.

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father,

There is no shadow of turning with Thee;

Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not;

As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.

Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!

Morning by morning new mercies I see:

All I have needed Thy hand hath provided,

Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.

August 5th

Genesis 8 v20 – 9 v17

Jewish people regard this covenant as God's covenant with the whole human race. We respect life. God guarantees the natural order. The covenant with Abraham then they apply specifically to the Jewish people – the promise that Abraham's descendants will live in the Promised Land and the obligation on them to observe the Law. Christians, as we shall see, interpret both as fulfilled in Christ for the Church, which potentially includes the whole of humanity – Jew and gentile alike.

August 6th

I Peter 1 vv 1-9

Some people think that I Peter is an Easter letter. Certainly it is written in the Spirit of Christ crucified and risen to the people of God, to those who with Him are crucified to the end that they may share in His risen life. The promise to Abraham in its Old Testament context makes Canaan the home of the people of God. Under Abraham's grandson, Jacob/Israel, they go down to Egypt to escape famine, but the promise is always that they will return to the Holy Land. This they do under Moses and Joshua. In due course, Solomon builds the Temple in Jerusalem. As we have seen, however, God's faithfulness is met by the faithlessness of His people. Various disasters ensue, culminating in Exile in Babylon. Again there is a return to the Promised Land and a restoration. However, all these vicissitudes lead to the dispersal of Jewish people among the gentiles. Jews live in other nations. They experienced divided loyalties. By and large, they seek to be good citizens of the countries in which they live, but their higher loyalty is always to God. They are different. They try to live in accordance with God's Law and sometimes this brings them into conflict with the people in whose countries they live. The result is sometimes ghettoisation or persecution. These Jews living in other lands are known as the Diaspora. In our reading today, Peter addresses Christians as Diaspora – the people of God living among strangers, good citizens, but with a loyalty to God much deeper than their loyalty to king and country.

*O love that wilt not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee:
I give thee back the life I owe, that in thine ocean depths its flow
may richer, fuller be.*

*O light that followest all my way, I yield my flickering torch to thee:
My heart restores its borrowed ray, That in thy sunshine's blaze its day
may brighter, fairer be.*

*O joy that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to thee:
I trace the rainbow through the rain, and feel the promise is not in vain,
that morn shall tearless be.*

*O cross that liftest up my head, I dare not ask to fly from thee:
I lay in dust life's glory dead. And from the ground there blossoms red
life that shall endless be.*

August 7th

I Peter 1 vv 10-16

One of the shocking facts of history is the persecution of Jews by Christians. Jews were persecuted because they were “different”. They were persecuted because their loyalty to their religion was perceived as a threat to social cohesion and the security of the estate. They were often resented for their success in business, success actually built on community values, hard work and integrity. Because, for complicated and spurious theological reasons, Jews were the moneylenders of Europe, they were resented as creditors so often are by debtors.* Christians attempted to justify persecuting Jews on the grounds that the Jews crucified Christ (He prayed *Father forgive them*) and that the New Testament supersedes the old so that the Jews are no longer God's people. There has been a reaction to this in recent years with some Christian scholars claiming that the Jewish interpretation of the books we call the Old Testament is true for Jews and that the Christian interpretation is true for us. This would mean that the Jews should keep the Torah as they always have (including circumcision, avoiding pork, etc.) and that they are entitled to regard the Land of Israel as their own – which would be bad news for the Palestinian Arabs. I do not think that this is a fair interpretation of the New Testament. The New Testament recognises Christ as the fulfilment of the Old Testament both for Jews and gentiles. God's commandments and promises in the Old Testament have to be interpreted in the light of Jesus. Certainly, the New Testament cannot be read as an excuse for persecuting the Jews, but neither does it allow interpretations of the OT which do not take Christ into account. Peter uses the words of the OT regarding Israel of Christians. We are the people of God, bound to be holy because God is holy.

*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace: according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen: thy salvation; Which thou hast prepared: before
the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles: and to be the
glory of thy people Israel.*

*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.*

* The Old Testament forbids usury. Mediaeval Christians took this to mean that they could not lend money at interest. Jews also believed that they should not lend money at interest, but thought that the prohibition only applied to lending to fellow Jews. So they were willing to lend to Christians, which seems to me like hypocrisy on the part of practitioners of both religions.

August 8th

I Peter 1 vv 17-25

I love this letter. But it does raise the question of our seriousness. We are reminded that our Judge is God, God Who is infinitely powerful and infinitely just. We are reminded that the price paid for our redemption is nothing less than the Blood of Christ. We are reminded that the flesh will surely pass away. Only the Word of God is eternal. The Word is the Gospel. Through the Word, we are born again to an incorruptible inheritance. It follows that we purify ourselves, that we love God, that we love the brethren. And yet we are so casual about our faith.

Why are its bounties all in vain before unwilling hearts displayed

Was not for them the Victim slain? Are they forbid the children's bread?

August 9th

I Peter 2 vv 1-6

The Temple at Jerusalem was the House of God. The Old Testament is well aware that God cannot be contained in a stone building erected by human hands. The Temple was, however, the place where the tribes went up to worship and the place where the Ark of the Covenants was contained in the Holy of Holies. God is, of course, everywhere. Indeed everywhere exists within God and then He is infinitely greater. God is always with us, wherever we may be and whatever we are doing. Nevertheless, we do consecrate places for worship and within our churches we think of some places, especially the sanctuary, as more holy than others. So our worship is directed towards the holy table. The New Testament locates the dwelling place of God, not in the Temple at Jerusalem, but in Jesus Christ. The New Testament identifies the Church – the sum total of Christian believers – as the Body of Christ. God dwells in the Church. He dwells in our hearts as individual Christians. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. He dwells in the Church as a corporate Body (the Body of Christ). The Church of God is the Temple of God, the place where His glory dwells. One stone doesn't make a church! We are all necessary. The building is consecrated. The stones must lay *aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies and all evil speakings.*

Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and corner-stone,

Chosen of the Lord, and precious, binding all the Church in one,

Holy Sion's help for ever, and her confidence alone.

All that dedicated city, dearly loved of God on high,

In exultant jubilation pours perpetual melody

God the One in Three adoring in glad hymns eternally.

