

# Bible Notes

## July – September 2006



*Frankincense*

# Matthew & I saiah

50 p.

July 1<sup>st</sup>

Matthew 1 vv 1-25

I was sorry not to reach the end of Isaiah last quarter. There is so much in the last few chapters. We will therefore resume Isaiah after a break. I thought we could do Matthew first as something of a favour for a friend, who has chosen Matthew as his Gospel to study. Traditionally, this Gospel was regarded as being written by the apostle Matthew, though most modern scholars think it was written later by someone else, who probably used Mark and various other sources (including one used by Luke often called Q<sup>\*</sup>) to find information about Jesus. It has often been thought, too, that Matthew was written for Jewish Christians and Luke for gentile converts, but that is very much an oversimplification.

As a youngster, I was never fascinated by these genealogies in the Bible, but they are obviously important or they would not be included. More and more people are looking up their family trees. It gives them a sense of who they are and where they belong. The family tree of Jesus tells us that He is in the same line as Abraham and David. Three women are mentioned apart from Mary. Each one had an interesting history in the Old Testament. There would have been people who would have said of Tamar and Bathsheba that they *were no better than they ought to be* and Ruth was, after all, a foreigner. Does this tell us something about Jesus from the very beginning about His care for women, outcasts and sinners? This Jesus is Immanuel, *God with us*. He is the One Who will save His people from their sins.

July 2<sup>nd</sup>

Matthew 2 vv 1-23

If we oversimplify, saying that Matthew was written for Jewish Christians, we have to explain the fact that he starts with the visit of the gentile magi to the Holy Infant and finishes with the commission to tell all the nations about Jesus. Matthew certainly fits the story into the history of God's people, with all these quotations from the Old Testament. Just like St Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, he includes the gentiles in God's plan of salvation.

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\* Q is simply the first letter of the German Quell, which means "source". A lot of Bible scholars are German.

July 3<sup>rd</sup>

Matthew 3 vv 1-17

John fulfils the Jewish prophecies by preaching repentance in the wilderness because the Kingdom of Heaven is imminent. (Matthew uses the phrase Kingdom of Heaven where Mark has Kingdom of God. This is Jewish reticence out of respect for the Holy Name.) When the Jewish leaders, however, turn up, they are told that God could raise up sons of Abraham from the rocks if He wanted to. What is needed from Jew and Gentile is repentance, the willingness to turn away from sin and conform one's life to God's perfect Law of Love.

Why then must Jesus be baptised? After all He is without sin. But He is one of us. He expresses His solidarity with the human race. He invites everyone to come to Him and to share His Baptism. All those who do so are filled by the Holy Spirit and become the children of God.

July 4<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 4 vv 1-17

Jesus was tempted as we are. Being baptised doesn't saving you from being tempted. What happens is that the Devil gets more subtle as we get better. The thing is that Jesus is with us in our temptations. He understands and we can find strength to resist the Devil by keeping close to Him. We do need time apart to refresh ourselves for service, and these may be just the times the Devil chooses to attack us. By and large, the Devil does not straightforwardly try to deflect Jesus from His mission. He suggests that He take care of Himself, prove that He trusts God and gain control of the world (which He would surely rule wisely). The aims are good, but the method is wrong. In each case, it would mean disobeying God and following the Devil. Notice Jesus answers Him from the Scriptures.

John is one of the first martyrs. Christians can't expect to have it easy. Jesus continues and completes John's work as we continue and complete His. You students of Isaiah will recognise the quotation – Galilee of the Gentiles!

July 5<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 4 vv 18-25

Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God. That Kingdom is fulfilled in Him. It is an urgent message, a message the world needs to know. Without the knowledge of God, the world is going to perdition. Jesus needs committed helpers. He calls the fishermen. They will prove to be very far from perfect. He knows that, but He needs them. He needs them as the people they are. For all their failings, they follow Him. They thus become part of His great work of saving the world. He calls ordinary people like us and uses us, using all the differences in our personalities as part of the tapestry of His plan.

When the Gospel is proclaimed faithfully, those who know their need flock to Him. Proclaim the Gospel faithfully!

July 6<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 5 vv 1-12

Jesus begins to collect followers. Multitudes come out to hear. Of those, some draw closer. They make a commitment. They become disciples. Just as Moses gave the Torah on Mount Sinai, Jesus gives the Law on this mountain. He does not abolish Torah; He fulfils it. Jesus is what Torah is all about – a life offered in loving service to God and to humanity. The Sermon on the Mount teaches those who are in Christ what it really means to live as a Christian.

These Beatitudes are given as an alternative to the Ten Commandments in our new (Common Worship) service books. We have never yet so used them. I'm not sure congregations have the patience to listen to too much. When I feel I can get away with a long reading before the Confession, I still choose the Ten Commandments because I am not convinced that we have all got the GCSE in the Old Testament Torah which would qualify us to study for A Levels in Christianity!

July 7<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 5vv 13-16

It is a wonderful thing to be close to Jesus, to be in Christ, but what a responsibility. Living Christ-like lives, we are meant to draw people to Him as we are channels of His love into the darkest places of the earth.

July 8<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 5 vv 17-48

What do we do with these words of Jesus? They are so impractical. Whatever would happen to you if you tried to live like that? Surely you'd get crucified. Would you advise your children to behave like this in the playground let alone behaving this way yourself in the grown up real world?

Surely Jesus is talking about what life will be like in Heaven or in some imaginary ideal world. Maybe this is a code of behaviour for His special followers – hermits, monks, nuns, priests? He can't expect ordinary people to live like this in the real world!

Well, I think He does. God's people are to be like God in the Old Testament as well as the New. We are to be generous, forgiving and loving as He is at whatever cost. What you and I have to do is to work out how to live by this standard where we are in the twenty first century.

This is not to weigh us down with guilt. Christ sets us free, free to walk with Him through all the difficulties we face in this life. It is challenging, stimulating and life-giving, not despairing, guilt-tripping and giving up. There is no need for that because we are in Christ and He is in us.