August 10th

I Peter 2 vv 7&8

But what of those who don't believe? Two days ago I asked why we are so casual about our faith. The idea seems to have grown up that God is a cosmic kindly old gentleman, benignly senile. If there is a God, people tend to assume, if there is an afterlife, it will all be quite pleasant and all the same for everyone. Maybe paedophiles and suicide bombers will go to hell, but everything will be fine for the rest of us. But would that really make sense, that the God of Justice would simply overlook our sins, that the Almighty could safely be ignored or even mocked? God's love for us is such that He sends His Son to die so that we might be restored to eternal life. He does not desire the death of a sinner. But that very fact should be enough to deliver us from a casual attitude to the things of God.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do thereafter; the praise of it endureth for ever. (Psalm 111¹⁰).

August 11th

I Corinthians 10 vv 1-4

The people of God in the Old Testament were the Israelites. To them were the promises given. God delivered them from slavery to sin in Egypt, He delivered them from death and brought them through the Red Sea. It was like Baptism. They were what the Americans claim to be – one nation under God. Baptism washes clean. Baptism is a new beginning. Baptism is deliverance from death. Baptism makes us members of Christ and members one of another. God nourished the Israelites on manna, the bread from heaven, but the true bread from heaven, is Jesus Himself Who nourishes us with His Body in the Holy Communion. They drank water from the rock. When Jesus died on the cross, water flowed from His side, signifying the gift of the Holy Spirit, the water of life. The Israelites were both protected and guided by the pillar of fire and smoke. The Church received the Holy Spirit in the rushing wind and flames of Pentecost. God made a covenant with His people at Mount Sinai in the blood of animal sacrifices. He made a new covenant with His renewed people (Jews and gentiles) in the Blood of Christ shed on Calvary and bestowed on us in Holy Communion. He brought His people to Promised Land as He will bring us to Heaven.

Life—imparting heavenly Manna, stricken Rock with streaming side,

Heaven and earth with loud hosanna worship thee, the Lamb who died,

Alleluia, Alleluia, risen ascended glorified.

August 12th

I Corinthians 10 vv 5-12

I was tempted to leave I Corinthians 10 after yesterday's reading, but that would have been dishonest. We have to beware of readings that cut off as soon as they reach ideas which the compilers of lectionaries, preachers and congregations find uncomfortable or hard to understand. A preacher has only done his duty when he has declared all the counsel of God, not just his favourite bits (Acts 20²⁷). The story of the Bible is the story of God's faithfulness and mankind's faithlessness. Despite everything which God had done for them, despite the wonderful things they had experienced, the Israelites, by and large, were faithless and faithlessness had consequences. God forgave them time after time. He sent them His prophets. He reached out to them in love. But faithlessness had consequences. What happened to Israel was all part of God's providential plan for the deliverance of the whole human race, when the Word would become flesh and dwell among us, when He would offer Himself *as a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world*, when He would pour out of His spirit on all flesh, *And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved*. Paul is not teaching his readers to despise the Israelites for their failings. He is warning us that we too are human and need continually to seek God's grace that we should not be found faithless.

And we, shall we be faithless? Shall hearts fail, hands hang down?

Shall we evade the conflict and cast away our crown?

Not so: in God's deep counsels some better thing is stored:

We will maintain, unflinching, one Church, one faith, one Lord.

August 13th

Exodus 19 vv 1-6

So. What it means to be the people of God. God has redeemed the Israelites. They owe everything to Him. What is required is that they keep His covenant and obey His commandments, If they do so, they will be a peculiar treasure, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The whole earth belongs to God. All nations live out their histories under His providence. But God's people are holy; they are special. They are especially privileged and they have especial responsibility to keep His covenant and to obey His commandments.

*O dearly, dearly has he loved and we must love him too,
And trust in his redeeming blood and try his works to do.*

August 14th

I Peter 2 vv 9-12

Peter teaches us that what was true of Israel in the Old Testament is much more wonderfully true of the Church in the New Testament. We are *a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people*. We are especially privileged. We have especial responsibility to keep God's covenant and to obey His commandments. As a priesthood, we (all the baptised) have access to God in Christ. In Christ we mediate between God and creation. We interceded for the world. We speak God's Word to the world. We warn the world; we bless the world. But, above all, *we show forth the praises of him who hath called us out of darkness into his marvellous light*. The worship of the Church is focused on God. Whether worshipping on our own or in company with others, the primary purpose of worship is not to make the worshippers feel better or to educate them and certainly not to entertain them. The purpose of worship is to glorify God. If we worship in spirit and in truth, we are much more joyful as people, we are educated in the sense of being built up as people so that we may fulfil our personal potential, but if we approach worship mainly thinking of what we can get out of it for ourselves, we neither glorify God, nor find grace to grow as people. In the same way, the Church is not primarily a body of people who do good in the world and also happen to enjoy worshipping. The Church exists to worship God and therefore does good in the world. The more profound our worship, the more good we shall do.

Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, tithes;

Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of thy love;

Take my feet, and let them be swift and beautiful for thee.

August 15th

I Peter 2 vv 13-16

As a holy people, separated from the world because we are washed clean in the Blood of Christ, we might think that we should disdain to take part in ordinary life. Peter, however, points out that such an attitude would be entirely wrong. It would antagonise people in the world when we ought to be reaching out to them with the love of God. Our freedom as Christians is not the freedom to act irresponsibly. It is the freedom to do our duty, the only way in which we can be fulfilled as people. *O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom: Defend us thy humble servants in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in thy defence, may not fear the power of any adversaries, through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord.*
Amen.

August 16th

I Peter 2 vv 17-25

V17 is often quoted. I feel sure that used to be used as part of the dismissal and blessing at the end of services, but I can't find it – not even on the internet. It's a good summary of what it means to live as a Christian, a member of this peculiar people, in the world. We respect non-Christians and the institutions of the secular world. We love one another. That's easy in theory, but how do we put it into practice, in real life situations? What if you are badly treated, for example, by your boss? You don't have to be a Christian to enjoy working for a good boss. You don't have to be a Christian to take a deserved punishment well. But what about if you work for a bad boss or if you are unfairly punished? I don't think that Peter is saying don't use whatever redress might be available to you through your union or an industrial tribunal, but he is saying that your attitude even towards your bad boss should be modelled on Jesus. We live in the world, but we are not of the world. So, in each case, we have to ask what is the Christian response to any given situation, the response which bears witness to the world of the love of God which dwells in our hearts.