July 9<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 6 vv 1-6

Having been in and around churches all my life, I was very surprised when I got involved with a secular charity and witnessed the fuss made of donors and workers. People were made to feel good about their contribution. The bigger the cheque, the more the honour. Others felt inspired or shamed to pledge similar amounts. It was a very efficient way of raising funds in a good cause. But would Jesus approve? If not, why not? Why does Jesus want us to be generous? Surely, He simply wants us to be people who love, who will use the good things God has given us for the benefit of other people irrespective of any thanks we may receive. Sometimes the least appreciative are the ones who most need help.

July 10<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 6 vv 7-15

It is good to pray, good to spend time in prayer and good to present all our needs and anxieties before Him. We come to God, however, in trust. We don't expect to change His mind, to bargain with Him, to badger Him or to earn His favour. We come in trust knowing that He knows what we need and loves us and cares for us.

We come knowing that He accepts us as we are and we have to accept other people in the same way. Jesus is absolutely clear that we cannot expect to be forgiven if we will not forgive. Again, this is not a question of screwing ourselves up to forgive and panicking if we can't. It is a matter of letting go and letting God.

July 11<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 6 vv 16-18

Fasting is something which has gone right out of fashion. The majority of people diet to improve their health and appearance. Many of these diets are short-lived and therefore of little effect. Some are bizarre and some are downright dangerous. Fasting for the benefit of the soul is definitely out, either because the soul doesn't matter as much as the body or because people don't think fasting is good for it anyway. If I go into raptures about the merits of fasting, I shall make myself a hypocrite. I can go so far as to say, however, that we are ultimately wasting our time looking after our bodies which will rot or burn and paying more attention to them than to the things of eternal worth.

July 12<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 6 vv 19-34

*Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*

That saying of Jesus either defines the way we use our time, talents and money or else it reveals how what we do with our time, talents and money defines us. Those who have chosen Jesus have only one allegiance.

### July 13<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 7 vv 1-5

This is a hard one. It is so hard not to judge other people. When we do judge other people, we judge ourselves. We worry about what other people think of us. Much better to leave judging to God. Judging one another just undermines our relationships and destroys fellowships.

### July 14<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 7 v6

There are times when sharing holy things with other people does more harm than good. We are expected to pay the price for sharing our faith with people who laugh at us or persecute us, but there are occasions when to do so helps no-one and we have to realise that.

### July 15<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 7 vv 7-29

These words are addressed to those coming to Christ. God does honour our reaching out to Him. He reaches out to us. Sometimes the way is hard, but we can trust God. There are false prophets and roads which look a lot easier than the Way of the Cross. Ultimately, however, they lead to destruction. The only right way is to follow Jesus and to keep His commandments as set forth in the Holy Scriptures. Some people who claim to be religious are in fact false. You can tell people's true nature by their fruits. Are they full of love? The most dangerous false guides are the ones who claim to be religious. In easy times, there may not be much apparent difference between houses built on sand and houses built on rock. It would certainly be easier to build on sand. Come the storm, however, and the difference will be clear enough.

### July 16<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 8 vv 1-34

It is all about following Jesus. He heals the unclean, the gentile's servant, the demon possessed. He brings healing to the excluded. He also saves Peter's mother-in-law, a member of the chosen people and a relative of a close friend. Jesus is for everyone. Gentiles will join Abraham in the Kingdom. All Christians share Christ's Commission. Notice He heals everyone, not just those who follow Him. However, He demands absolute whole-hearted commitment from those who do follow Him. Yet He is also in the boat with us, calming the storm.

July 17<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 9 vv 1-17

The ministry of Jesus attracts opposition. He heals the sick. He forgives sin. He brings the despised outcast into the community of God's people. Who does He think He is? Who do we think we are when we claim to know better than our contemporaries, condemn behaviour which is perfectly acceptable to a lot of people and yet welcome in those considered beyond the pale? I was castigated once for saying in a sermon that we should be concerned for the human needs of gypsies! Who is it, says Jesus, who really needs Him?

It is not easy to grasp that God loves the sinner and the outcast. Paradoxically it can be hardest for the most respectable people to acknowledge this. We need renewing ourselves if we are to accept God's values and love the way He does.

Those of us who have pulled ourselves up, worked hard, not gambled, drank or womanised, can find it hard to see why those who have might enter the Kingdom of Heaven before us. If this is not to be seen as rewarding bad behaviour and punishing good, we need the insight of St Paul!

July 18<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 9 vv 18-38

Jesus did wonderful things and so can His followers if they work with Him. Miracles may or may not happen but it is wonderful what self-sacrificial love can achieve in caring for the sick, the disabled, the bereaved and the unloved. There is, however, so much to do. There are millions of people on this planet and Jesus loves every one of them. We must pray for more people to work with Jesus and, while we're at it, why not us?

July 19<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 10 vv 1-42

Can we catch the excitement of this? There is the urgent need to proclaim Jesus in Israel in the three years between His Baptism and the Crucifixion. He chooses 12 apostles to get on with that. At this stage, they preach only to Israel. There is so much to do and God's plan is to prepare for the gentile mission by way of the mission to Israel. This



Jewish mission, however, is a preparation for the apostles and for the whole Church to extend the mission after His Ascension to the whole world. There will be opposition and persecution. Everybody needs Jesus but many people do not realise that. Many resist acknowledging their need of God. People will treat us the way they treated Jesus, but God is with us. He cares for us. He loves us. Those who minister to us, minister to God. How about that? We in our generation have got to get on with this mission.

July 20<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 11 vv 1-30

There are times when we doubt Jesus. The mission seems to be going nowhere. Our lives are in a mess. You know. Our English churches are empty. Nobody seems interested in the Gospel we preach. Maybe our own lives are unsatisfactory. John felt like that. He was in prison. God hadn't brought in His Kingdom in the way John expected. Was Jesus the one? John is encouraged to look at what Jesus is doing. The signs of the Kingdom are there if we can lift our eyes off the cell floor!

Jesus uses this incident to point out how hard it is to get people to open themselves up to the message they need to hear. One vicar is too prim and proper. The next one is too easy-going. Stop moaning and start listening. Because there will be a judgement and it won't be too good for those who reject God. Everyone is invited. Everyone needs Him. So come to Him and find out for yourself what it is to serve Him Whose service is perfect freedom.

July 21<sup>st</sup>

Matthew 12 vv 1-30

The religious people missed the point again! The Sabbath was made for man. It is a day off for the labourer, rest for the weary and an opportunity to meet God. It is not a burden. Neither is Sabbath-keeping meant to be a test of piety, a means by which we can judge and condemn others. The point is love. If we think we are being religious, but are really being unloving and unlovely, then we are missing the point too.

The religious reject Jesus and the gentile outsiders find Him. To coin a phrase, we were the outsiders once. Where do we stand now? In the Kingdom, or blocking the entrance?

Whether we are with Jesus or Beelzebub ought to be apparent from our fruits, but may not be to those who can't see the wood of faith for the trees of religion.

July 22<sup>nd</sup> St Mary Magdalene)

Matthew 12 vv 31-50

You are on one side or the other. To blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is so to harden yourself against God that He – honouring your freedom to reject Him – cannot get through to you. This is a special problem for people who are so confident that they know what is right that they refuse to hear what the Bible and the Church are saying or, rather, what the Holy Spirit is saying through God's Word written and God's Word incarnate in the Body of Christ. Notoriously wicked people who turn to God are saved but people who don't think they need God find themselves locked outside of the Kingdom by their own obstinacy. It is no good cleansing the demons if they are let back in because the Holy Spirit has not been welcomed in to fill the void they left. You don't only have to give up drink, drugs and a bad way of life. You have to start a new life, spending your time in worthwhile and fulfilling ways. Otherwise you will lapse. You can keep on asking for signs, but it would make more sense to recognise the signs that are always there. It is a wonderful thought that those of us who accept God in our lives are closer to Jesus than blood relatives.

July 23<sup>rd</sup>

Matthew 13 vv 1-58

The Kingdom of Heaven grows by the power of God. We don't understand how. We're not supposed to. We are likely to do more harm than good if we try to sort people out instead of leaving that to God. The message is broadcast everywhere. Some believe many don't. We can try (prayerfully) to sort out our own lives so that the word is not snatched away as soon as we receive it, choked by worldly considerations or blighted because we are scared of hardship. It's worth it to be fruitful. It's worth giving everything you have for it. If we are

faithful, we help to transform the world. There are many reasons why people can't or won't believe. That's up to them and God. What we have to do is to remain faithful, drawing on all the resources God gives us, new and old.

July 24<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 14 vv 1-36

Herod respected John but he wouldn't accept his message and in the end he had him killed. He listened to the promptings of the world, rather than God.

John's death became the occasion of Jesus preaching to vast crowds and a great miracle. They used to say that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church. Jesus shows Himself to be greater than Moses, like God, the One Who feeds His people. Indeed He shows Himself to be the Bread of Life. He shows Himself to be like God too in that He is the master of the sea. Peter could share with Him if only He had the faith. Jesus supports Peter's weak faith, taking him by the hand. That's a comforting thought. We in Christ, Christ in us, continuing and completing God's mission to the world.

July 25<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 15 vv 1-20

What a muddle we get into. Look at the disputes and arguments that have divided the Church down the ages and put off outsiders. The fuss that we make about things that don't matter in the end.

The trouble is that it is sometimes hard to know what does matter. What is it worth making a stand over, leaving a Church, dividing a Church, excluding people who don't agree? Issues like women's ministry and homosexuality are exercising the Anglican Communion in the present day. Why don't we agree? Are we so certain we are right that we cannot share fellowship with the others? How do we know which issues are that important? Love is a good guide. So is the Bible. So is the Church's traditional teaching. So are reason and conscience. I am sure we can say that the presumption is generally against dividing the Body of Christ. Even when we believe that we must disagree, we must still love.

July 26<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 15 vv 21-39

Rereading Matthew for these notes, I am struck by just how many miracles there are in this Gospel. Jesus is the victorious Son of God, victorious over Sin, the World and the Devil, the One to Whom all authority on earth and in Heaven is given. This is consummated on the Cross, but it is foreshadowed throughout the Gospel.

The boundaries are extended in the first miracle. The plan is to proclaim the Kingdom to Israel and then to go on to the gentiles. But this gentile woman is in need now. The change of plan has to be talked through so that everyone understands what is going on, but Jesus responds to the need. He is not constrained by the plan.

Some people think that the 12 baskets left over after Feeding the 5,000 represent the twelve tribes of Israel and the 7 baskets left over here represent the gentiles – who were symbolically thought of as 7 nations.

July 27<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 16 vv 1-12

There are none so blind as those who don't want to see. There are all sorts of excuses for not finding Jesus. Blame your upbringing. Blame the Church. A bad workman can always blame his tools. Indeed a bad workman often has poor tools because he doesn't look after them and he doesn't use them properly. There is a case for reading a different version of the Bible or trying a different Church, but the main thing is for you to be open to Jesus and to be ready to accept His Will for your life, rather than telling Him that He must fit in with you.

July 28<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 16 vv 13-28

Christ is the foundation stone of the Church. In order to build on Him, you need faith. As a faithful person, you are part of the Church, the Temple of the Holy Spirit. Like Peter the Rock, you are a living stone, in God's dwelling place on earth. Faith has to accept that the way of Christ is the way of the cross. Such faith is more powerful than the gates of Hell. We are on the winning side, so long as we are on God's side!

July 29<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 17 vv 1-27

We start with two apparently contrasting stories. Three privileged apostles have the most wonderful vision of Jesus. Meanwhile the others are approached by a man in great distress for his son and they are unable to help him. Maybe we can relate to both stories. There are times when we are transfixed by the glory and other times when we feel helpless to do what is surely God's work. In the first case, it just happened. The disciples didn't have to do anything. They didn't pray for a revelation. God reached out and showed them. In the second example, they needed faith and didn't find it within themselves. Jesus Himself came and helped them and the boy and his father. Faith is faith in Jesus Who died and rose again. You don't need much. It's Jesus Who moves the mountain, not your faith. Walk with God. Try to do His Will. Rejoice when He reveals Himself to you. Do your best to walk in His ways in caring for others.