*Like a mighty army moves the Church of God;
Brothers we are treading where the saints have trod:
We are not divided, all one body we,
One in hope and doctrine, one in charity.*

August 17th

I Peter 3 vv 1-7

This is one of those passages often omitted from reading schemes and sermons. It starts off with the same idea as the previous passage about the maltreated servant. A Christian wife should behave in such a way towards her unbelieving husband as to commend the faith to him. In the context, this requires submission to him, as was usual in the ancient world. The remarks that follow, however, appear to be general. I don't think that Peter is saying that, for now, women should *love, honour and obey* their husbands and attend more to cultivating a good character than worrying about their appearance. I think he is saying that this is how things ought always to be. If my understanding is right, is the conclusion that Christian marriage should be as St Peter here describes it? Do we think that Peter's counsel was correct for his time and for many centuries following, but not for the present day? Or do we just think that Peter was wrong and that feminism is right all along? If we adopt the second or third of these options, what does it say about our understanding of Scripture.?

August 18th

Ephesians 5 vv 21-33

One reason why I think St Peter's description of Christian marriage was meant for all times and all cultures is that here St Paul makes very similar points much more forcefully. This is also the principal biblical passage linking marriage and our understanding of the relationship between Christ and the Church. I sometimes say to couples that in the sacrament of marriage we give ourselves in love to one another and God makes us one flesh, and in the sacrament of Baptism Christ gives Himself to us and we give ourselves to Him in love and God makes us one. The difference is that marriage is lifelong and Baptism is eternal.

If we don't believe that the biblical model of marriage is appropriate for C21 West, can we disentangle Paul's C1 understanding of marriage from his theology of the Church as the bride of Christ? Or maybe we feel that Church as bride is an inappropriate metaphor in a feminist world in which Christ might equally have been female and any suggestion that the wife is subordinate to the husband is unacceptable? If we do reject the biblical imagery, in what sense do we still regard the Bible as the Word of God and if God does not speak to us through the Bible, how does He speak to us and how do we assess whether what we believe to be God speaking is really His Voice, our own imaginations or the spirit of the age (zeitgeist)?

Ephesians 5 and its teaching of male headship is the main reason why evangelical Anglicans (like me) cannot accept women priests and bishops. Anglo-Catholics put more emphasis on what the Church has always and everywhere (almost always and until quite recently) believed on the subject and the necessity to act together with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches to ordain women or not to act at all.

One church in the Diocese of Rochester was strongly criticised in the national news because one of its clergy put something on the internet about Ephesians 5 being the model for modern British marriage. If you measure the success of a church in terms of numbers, numbers of converts and money, the church in question is one of the largest and wealthiest in the diocese and one with one of the most successful missionary programmes. On the other hand, the Bible doesn't measure worth by size or wealth!

August 19th

Revelation 21 vv 1-8

The only other direct references to the Church as the Bride of Christ come at the end of Revelation. I quite often use this reading (omitting v8) at funerals. I don't think I need to say anymore about the beauty of the final consummation to which we can look forward.

*Mid toil and tribulation, and tumult of her war,
She waits the consummation of peace for evermore;
Till with the vision glorious her longing eyes are blest,
And the great Church victorious shall be the Church at rest.
Yet she on earth hath union with God the Three in One,
And mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won:
O happy ones and holy! Lord give us grace that we,
like them the meek and lowly, on high may dwell with thee.*

August 20th

Revelation 22 vv 1-17

One of the first flower festivals at St Michael's after I became Rector depicted in flower arrangements around the church the story of the Bible – Salvation History. The doorway was paradise, the Garden of Eden, lost through the old Adam's disobedience, and Eden restored by the obedience of the second Adam. In this passage is the fulfilment of all things, the final consummation when Christ shall come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. *And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.*

*O sweet and blessed country, the home of God's elect!
O sweet and blessed country that eager hearts expect!
Jesu, in mercy bring us to that dear land of rest;
Who art with God the Father and Spirit, every blest.*

August 21st

I Peter 3 v7

In both Peter and Paul, the idea of headship imposes on the man a duty to care for the *weaker vessel*. I often hear on the radio pleas from feminists that women should be treated with particular respect because they are weaker physically or because of their monthly cycle or because of the consequences of child bearing. All true, but only if we acknowledge that men and women are different and that therefore women may be better in certain roles and men in others!

August 22nd

I Peter 3 vv 8-15

Peter describes life as members of the Christian community. This is how we behave towards one another in the Church. It is how we behave towards the world. The result both of our community life and our conduct towards those outside the community is that people want to know the reason for the hope which is in us and we are to be ready with an answer.

*Bind us together, Lord, bind us together
With chords that cannot be broken.
Bind us together Lord, bind us together.
Bind us together with love.
There is only one God. There is only one King.
There is only one Body. That is why we sing (chorus).
Made for the glory of God, purchased by His precious Son.
Born with the right to be clean, for Jesus the victory has won (chorus).
You are the family of God. You are the promise divine.
You are God's chosen desire. You are the glorious new wine (chorus).*

August 23rd

I Peter 3 vv 16-18

The people of God are different and are therefore likely to experience rejection and persecution. It is much easier to assimilate to the world and many of us do. We don't talk about our religion. We give way when family or friends ask us to do something which is not really in keeping with our Christian profession. If we don't, we may find ourselves at odds with other people. We have to judge when it is right to make a stand and when it is right to give in. Peace, but not at any price! If we do suffer for our faith, Peter says, it should not be because we deserve it! If we suffer undeservedly, we should remember Jesus.

*Take up thy cross then in his strength and calmly every danger brave;
'twill guide thee to a better home and lead to victory o'er the grave.*

August 24th

I Peter 3 vv 19-22

So, back to Noah and the Flood. God's covenant is with the whole human race in Christ. Just as Noah and his family were saved in the Ark, borne up upon the waters, so we are saved in Christ through the waters of Baptism and the Church is the Ark of Salvation for all believers, for men and women of every race and language. Christ crucified descends into hell and the dead are set free. (See next page for devotional.)