The final story about the tribute money seems to me to indicate that such things are not very important. Get on with doing the things you have to do while living in this world, but don't let them dominate your consciousness.

July 30<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 18 vv 1-14

This strange contrast. The Kingdom is open to absolutely everyone. The helpless, children, people in trouble, are specially welcome. Woe betide anyone who puts off some vulnerable person who is coming to God. Yet membership of the Kingdom requires a total commitment. If we belong to Christ's people, we belong absolutely.

July 31<sup>st</sup>

Matthew 18 vv 15-35

Matthew is the only Gospel which deals with the organisation of the Church. It is a spiritual community. Christ is present among us. God hears our prayers. He gives us Christ's authority to bind and loose. It requires total commitment. It requires Christians to yield their lives in love. The Church is also a human organisation, made up of fallible people. None of us can really say we love God wholeheartedly or our neighbours as ourselves. We quarrel. We are selfish. We are only too

human. The flesh will continue to lust against the spirit till we reach Heaven. So just as, as individuals, we have to live the principles of the Sermon on the Mount in the world as it is, not in some ideal world, so, corporately, we have to live as the Body of Christ in which all the members on earth are imperfect.

August 1<sup>st</sup>

Matthew 19 vv 1-30

We have two other examples of the same thing here – the dissonance between the way things are and the way they ought to be.

Marriage is supposed to be an indissoluble union. Husband and wife promise lifelong unconditional love and the two become one flesh. *What God has joined together!* Yet married couples are real people. They are sinners. There are times when they mistreat one another. There is some conduct which is very hard to forgive. So is there a point at which we cease to try sustaining a marriage and go our separate ways, perhaps to start again with someone else?

Likewise we know that money is not of any ultimate significance. It is hard to justify living in luxury while other people starve. So why not give away all our money? But we can't. Can we?

August 2<sup>nd</sup>

Matthew 20 vv 1-34

The story of the two blind men is the easiest to understand. It is obviously good to heal people, obviously right that those who have felt Christ's healing touch should follow Him.

It is certainly not so obviously right that those who repent at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour should get the same place in Heaven as those who have laboured all their lives, no more so than it is obviously right that the Son of Man should become a servant, suffer and die. Neither is it obviously right that those who are ambitious to serve God in high office should expect humiliation and perhaps death. But that is the way Jesus says things are.

### August 3<sup>rd</sup>

Matthew 21 vv 1-22

The longed for King comes humbly and peacefully on a donkey. The saddle is made of His friend's coats. The procession is made up of ordinary peasants. The regalia are branches cut from the trees. His praises are sung by children. Yet He has the authority to cleanse the Temple. That is the way things are.

### August 4<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 21 vv 23-46

Those who won't see can't see. The chief priests don't understand Christ's authority any more than they understood John the Baptist. They give Jesus a typical politician's answer. *We can't say X or Y, because if we say X, we'll upset one side and if we say Y, we'll upset the other.*

What matters is that people respond to Christ's call: *Come unto me all that are heavy laden. Take up your cross and follow me.* The Sadducees and Pharisees saw a gradation. They were nearest God. Then came the ordinary Jewish people of the land. Then Jewish publicans and sinners. Then Samaritans. Then gentiles.

But Jesus turns all this round. It is not the people who claim to do God's Will who please Him, but those who do. St Paul brings this out in Romans. It is far more important to have a good conscience than to be born a Jew. In fact the people who ran God's vineyard have abused His messengers and killed His Son, thinking to keep everything for themselves. In fact the vineyard will be given to those who sincerely want to deserve it. Christ brings salvation to sincere seekers after God and judgment to the self-righteous who really think they can live without Him.

### August 5<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 22 vv 1-14

It is so obvious what happens to those who are too busy when God calls them that I cannot understand why we fail to understand the message. Nothing is as important as responding to God. If we're not ready when He calls us, we might well find it is too late. If we can't be bothered to put on a wedding garment, we might well be thrown out.

### August 6<sup>th</sup> (The Transfiguration)

Matthew 22 vv 15-46

When the disciples saw Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, God told them to listen to Him. These people ask Him questions, but they are not hearing Him. They are trying to trap Him. The answers are straightforward. We do owe our ultimate allegiance to God, but we also have to act as responsible citizens. The hereafter is so different from this life that speculation about it is pointless. We know as much as we need to know. The whole Law is summarised in the command to love as every pious Jew knows full well. Jesus tries to help them to see that there is more in their Scriptures than they recognise. The Hebrew Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament) testify to Christ.

### August 7<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 23 vv 1-39

Jesus is very tough on the Pharisees. They ought to have understood because they knew more about the Bible than anyone, but they failed to recognise Him. They had lost themselves in arguments about trivia. They felt superior to those who appeared less pious than they. They enjoyed being looked up to. And somehow they had become a barrier to those honestly seeking God. It's happened often enough in Christian history. People who have been most zealous for God have gone so badly wrong that they have put other people off finding Him. It is something we have to ask ourselves in every generation. Are we humble seekers after truth, taking others gently by the hand, or are we so sure of ourselves that our worship is a sham and we are a block to genuine seekers?

### August 8<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 24 vv 1-41

Some people pour over this chapter and others like it trying to work out the time of the end of the world. Others find all this very difficult and don't read it at all. So, what do we make of it? Well, the world had a beginning and Christ was there then as one person of the eternal Trinity. The world will have an end and Christ will be there then also. There will be a judgment, separating the good from the bad, God's people from the rest. The end will be sudden and you had better have made up your mind which side you are on by that time. Before the end, all sorts



of terrible things will happen, but God's people should not be afraid. They know they can trust Him. What we have said generally about the death of the cosmos is equally applicable to our own personal deaths as individuals.

August 9<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 24 vv 42-51

I hope that when Christ comes again He will find us doing the good works He has prepared for each one of us to walk in.

August 10<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 25 vv 1-46

These are all well known stories, though maybe we don't usually read them all together. The first is about being ready. The second is about using what God has given you. The third is about how you use it.

August 11<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 26 vv 1-16

This story of the anointing is important. It provides the occasion for Judas to decide to betray Jesus. It also is a consecration of Jesus as the One Who is going to offer Himself for the sins of the world. That woman so wonderfully showed her love for Jesus by pouring out that precious ointment on His head. What an example.

August 12<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 26 vv 17-35

If we are to finish Matthew, we shall have to think about a lot each day. We know this story very well. What are the things which impress you? To me it is amazing that, knowing what awaited Him the next day, Jesus paused to share this meal with His disciples, to offer His Church so much teaching, and to institute the Holy Communion as a perpetual memory of Him. How can we be casual about what we do in Holy Communion?

August 13<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 26 vv 36-75

A girl I used to know thought the most amazing thing was the way He prayed in Gethsemane. His flesh obviously shrank from Crucifixion as ours would. Yet He did not withdraw. He accepted God's Will. He offered Himself in love for those who hated Him.

Jesus was so much more dignified than His opponents. They were a rowdy mob. He healed the servant's ear and taught the human race a lesson about the consequences of violence. They came out with swords and staves. He was betrayed by a kiss. They mocked Him and hurt Him. They made up lies about Him. Even His friend denied Him. And through it all, Jesus preserved His dignity, His Love. He answered their questions as truthfully as their unbelief permitted.

August 14<sup>th</sup>

Matthew 27 vv 1-66

The human race doesn't come out of this story very well. Suppose, for a moment, Jesus hadn't been the Son of God, it would still have been appalling. To flog a man with a Roman punishment whip, to crucify someone, it is incredible that anyone would do that to a convicted criminal, yet thousands were crucified. Human beings have done some pretty terrible things to one another. As it happened, Jesus was innocent. He didn't deserve any punishment, but Roman and Jewish politicians found it expedient to let an innocent man suffer. Ring any bells? Then the mob, crying out for the release of a murderer, baying for an innocent man's blood, mocking a helpless victim dying an agonising death. How many millions of lynch mobs disfigure human history? The crucifixion story shows human nature at its worst. It stands for all the acts of inhumanity perpetrated by human beings against other human beings. It makes you shudder.

And this was the Son of God. What do we make of that? We did our worst to God's own Son. Might we not expect God to wipe out the human race in a great fit of rage?

Yet this turned out to be our salvation. Jesus endured our worst. He accepted the punishment of us all. He bought our forgiveness, our atonement with God. All human wickedness is cleaned up by the Blood shed for us on the Cross. We are born again in Him. Only believe and you will receive the gift of eternal life.

August 15<sup>th</sup> (the Blessed Virgin Mary)

Matthew 28 vv 1-20

We wouldn't have known what the Cross had accomplished if it wasn't for Easter, but Christ is risen and He has commissioned His Church to proclaim His Kingdom to the whole world. That is what you and I have to do as we live His risen life.

August 16<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 50 vv7-9

I felt that we could not leave Isaiah where we did at the end of April with so much wonderful material unperused. So, after a break, let's resume with a slight overlap.

Do you feel that it is legitimate to apply these verses to yourself? Will God look after you personally like it says? The original reference might be to Israel, the people of God. Well, you are one of God's people if you are a baptised believer. They might originally have referred to the Servant of the LORD. Well, the LORD's Servant is Jesus and you are in Christ if you are a baptised believer. The original reference might have been to any of God's faithful servants and I hope that includes you too.

So everywhichway, you ought to be able to have this sort of confidence in God.

August 17<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 50 vv 10&11

We need direction to our lives. We may not need to know where we are going, but we need to know the Way. If we don't follow one way, we'll follow another. Jesus is the Light of the world. If we follow Him, we shall not walk in darkness. If we try to devise our own light, if we follow the things that worldly people follow, we may well find that we have made a fire for ourselves which will burn us rather than enlighten us.

August 18<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 51 vv 1-6

There is always a tendency to look back. Maybe it is a matter of getting older and we can't help thinking that life was better when we were

younger and fitter. Maybe we don't want to let go and let the rising generation take over.

In the Church, it is always tempting to look back and to think that things used to be better. It must have been marvellous to know Jesus or the original apostles. It would have been wonderful to have been involved in original missionary work to our own nation. Even in our own lives we remember fuller churches, more clergy and maybe more exciting church activities – bigger fêtes, greater involvement in community affairs, youth clubs, projects to help the unemployed. When the Devil catches us thinking like this, he can get us thinking that we are helpless. Either we have let God down or He has given up on us or “young people today” haven't the commitment that we had. When we look back on the great things that God has done in the past, however, far from despairing, we should learn confidence. He is the same God today and tomorrow as He was yesterday. What He did then, He can do now, if He wants to. We can trust Him for His Church. If the next generation prove unfaithful, that is their responsibility, not ours, so long as we have been faithful in our attempts to impart the eternal Gospel to them.

#### August 19<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 51 vv 7&8

The Israelites the prophet is addressing are going through tough times. The whole nation is in a very bad way, but they can trust God. If people have God's Law in their hearts, He will not let them go. His Law is love. Jesus epitomises love. If we have Jesus in our hearts, we have God's Law in our hearts.

#### August 20<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 51 vv 9-11

Pray for revival. Pray for fresh growth. The reference is to the old story of God overcoming the sea and the sea-monsters, a myth demonstrating God's power over chaos, death and evil. Looking back at what God has done, we know what He can do. We know what Jesus did for us. We know something of the story of the growth and spread of the early Church. We know something of its history in this country and

1,000 years of Christian history in Cuxton and Halling. We know what He has done in our own lives. Pray with confidence for revival.

August 21<sup>st</sup>

Isaiah 51 vv 12&13

It is almost an insult to God if we doubt Him and worry about what mere human beings can do to us. God is looking after us whatever happens to us in this life and, even if we die, we know that we shall live with Him.

August 22<sup>nd</sup>

Isaiah 51 vv 14-16

We're thinking about those exiles again. Their parents and grandparents had seen the sack of the city of Jerusalem and its Temple destroyed. Then they had been forced to live in Babylon. Now the prospect of going home was wonderful, but perhaps daunting as well. They faced a long journey through the desert, the task of re-building the ruined city, the suspicion of those whose ancestors had been left behind in the holy land and the hostility of the present rulers. But God was with them as He is with us.