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

*Devouring depths of hell their pray at his command restore;
His ransomed hosts pursue their way where Jesus goes before.*

*Triumphant in his glory now to him all power is given;
To him in one communion bow all saints in earth and heaven.*

August 25th

I Peter 4 vv 1-7

Born again, buried with Him in Baptism, to become a Christian is to make an entirely fresh start. To know God is to have eternal life. Having eternal life puts a different perspective on life in this world. We see everything in the light of eternity. This obviously means ceasing from what is sinful. Fulfilled in Christ, we no longer need the false crutches of sex and drugs and rock and roll just to get through life. Moreover we also regard everything else in the light of eternity – our work, our relationships, our home life, our hobbies. Being a Christian makes all the difference and a Church, therefore, is an entirely different thing from any human institution. As a Church we may do the same things as charitable and philanthropic societies, we may have a social life programme similar to voluntary organisations, we may use the methods of business to manage our affairs, but our motivations are entirely different from any human institution and there will be times when the way we behave will be utterly different and perhaps inexplicable to the world. There has been a lot of debate about the meaning of v6. Whatever it means, it is clear that to be without Christ is effectively to be dead and that eternal life is through faith in Him in response to the preaching of the Gospel.

And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks unto God and the Father by him. Colossians 3¹⁷.

August 26th

I Peter 4 vv 1-7

I've been involved in several discussions about Baptism recently. The people Peter is writing to were converted to Christ as adults. They repented of their sins. They were baptised. The difference between before and after was (or ought to have been) absolutely clear. So Peter teaches them. Members of the Baptist Church believe that this is how it should be today. We should not baptise babies or children. We should only baptise mature people when they are old enough to make for themselves a definite profession of faith and repent of their old sins. This is a clear policy, but it raises a number of difficulties.

- At what stage in our lives can we be said to be sufficiently mature to take up our cross and follow Christ? Surely, we can never understand the full implications of being a Christian until we come to end of our lives on earth and stand before the Judgment Seat.
- How much faith would we need in order to be baptised? Jesus says we only need as much as a grain of mustard seed.
- Given that Baptism is the inauguration rite of the Church, what is the status of children, teenagers (and some adults) who pray and apparently know Jesus, but are not yet baptised? Are they Christians? Are they members of the Church? Would they go to heaven if they died? If the answer to all those questions is "Yes", is there any point in Baptism?
- What about people who have some sort of illness so that they will never come to a mature understanding? Can they never be baptised? Are they excluded from Church membership? Are they denied eternal life?
- Surely our membership of His Church depends on God, not on ourselves. So surely He can make babies members of His Church without waiting for them to be mature enough to seek membership for themselves.

For all these reasons, most branches of the Christian Church baptise the children of Christians, but this raises further questions.

- How much evidence does there have to be of your family's faith before you (as a baby) can be welcomed into God's Church and receive the benefits of Baptism?
- Can godparents (or anyone else) really make promises on your behalf?
- What about all the people we baptise who don't appear to profess the faith when they grow up? Are they Christians?
- Don't we blur the distinction between the Church and the world if we have an "open" Baptism policy?
- Don't we risk excluding the very people Jesus said we should suffer to come to Him, if we have strict Baptism policy?

August 27th

I Peter 4 vv 4 vv 7-12

Peter describes life in the Christian community. Above all, there is to be love. Love will cover all sins. He who loves fulfils the law. Love is generous and hospitable. God fills the Church with His Spirit and the Spirit enables Christians, each one, to fulfil his or her vocation, in building up the Church, in completing Christ's work in the redemption of the cosmos. This is life in the light of eternity. *The end of all things is at hand.* Have we downplayed this hope and the sense of urgency that goes with it? Although we say in the Creed very frequently *He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end*, do we really believe it and live accordingly? This world had a beginning and it will have an end at a time that no man can prophesy. Probably, but not necessarily, our lives on earth will come to an end, at a time which we cannot predict. There will be judgment. There is redemption. St Paul is not sure whether he wants to die yet (Philippians 1²³). He's got work still to do on earth. But it will be better, infinitely better, to be with Christ. *For I am in a strait betwixt the two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ, which is far better.* He describes how we Christians might be expected to look at life a couple of verses earlier: *For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.* There is a hymn based on this verse which is so good that I will quote it here.

For me to live is Christ, to die is gain
to hold His hand and walk His narrow way
there is no peace, no joy, no thrill, Like walking in His will
For me to live is Christ, to die is gain
Now once my heart was full of sin and shame
Till someone told me Jesus came to save
When He said "Come home to me"
He set my poor heart free
For me to live is Christ, to die is gain
Now there are things that I still do not know
But of this one thing I'm completely sure
He who called me on that day
Washed all my sin away
For me to live is Christ, to die is gain

Christ has died: Christ is risen: Christ will come again.

August 28th

I Peter 4 vv 13-19

Around about 1800, the Church of England was in a very poor state. Church buildings were in a poor state of repair. There was a great deal of indifference towards religion, even hostility. Many of the clergy were only too worldly. God revived His Church in this land at that time (among other ways) by two great movements. There was the Evangelical Revival, which focused on preaching the Gospel, especially to the poor, and personal holiness, and the Oxford Movement, which emphasised the holiness of the Church as a corporate body. Sadly, as the devil so often intervenes in the affairs of the Church, these two great movements tend to distrust one another and acted more like rivals than allies. But, despite the devil and human frailty, God did tremendous work through both those movements and many other institutions and individuals throughout the C19. Around 1900, the Church in this country was probably healthier than at any time since the Reformation. So don't despair. 1800 was discouraging but 1900 was much better. 2000 might have been discouraging, but who knows what God has in store for 2100? Anyway, what I was coming round to, was that some members of the Oxford Movement, while having very high ideals for the office of bishop, thought that it would be a very good thing if the actual bishops were deprived of the wealth and power bishops enjoyed in Victorian times, and if they were forced to undergo persecution. Would we like to see a revival of the Church in this country in this century? There is a thought that our Christian life, if it were truly alive, would challenge the world to the point at which we might expect to be persecuted, only at which point would our impact be sufficient for us to be really effective witnesses of the Gospel. After all, the New Testament word for witness is martyr (μαρτυς).

August 29th

I Peter 5 vv 1-5

As most readers of these notes know, I have a weakness for the King James Version of the Bible. Maybe because it is a good translation of I Peter or maybe because I know these verses so well, but this passage is like music to me. It warms my heart. Peter was entrusted with the care of Christ's lambs. Here he speaks to the whole Church and especially to pastors about what the pastoral office means and how we all are called to care for one another as members of the flock of Christ, the Good Shepherd.

August 30th

I Peter 5 vv 6-9

Go on. Read it in the KJV. 6 Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time:

7 Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.

8 Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour:

9 Whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world.

I can't add to that. Just think on what it means. Submit to God. You can unload all your cares on Him, because He cares for you. You can resist the devil. Ferocious as he is, you are not alone. You are part of the communion of saints. God is with you.

August 31st

I Peter 5 vv 10-14

Peter speaks of the God of eternal glory. Just try for a moment to comprehend something of what that means. He speaks of the involvement of the God of eternal glory in your life and in mine. He speaks of the "religious" things of life: *perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you*. He speaks of the mundane, the exchange of greetings between friends. There is nothing in our lives which is outside the scope of God's care for us.

September 1st

Genesis 1 vv 1-9

Back to the Flood. Eight persons saved in the ark rapidly multiply and head for Babylon. There they decide to make themselves a name, to build a city and a tower which will reach up to heaven. Ironically, they suppose that by so doing they will avert the threat of being scattered abroad upon the face of the earth. Arrogance, pride. They will make themselves a name. What is going to happen if people who reject God Who is love and His commandments which are summed up by love, combine together and pool their technological resources? Think weapons of mass destruction. Think concentration camps. So God, in His justice and mercy, destroys their tower, confounds their language and scatters them over the face of the earth.

Still through the cloven skies they come, with peaceful wings unfurled;

And still their heavenly music floats o'er all the weary world:

Above its sad and lonely plains they bend on hovering wing;

And ever o'er its Babel sounds the blessed angels sing.

September 2nd

Numbers 6 vv 22-27

And they shall put my name on the children of Israel: and I will bless them.

The people who built the Tower of Babel wanted to make themselves a name. They were the important ones. They didn't need God. Proud and arrogant, they trusted in themselves and their own abilities. *Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time:* The children of Israel were to receive God's Name. They were to be holy because He is holy. They were to obey God's Law because *I am the LORD*. *The LORD* in our English bibles of course stands for the Name of God which is to holy even to speak out loud – יהוה. As Christians, we, people of all races and nations, bear the name of Christ. Our calling is to live by His perfect Law of Love.

For lo, the days are hastening on, by prophet-bards foretold,

When, with the ever-circling years, comes round the age of gold;

When peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendours fling,

And the whole world give back the song which now the angels sing.

September 3rd

Exodus 20 v7

What does it mean to take the LORD's name in vain? We usually think of using the name of God or Jesus as a swear word. It is very common for people to do this and it does indeed reflect disrespect towards God and it is offensive to Christian people. I cannot forbear to note how careful broadcasters etc. are in their use of the name of Mohammed and other names sacred to other religions and how this care contrasts with the gay abandon with which they scatter around language which is offensive to Christians. Maybe this is because they are not afraid that fanatical Christians will bomb recording studios. Or maybe it is because we are the people they really do fear. We have to be mocked because the Christian Gospel so effectively challenges our materialist, secular society. The secular authorities are perfectly happy to celebrate the Chinese New Year, Diwali, Hanukkah, Eid, etc.. If we all celebrate all of them, they are effectively robbed of their meaning. We keep the rituals without caring what they mean. We respect the rights of other people to celebrate their own culture, but we expect them to keep themselves to themselves. British culture is bigger than and can easily absorb minorities. What really challenges secular Britain, however, is the truth of the Gospel. If Christmas is allowed to be about Jesus, it cannot be a celebration of materialist greed.

September 4th

Deuteronomy 5 v11

I thought I would remind you that the Ten Commandments come twice in the Bible. So what does it mean to take the LORD's Name in vain, other than to use it as a swear word? It would be taking the LORD's name in vain to swear an oath is His name and then tell lies or fail to keep the promise or covenant made. Jesus says that the people of God ought to be so honest that oaths are unnecessary. It would be taking the LORD's name in vain to use it in magic spells or pagan religion. Is it not also taking the LORD's name in vain if we who bear that holy name do not live up to our high calling?

Our Father, which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

September 5th

Acts 2 vv 1-13

When the human race decided to make a name for itself by building a city and a tower, God confounded our language in His justice and in His mercy and scattered us abroad on the face of the earth. Men and women, made in the image of God, made to be His children, have rejected His parenthood, travelled far from God, wasted the good things the Father has given us, and reduced ourselves to a state in which we would fain have filled our bellies with the husks that the swine did eat. Only God could bring us back home and this He did in Jesus. Those who turned to Christ, those who repented of their sins, were baptised in the Name of the Triune God. No longer scattered abroad on the face of the earth, we are once again one in Him. The people of God have a common language, the language of love. All this is God's work, the work of Jesus, the work of the Holy Spirit.

*From the overshadowing of thy gold and silver wing
Shed onus, who to thee sing, holy, heavenly love.*

September 6th

John 15 vv 1-8

Rebellion against God brought disunity to the human race. How can you believe in the brotherhood of man if you don't know the fatherhood of God? In Adam, we are one in sin and rebellion against God. We have only death to look forward to. But, in Christ, we are one in a perfect unity of love, a communion with God the Holy Trinity, a communion with all Christian people, the saints on earth and the saints in Heaven. We are as much part of Christ as the branches are of a vine. Our nourishment, our continued life, our ability to produce fruit, depends entirely on our union with Him in love. This is eternal life, to know God and Jesus Christ Whom He has sent.