August 23<sup>rd</sup>

Isaiah 51 vv 17-23

Given what has happened to the Jews, there is a failure of leadership. Bad and foolish kings had led the nation to the point where they became the victims of Assyrian and Babylonian expansionism. Worldly priests and false prophets had undermined Israel's allegiance to Yahweh. They trusted in false promises. They did not follow the Law. They did not trust the LORD to save them if they turned back to Him.

Now they need good leaders to bring them back to Jerusalem and to re-establish the nation, based firmly on following the ways of the LORD.

The twenty first century Church in Britain is weak. We can think endlessly about the reasons why. If we want to be strong again, we need good leadership. Good leadership can only come from God. So we pray to Him to raise up good leaders and to guide and sustain the leaders we have. Leaders can only be effective, however, if they have the loyalty of the people. We should support our leaders prayerfully

and in other ways unless we are humbly convinced that they are no longer working with God.

August 24<sup>th</sup> (St Bartholomew)

Isaiah 52 vv 1-6

If the holy city stands for the Church of God (which it does), shouldn't we be as in love with the Church as the people of the Old Testament were with the city of Jerusalem? I don't necessarily mean that we should love our beautiful buildings, though they do mean a lot to us. But surely we should love the other members of our congregation, the part of the Body of Christ to which we belong, and the members of other congregations too – other parts of the Body of Christ, His Bride. We sold ourselves for nothing. Turning our backs on God got us nowhere, though worldliness promised us so much that it crowded out our love for God. In His amazing generosity, God redeems us for nothing. We do not have to do anything to earn forgiveness and a new start. Our restoration is God's free gift which we only need faith to receive.

August 25<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 52 vv 7-10

Someone asked me the other day why we don't sing these words more often. The only reason is that they are quite difficult and I get embarrassed if we don't do things very well in our acts of worship. The person who proclaims God to the nations is doing a marvellous work, however. He or she may be persecuted in the world, but they should be acclaimed in the Church. Pray for missionaries to take the Gospel all over the world. Pray for those doing so now. And what can you do to proclaim God in the little corner of the world you inhabit?

August 26<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 52 vv 11&12

*Touch no unclean thing.*

As Christians we are all priests of the LORD. We have to be pure, to be holy. In the Old Testament, there was ritual purity to stand for moral purity. The New Testament puts ritual on one side, but the demands for moral purity are even more highly stressed. See what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7). Being holy is being separate. It is being different. You can't serve God and Mammon.

You are either a Christian or you are not. We ought not to be trying to be of the world as well as being of Christ. We live in the world. We serve the world. But we are different from the world and that sometimes carries a cost, a cost we have to be prepared to accept if we are truly Christians.

August 27<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 52 vv 13-15 & 53 vv 1-12

This is the most profound of the Servant Songs and it so clearly applies to Jesus that I cannot find words to express what it means. Just wonder.

August 28<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 54 vv 1-10

If you are like me, you sometimes wonder at the desperate medical lengths some couples go to in order to conceive a child. One wonders whether the humiliation, the pain, the hopes falsely raised and then dashed, even the financial investment are worth it. Shouldn't people accept that they may not be meant to have children? Couldn't they adopt if they have the love to care for a child but cannot have one of their own? It certainly seems horrendous that, while some couples are going through astonishing medical interventions in order to have children, perfectly healthy babies are being aborted by mothers who just don't happen to want a baby at this time.

We can see from the Old Testament, however, that for many people being childless has always been a devastating condition. The barren couple, the disappointed spinster, the premature widow are here all used as images for Israel cut off from Yahweh for her sins. God promises restoration and a more joyful life than the one which she feels has been snatched from her.

We should pray for those who cannot have children and for their doctors. Also maybe we ought to pray and think rather more about the appalling abortion rates in contemporary Britain.

August 29<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 54 vv 11-17

The new Jerusalem will be beautiful. She will be beautiful because her children are taught by the LORD. She will be safe because God will

protect her. She will have enemies, but they will not be able to overcome her. Jerusalem in the Old Testament is a type of the Christian Church and the Christian Church is a type of the ultimate reality of the Kingdom of God.

August 30<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 55 vv 1&2

Isaiah 55 is one of my favourite chapters in the Bible – up there with Romans 12 and John 17. It starts with an invitation. Many people's lives are unsatisfactory. Perhaps very life lived without God is unsatisfying. And it raises a good question. Why do people spend so much time, money and effort on what is not satisfying, but will not come to God Who will give them all they need with no charge at all? As a Christian minister, I feel I have a due role: to help those who are seeking to find God, but also to persuade those who believe they have found Him to put Him first in their lives.

August 31<sup>st</sup>

Isaiah 55 vv 3-5

Salvation is in the Son of David. This means Jesus. This salvation is not for the Jews alone, but for people of every nation who will come to Him. We need to cleave to Jesus. We need to proclaim Jesus to the world.

September 1<sup>st</sup>

Isaiah 55 v 6

Will there come a time when the LORD can no longer be found? When we die, is it too late? Is it too late when He comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead? When will we die? When will the end come? Is it possible that if we keep on rejecting God or if we can't be bothered with Him, there comes a time when we are too hardened to change? Is this the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit which Jesus says is the unforgivable sin? Am I asking these questions to frighten you?

The way I see it is that we all fall far short of the glory of God. We do not deserve to spend eternity in perfect bliss. We deserve judgment and punishment. Old time preachers used to scare people with the threat of hell. Quite rightly, better preachers put the emphasis on the love of



God. God does not desire the death of a sinner. He makes a way to bring us back to Him.

Yet the way He does it is through the death of Jesus. It is not a trivial matter, something to take for granted, something about which to be complacent. Yet God seems to be a low priority in the lives of many who call themselves Christians. Someone once told me that participating in Holy Communion was a life-style choice. Given that my best Friend told me to do this in remembrance of Him on the very night before He died a cruel death to save my life for all eternity, I cannot see it as less than a sacred duty.