September 7th

Galatians 5 vv 1-6

Galatians reads as an impatient letter. You can sense Paul's frustration with the Galatian Christian community. It was Paul himself who had preached to them the Gospel – that God had done everything necessary through the Cross of Christ. Everything depends on Him. It is by grace that we are saved through faith, and that not of ourselves; it is the gift of God. It is not a question of our trying to be good to make God love us. It is because God loves us that we can be good. Somehow, the Galatians have got this the wrong way round. They think they have to be circumcised and to keep the Jewish Law. Maybe they have misunderstood the Scriptures. Perhaps they have been influenced by Jews or by Jewish Christians who do keep the Law in the traditional way. Maybe, when sometimes Christians were persecuted and Jews were not, they thought it would be safer to appear to be Jewish. Paul is insistent. You can't earn God's love. You can't save yourself and, if you think you can save yourself, you can't accept your need for Jesus and therefore, paradoxically, you cannot be saved. It's just as true today. You can't save yourself by being good. You will never be good enough. Only God can save you. When God saves you, you are set free from slavery to sin, and only then can you be good.

September 8th

Galatians 5 vv 7-15

If we wrongly understand the Law of God, thinking that we have to justify ourselves by our obedience to it, in effect it enslaves us. We feel the weight of so many obligations, but there is never any reward, because we cannot possibly fulfil them all. If the only way to evade punishment were to be to be perfect, we'd lead miserable lives striving after the impossible and still face punishment at its conclusion. The realisation that God loves us as we are, the realisation that Christ on the cross has done everything necessary for our salvation, sets us free. We are free from sin and the fear of death. The truth sets us free. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Being free does not mean being free to be evil without fear of punishment; it means being free to be good. To be good is to love and love fulfils the Law.

*If the Son shall set you free,
Ye shall be free indeed.*

*Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.
Hallelu, Hallelujah!*

September 9th

Galatians 5 vv 16-26

So we're back to bearing fruit, the fruits of the Holy Spirit. These are the characteristics of the individual Christian and of the Christian community, the Church. The old Adam is crucified with Christ so that we may live in the freedom of the resurrection, the new life of the second Adam Who came to our rescue.

But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.
Galatians 6¹⁴.

*When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.*

*See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

*His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spreads o'er His body on the tree;
Then I am dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.*

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

September 10th

John 15 vv 9-15

I have been thinking a lot lately about the vine as an icon of the Church. I do tend to go on about the Church as the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The Church is not primarily a human institution. It is not a voluntary society, a social club, a historic building preservation trust, a political movement or a business, even though it may have characteristics of all these and more. The Church is God's Church and it is *sui generis*. There is nothing quite like it. I am finding the icon of the vine particularly attractive just now because of its intimacy. The branches are the vine.

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

September 11th

John 15 v16

Far too many people think that evangelism or mission is about appealing to people to join our Church. We need more members to keep it going. We need younger members to do the jobs that some of us are getting too old for. So we have to appeal to people, to compete for their attention with the WI and children's football teams and the PTA and the ramblers and boot fairs and all the other worthy organisations which compete for the support of the public. We have to change our presentation and even our message to gain the support which we need in order to survive.

This is neither mission nor evangelism and the Church is not a worthy organisation which needs the support of the public. We proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ because He told us to. It is to His glory that numbers are added to His Church. It is for their salvation that people believe. Yes, we do have to present the Gospel in such a way that people will take notice and understand it, but it is the Word of God which we proclaim, not our own message or the message we think that people will necessarily want to hear. Our task is to preach the Word of God whether or not people listen. We are like farmers sowing seed in the ground. We do our bit, but only God can make it grow. If people do come into church membership, it is because God has graciously granted them the gift of faith. The glory is all His.

September 12th

John 15 vv 17-21

These verses are very thought-provoking. Christians are branches of the Vine which is Christ. We are members of His Body. We are living stones in the Temple of the Spirit of the Risen Christ. We have the same commission from the Father that Jesus has – the redemption of Creation through the Word, by which (by Whom) it was originally created. Jesus tells us to expect the response He got! We know that many people rejected Jesus and His message. We know that they crucified Him. Why would we expect anything different? *He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. 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: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of man, but of God.* John 1¹⁰⁻¹³.

September 13th

John 15 vv 22-27

These verses also are thought-provoking. We think of Jesus as coming to bring peace, harmony and unity. In fact, He brings division. Until they hear the Word people can live complacently. Not knowing the truth about themselves and the world they live in, they can get on undisturbed with their worldly lives. Then Jesus speaks and they have to choose. The Truth sets them free, but do they really want to be free? Sometimes people who have served long prison sentences can't adapt to life on the outside. They have forgotten why freedom matters and they have lost the desire to take responsibility for their lives. The authentic proclamation of the Gospel forces people to choose – the strait and narrow way that leads to life or the broad road that leads to destruction. To the spiritually blind, the broad way appears easier and holds few terrors. It is simplest to go along with everybody else. The narrow way appears harder and its destination uncertain, not many people choose it. Then Jesus the Light of the World reveals the Truth. He is the Way. He is our friend on the journey. He is our end. There is only one choice once Christ has healed our blindness to the Truth.

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

September 14th

Genesis 11 v27 – 12 v3

Are cities a good thing? On the one hand, when large numbers of people live together: division of labour makes it possible for arts and science and politics to flourish; delivery of public services and trade are facilitated; the sheer diversity of people opens us up to new ideas. On the other hand, cities are congested, often dirty, extremely unhealthy in the days before the principles of sanitation were properly understood, crime-ridden and lonely, cut off from nature, weak on community, and perhaps tending to alienate from God. The Bible recognises both the value of cities and the downside. Abraham's family are told to depart from pagan civilisations and make a fresh start as the people of God in the land of Canaan. In doing so, they will become a blessing to all the families of the earth.

September 15th

Philippians 3 vv 14-21

Paul writes to the Christian community that we do not really belong here. This certainly is not all that there is. The best is yet to come. We are on a journey. This world is somewhere we are passing through on our way to the Kingdom of God. Although a Roman citizen and a native and citizen of Tarsus (*no mean city*, he calls it), although the people to whom this letter is initially addressed are residents of Philippi, Paul maintains that all we Christians are primarily citizens of the Kingdom of God. It is this which determines where our ultimate loyalty lies and the standards by which we live. *Merciful God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as pass man's understanding. Pour into our hearts such love towards you that we, loving you above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord.* Amen.