### September 2<sup>nd</sup>

Isaiah 55 vv 7-9

Paradoxically, while we are complacent about our own salvation, confident that decent people like you and me are sure of a place in Heaven, we can be quite judgmental about other people. We can think of people who are not nice people at all, who, if they get to Heaven at all, will get there as an act of mercy on God's part. God's ways are not our ways. None of us is saved except by God's mercy. God can save anyone how ever wicked, provided he sincerely repents. It is not our place to judge others. That is God's job. We should examine ourselves and, where necessary, repent.

### September 3<sup>rd</sup>

Isaiah 55 vv 10&11

God speaks His Word by the prophets. He created Heaven and earth by the Word of His Mouth. Jesus is the Word of God come to dwell among us. God continually speaks His Word of Creation and Redemption and, despite the worst that the forces of evil can do, God's Word is effective. If we preach God's Word, we are doing good whether we can see any results or not. God is bringing His Kingdom in with or without our support. If we are on His side, we know that we are not only on the right side, but also on the victorious side. If we don't trust Him, if we put our trust in the things of this world, we shall be disappointed.

September 4<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 55 vv 12&13

Isaiah seems to have provided librettos not only for George Frederick Handel, but also for a lot of lesser composers. This is another great verse we sing in our services. The redemption Isaiah celebrates for Israel is a foretaste of the much greater redemption God offers all the nations in Christ. We sing this one to a good cheerful tune. Our hearts ought to be filled with joy when we think of God and all that He is doing for us.

I keep moaning and nagging about doing our Christian duty with vague threats of what might happen if we don't, but surely we ought to do what we believe will please God for sheer joy in the Holy Spirit, the natural result of loving God with all our hearts.

September 5<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 56 vv 1&2

The message of John the Baptist was *Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand*. Jesus took up the same refrain in the early days of His preaching. This can be taken as a threat. God will judge the world by His Law of love. Those found to be unloving people will have condemned themselves by separating themselves from the One Who is love and also the source of all life. Another way of looking at it is to say that we should be pleased and proud if we are found doing the Master's Will when He comes. Yet another way of looking at it is to say that most people think we Christians have got it wrong. We should look after number one, not devote time and energy to God and His Church and to people who can never repay us. However, God's Kingdom is round the corner and we shall shortly be shown to be right.

Then what about this stuff about polluting the Sabbath? Jews and old time Christians have been castigated for over-emphasising the Sabbath, legalistically fencing it round with so many regulations that you can't enjoy it. But what about us liberated people? If we don't insist on keeping Sunday as the Lord's Day, does He in fact have a day in our lives. If Sunday is the day we catch up on all those little jobs, is that because we spend an equivalent time with God in the week? Or isn't God important enough to spend time with?

September 6<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 56 vv 3-8

Do immigrants belong? What about those whose bodies are imperfect? God says, Yes they do. They too can be children of the Kingdom if they accept God's way. Who might feel excluded from your Church? And why?

September 7<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 56 vv 9-12

Being a minister of religion is a huge responsibility. You often feel you can't get anything right. If you act like other people, you are condemned for not being holy enough. If you act holy, you are condemned for being out of touch. People blame the minister when they themselves are out of sorts with God. If people fall out with the Church because of something the minister has done, they think that the minister bears all the responsibility for the consequences to them and to the Church. None of these things is fair. Ministers are Christians the same as everyone else. All Christians are responsible for their own actions and for their personal relationship with God. Ministers facilitate. They do not take away personal responsibility. They do not stand in the place of God. Like all Christians, they are called to be holy, but not *holier than thou*.

Ministers do fairly come under judgment, however, if they neglect to love their people, to deliver the whole counsel of God in their sermons, to minister the Sacraments, to love those in pastoral need and to preach the Gospel to those who have not heard it. Traditionally, in the Church of England, the people to whom the vicar owed this ministry were all the people in the parish, but in those days country parishes had only a few hundred inhabitants. That sort of ministry is no longer possible (though many of us clergy and laity wish it were). So where are the boundaries of the modern minister's responsibilities? The congregation? The fringe? Those who seek him out? Those whom he happens to run across?

September 8<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 57 vv 1-12

Human beings can frighten you. You see the streets of many cities when they come out of the pubs and clubs. You see the behaviour of a football crowd. You see TV pictures of massacres in foreign villages or huge crowds with contorted faces crying slogans of hate. What is the world coming to? You read about torture, rape and murder. That is man without God. God does not give up on us. What we have to do is to return to Him. Looking at the scale of evil in the world, it is an enormous task to turn the world round to face God and it is a task which has to be accomplished in every generation. There is no room for slacking on the part of those who are supposed to be on the LORD's side.

September 9<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 57 vv 13-21

*There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked.*

This is a difficult section to understand, but everybody knows that last verse. No peace for the wicked. Why not? Because they come under judgment? Yes, but also because wickedness does not satisfy. They are always moving, always looking for something else, never content. The converse of this verse is, *Be still and know that I am God.*

It is my opinion that the reason many people seem to be unable to rest these days (including taking a Sabbath rest) is that they need activity to cover up the emptiness of their lives. Better to drag the kids round MFI than to sit down and face yourself. Yet the answer they need to the question they daren't ask lies in taking it easy, stopping and thinking. *Be still and know that I am God.*

September 10<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 58 vv 1-14

We wonder why our prayers aren't answered, even when we are praying for good things, like the revival of God's Church. Why aren't they answered? One reason is that God does not compel people. They need to come to Him of their own free will. We can pray to God that He will help people to find Him and so He will, but they have to want to.

There are also other possible reasons in us why our prayers aren't answered. Is our Church working for justice and helping the poor? Do we keep a sacred space in our lives, a sacred space whether other people might find God?

### September 11<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 59 vv 1-8

I don't believe that our church is held back by bloodshed and dishonesty. I am sure we are not like that. But, what does hold us back? Are we sufficiently united in love? Does God come first in our lives? Do we care about bringing other people for their own sake and because we want God to be honoured?