September 16th

Philippians 4 v1-9

This is another of those splendid and well-known passages to which I find it hard to add. Paul describes life as citizens of the Kingdom of God. This is what the Church is like. If the Church isn't like this, there is something wrong. The branches are failing to be nourished by the vine. Are we neglecting the Word? Are we neglecting to pray? Are we less committed to the fellowship than we ought to be? Are we failing to honour the Sacraments? *As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue in my love.* John 15⁹.

September 17th

Jeremiah 29 vv 1-14

As we have seen, the people of God are a rebellious people. Time after time they have broken God's covenant, worshipped false gods, disobeyed His Law and turned deaf ears to the prophets. The result in C6BC was that the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar was able to conquer Jerusalem, destroy the Temple and deport many of the leading citizens to exile in Babylon. Jeremiah the prophet warned the people time after time and they took no notice. When his words came true, he remained loyal to the people left in Jerusalem and eventually accompanied them to Egypt (even though their going there was contrary to the message God had given him for them). Here he writes to the exiles in Babylon. They are not to be fooled. They will be staying in Babylon for a long time. They've got to settle down there, build houses, get jobs, marry and start families. Moreover they are to work and pray for the peace of Babylon (the very city whose armies had made war on Judah and destroyed everything that was most dear to them). This is an analogy for us as Christians. Primarily, we are the people of God. We need to learn the lessons of the past: keep God's covenant with us, obey His laws, listen to the prophets. (We can only expect disaster if we don't.) We are now, in a sense, exiles in this world. Our home is in heaven. For now, however, we live in this world. We build houses, work, raise families. And we pray and work for the well-being of the communities in which we live.

September 18th

Daniel 6 vv 1-28

Nebuchadnezzar trained up some of the boys among the Jewish exiles to serve him in his court. They were quite happy to do this, so long as their loyalty to God was not compromised. They could be good citizens of Babylon and faithful public servants, even rising high up in the administration, but only so long as they did not compromise their membership of the people of God. Daniel served Nebuchadnezzar and prophesied for his son Belshazzar. Belshazzar was a very foolish man, however, and his defiance of the living God resulted in his losing the kingdom to Darius the Mede. Darius had so much confidence in Daniel, his ability and his integrity, that he made him head of the civil service. This created jealousy and resentment. (People objected to Ruth Kelly being a minister under Tony Blair because she was a Christian.) The result was that Daniel was forced to choose whether to carry on praying or to compromise.

September 19th

Genesis 15 vv 1-6

I am thy shield and exceeding great reward.

This was a wonderful thing that God said to Abraham. I think it is fair to believe that what He says to Abraham here, he says to everyone of us who belongs to the people of God, to every Christian. But just then it wasn't enough for Abraham. Abraham was wondering about the promise God had made to him that his seed would inherit the land. Abraham had no children and he and his wife were now too old to have children. God confirmed and repeated His promise *and he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness*. The people of God are the seed of Abraham because we believe God. Because we have faith, we are counted righteous, not of ourselves; it is the gift of God.

September 20th

John 11 vv 20-27

Abraham's apparent initial dissatisfaction with God's words to him about being a shield and a reward reminded me of Martha's apparent dissatisfaction with Jesus' promise that her recently deceased brother Lazarus would rise on the last day. Then Jesus reveals to her *I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die*. In both cases it is as if God gives the person in question a more profound understanding of what His promises really mean. The faithful seed of Abraham will inherit everything which God promises – not merely grazing land in Canaan, not merely some sort of resuscitation on the last day, but eternal life in Him Who is the Resurrection and the Life.

September 21st

Genesis 15 vv 7-21

One of the things which impresses me about these stories of the patriarchs is that sometimes they seem to be conversing with God as if to a friend and sometimes they experience the numinous, the awesome, even the fearful. These are authentic experiences of the people of God. We can talk to God at any time in any place. Our lives can be a conversation with God. Yet also, He is awesome, fearful, numinous. He is holy, just and merciful. We are very aware that we are not worthy so much as to gather the crumbs under His table. We come into His Presence in fear and trembling. And we would be wrong to lose either, the intimate or the numinous, because both are true.

September 22nd

Romans 4 vv 1-12

St Paul takes the Abraham story to explain what Christ has accomplished for us. I never tire of pointing out that Christ fulfils the Law and the Prophets (what we call the Old Testament). You cannot understand the New Testament, you cannot appreciate the significance of Jesus unless you know the Old Testament. So we have to read it for ourselves and we have to teach it to our children, even if it is hard to understand and sometimes horrifyingly violent. Just bear in mind that we read the Old Testament in the Light of Christ, just as we grow to know Him better from our reading of the Scriptures. Paul's point is that it was faith which was counted to Abraham as righteousness. It was not because Abraham was circumcised or because he obeyed the Law or because he was a good man; it was because he believed God that he inherited God's promises. Everyone who believes God, Jew or Gentile, how ever great a sinner he or she may be, inherits God's promises through faith in Christ alone, faith which is in itself God's free gift to us.

September 23rd

Romans 4 vv 13-25

The name Abraham means father of many nations. Originally his name was Abram – great father. Both names may have seemed ironic. He had no children at all when he was Abram and his wife was barren. Then, when he still had no legitimate children, he became a father to the child of his wife's maid Hagar. This boy was Ishmael. It was after Ishmael's birth, but before Sarah became pregnant with the legitimate son Isaac, that Abram's name was changed by God to Abraham. As Paul points out, the point is that Abraham believed God. This faith was counted to him as righteousness. Isaac then was the child of the promise, the seed in which all the families of the earth would be blessed, through faith in Jesus Christ.

The God of Abraham praise who reigns enthroned above,

Ancient of everlasting days and God of love:

Jehovah, great I AM, by earth and heaven confest;

We bow and bless the sacred name for ever blest.

Before the Saviour's face the ransomed nations bow,

O'erwhelmed at his almighty grace, for ever new;

He shows the prints of love. They kindle to a flame,

And sound through all the worlds above the slaughtered Lamb.

September 24th

Galatians 3 vv 5-16

He saith not, And to seeds; as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.
The English word seed (like sheep) can be singular or plural. You can read the references to Abraham's seed in Genesis as singular, meaning Isaac, or plural, meaning all Abraham's descendants for generations to come. St Paul understands Abraham's seed here in the singular, as referring to Jesus. Jesus was of course a descendant of Abraham after the flesh, as you can read in the first chapter of St Matthew's Gospel. Elsewhere, St Paul means all those people who share Abraham's faith are the seed of Abraham. This makes sense because we are all baptised into Christ. We all partakers of the same Holy Communion. We are one in Him and He in us.

I do take issue with some modern translations which try to avoid the old-fashioned sounding *seed* by using words like *children* or *descendants*. They obscure Paul's very important point in Galatians, that the focus of the promise that all the families of the earth would be blessed in Him is Jesus, the Son of God, rather than the Jewish people, Christ being both a light to lighten the gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel.

The whole triumphant host give thanks to God on high;

"Hail! Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," they ever cry:

Hail! Abraham's God, and mine! I join the heavenly lays)

All might and majesty are thine and endless praise.

September 25th

Luke 1 vv 39-56

As soon as the Archangel Gabriel informed Mary that she was to become the Mother of the Son of God, she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was six months pregnant with St John the Baptist. The two women rejoice together in the fulfilment of God's promises. This is what *he spake to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed for ever.*

When we sing the Magnificat or when we read it, we declare with Mary something of the nature of God, the God of justice and mercy, Who puts down the mighty from their seats and exalts the humble and meek. If this is the character of God, it is also the character of the Christian community.

September 26th

Luke 1 vv 57-80

Mary sang the Magnificat when she visited her cousin Elizabeth. When Elizabeth's child was delivered, his father Zacharias sang the Benedictus. We used to know these songs very well because we sang them at Evening and Morning Prayer. The best liturgy and the best hymns are firmly rooted in the Scriptures, the very Word of God. Again the point is made that what God is doing in Jesus is the fulfilment of His promise to Abraham. This promise is the redemption and salvation of God's people and it is received by faith. *That we being delivered out of the hands of our enemies might serve him without fear.*

September 27th

Romans 12 vv 1-21

To finish this study, some favourite chapters about what it means to be the Christian community and members thereof. It is logical that, considering God's love for us, especially in the death of His Son, we should offer ourselves wholly back to Him. When we do so, we are transformed into His likeness. We have eternal life. Every one of us Christians is a member of the Body of Christ. We are members one of another. There is no place for boasting. It is all of God. As we are one in the God of love, so love determines our relations with our fellow Christians. We are the Body of Christ and we are called to complete His work in the world. He has, therefore, given each one of us His Holy Spirit and supplied us with the gifts and graces that each one of us needs to play his or her part in the work of the Church. As we grow into the likeness of Christ, so we deal with other people and the world at large in the way in which Jesus deals with the world.

*Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven to earth come down,
Fix in us the humble dwelling,
All thy faithful mercies crown.*

September 28th

Ephesians 4 vv 1-16

The reading for St Mark's Day is taken from this chapter. This year, our annual meeting took place on St Mark's Day. For that reason we began the day with a celebration of Holy Communion. The Gospel was John 15, the Vine, and this was the epistle. Coincidence or not, it all seemed very appropriate for a church annual meeting. Given that it has the same form as the AGM of many secular organisations, our vestry meeting and annual parochial church meeting can seem no different from secular meetings. These Scriptures remind us of our true nature as the Church. What we might call church "politics", administration, management, etc., are not goals in themselves. They are to serve the Body of Christ. We speak of humility, unity and service. We recognise the unique importance of every one of our members. We acknowledge that we are called to follow Christ to the utmost. We rely on the Holy Spirit to call each one of us to do whatever work is required of us and to supply us with the grace we need to fulfil our calling. We value and respect one another. We support one another. We build one another up. So the Church grows stronger, the Good News is proclaimed to the world and God is glorified.

*Jesu, thou art all compassion,
pure unbounded love thou art;
Visit us with thy salvation,
enter every trembling heart.*

*Come almighty to deliver,
let us all thy grace receive;
Suddenly return and never,
never more thy temples leave.*

September 29th

I Corinthians 12 vv 1-31

As you probably realise, I enjoy reading lessons out loud in church. I have to confess I also enjoy ministering in the sanctuary. I like leading worship and preaching. Before I was ordained, I felt very privileged to be allowed to be a server. (They wouldn't let me sing in the choir, once they had heard my voice.) As a server at the 8.00 at St Matthew's, I remember reading this lesson. I must have been in my late teens at the time. It was important to me for a number of reasons. One was that I was under a certain amount of Pentecostal influence, which lays a great deal of stress on apparently miraculous gifts, including "speaking in tongues". Some people regard these as marks of a true Church and marks of a true believer. It was also a time when traditional ideas in the Church of England were being challenged. In the past, it had seemed as if the vicar did everything. He was the one who had "gone into the Church". He was the minister. Everything in the parish was his responsibility and other people undertaking jobs were "helping the vicar." This was being challenged partly because it was becoming apparent that there wouldn't be enough vicars to go round, but, much more importantly, because it is not at all the New Testament model of ministry (or the model found in the 1662 prayer book, which is very biblical). The New Testament teaches that all the baptised are full time ministers (servants) of Christ. The New Testament takes every member ministry for granted! I remember reading this passage at the time because it is so helpful.

Taken in the context of the whole Epistle, it makes clear that spiritual gifts, including speaking in tongues, are genuine, but that they are certainly not the only gifts. Indeed, Paul calls tongues the least of the gifts. God's gifts may be miraculous or mundane. But what they are all for is the building up of the Church. We are not to make comparisons, valuing some gifts above other gifts or some people above other people. Our gifts, our status, are all about serving, serving God, serving the Church, serving the world. The glory belongs to God. I think we realise that more now in the Church – though there is still a tendency to see ministry as what people who wear special robes and sit in a special place in church and have some of authorisation, do. Lay ministry then becomes a shadow of clerical ministry. In fact all forms of Christian service are ministry and all the baptised are called.

September 30th

I Corinthians 13 vv 1-13

We conclude with one of the best loved chapters in the Bible. I'm asked for it at weddings and I'm asked for it at funerals. It is always appropriate. What it is to be a Christian is love. What it is to be a Church is love. What it is to be the people of God is love.

*Thee would be always blessing,
Serve thee as thy hosts above;
Pray, and praise thee, without ceasing,
Glory in thy perfect love.*

*Finish then thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in thee.*

*Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise.*