### September 12<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 59 vv 9-15

Two men went up to pray – a Pharisee and a publican. The Pharisee boasted to God that he was a good man and probably he was by his own lights and the lights of his contemporaries. The tax collector admitted that he was a bad man. He knew his need of God. Jesus says that it was the tax collector who was justified.

It is so easy for us to play the Pharisee. We are good people by most people's standards. We are certainly not like those Israelites in this reading. So, do we need God?

### September 13<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 59 vv 16-21

There is no human help. God Himself will have to save His people. This He does by taking our flesh upon Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. The victory is won not by shedding the blood of His enemies, but by submitting to them so that they shed His Blood. This outpouring of love even for those who hate Him is a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. The whole human race comes to God through the Blood of Jesus shed on the Cross. All those who come to Him in faith are saved. The pouring out of the Blood is accompanied by the pouring out of water – the life-giving Holy Spirit. This is our inheritance as the children of God. Isn't it amazing?! In Jesus we know God and to know God is to have eternal life.



September 14<sup>th</sup> (Holy Cross Day)      Isaiah 60 vv 1-5

The cross points up and down, linking Heaven and earth, God and humanity. The Lord's arms are stretched out from side to side on the cross, linking all the nations all over the world, stretched out to embrace, stretched out to welcome. Meditate on the implications

of such a mystery.

September 15<sup>th</sup>      Isaiah 60 vv 6-18

We read chapters like these in the Epiphany season. Epiphany means revelation or manifestation. Christ is revealed to the gentiles, the nations. The magi are the firstfruits of the gentiles. The gentiles bring their treasures. They themselves minister to God and worship Him. Those who fought against God's people are compelled to acknowledge God's Victory. Yet everyone is included in this salvation, people of all nations, if they accept that the LORD is God, if they believe in Jesus Christ Whom He has sent, if their hearts have become the dwelling of the Holy Ghost. All you have to do in order to share in all this is to accept Jesus as your Lord and Saviour.

September 16<sup>th</sup>      Isaiah 60 vv 19-22

These wonderful words prefigure what God shows John in his Revelation, the very last book in the Bible. At the consummation, God is all in all and we need nothing else.

September 17<sup>th</sup>      Isaiah 61 vv 1-3

Jesus read this lesson in the synagogue at Nazareth. When he had finished, He told the congregation that these words were fulfilled in Him. They describe what things will be like in Heaven. They are a manifesto for what He did in the three years leading up to the Crucifixion. They give us Christians a model for how to behave individually and corporately as His Body, the Church. Good deeds done now are both good in themselves and signs of the coming Kingdom for which they pave the way.

September 18<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 61 vv 4-6

Priests mediate between God and man. All the Israelites constituted a priesthood. The time would come when they would mediate God to the world. This is fulfilled in Jesus, the epitome of Israel, Who is the priest Who reveals God to man and reconciles man to God. He also epitomises the Church. We in Him, He in us. We are all priests ministering to God on behalf of the world, mediating between God and the world. This is true because we are in Christ and He in us. Jesus epitomises humanity. He is the second Adam. All that prevents anyone from sharing in these blessings is a refusal to accept Jesus into his life. In Christ, the distinction between Jew and gentile disappears. All distinctions disappear. We are all one in Him, partakers of the blessings of God's Kingdom.

September 19<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 61 vv 7-11

*The Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations.*

When I was a young adult, there seemed to be a division in the Church between evangelicals who preached the salvation of the soul for Heaven and liberals who preached a social gospel apparently more concerned about the welfare of the body in this life. Neither of these positions is biblical. When God establishes His Kingdom, there will be righteousness and praise. The two are inseparable: the eternal worship of God, in which we participate in our church services, fellowship groups and individual prayer times; and a longing for righteousness, for justice for everyone. You can't claim to love your brother if you let him stay hungry while you eat. If we obey the royal law to love our neighbour as ourselves, we are concerned about his bodily welfare and we long for Him to have eternal life through knowing God. The two are inseparable. What is more, we give a hungry man bread just because he is hungry, not because we think that will turn him into a Christian – though it might if he sees what Christianity means in practice.

September 20<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 62 vv 1-4

Who is speaking in this passage? Is it God? Is it the prophet? Is it Jesus? There is such a spirit of celebration of the coming Kingdom and a longing for it to come into being. It is God's Word spoken by God, spoken through the prophet, spoken by Jesus the Word made flesh, and therefore spoken by us, because we Christians are in Him and He in us. God's Word effects what it proclaims. So surely we ought to be proclaiming it from the rooftops.

September 21<sup>st</sup> (St Matthew)

Isaiah 62 vv 5-12

The symbolism of v5 always strikes me as bizarre, but that is what it is – symbolism. The prophet is ecstatic to think of what God is going to do for His people and the metaphors run out of control. If we can't do anything else to advance God's Kingdom, we can pray. We can give Him no rest until Jesus is acknowledged as King of Kings and Lord of Lords in a Kingdom of Justice, Righteousness and Peace, which will have no end. Giving the LORD no rest also seems a bizarre metaphor, but to pray *thy kingdom come* is the same thing as to pray *thy will be done*. When we pray like this we are co-operating with God. We are working with Him. He doesn't want rest from the prayers of people like that.

September 22<sup>nd</sup>

Isaiah 63 vv 1-6

These words are quite well known, though I am not so sure that people know what they mean. The picture is that the deliverance of God's people means the defeat of their enemies. There is even an element of revenge or punishment. God's victory on the battlefield means the shedding of His enemies' blood.

But read this in the context of Isaiah and in the context of the New Testament. Israel's enemies do not have to remain God's enemies. People of all nations can repent and join God's people. All nations are invited to join the people of God. Universal forgiveness is possible because the Son of God has offered a universally effective sacrifice of Himself. He has taken on Himself the punishment of us all and the Blood dying His garments is His own.



September 23<sup>rd</sup>

Isaiah 63 vv 7-19

When St Augustine brought the Gospel to Kent, he was fairly successful early on. Thousands believed and were baptised. Then came persecution. Then the Church was re-established. Cathedrals were built at Canterbury and Rochester. Lots of parishes like ours were founded. They continued to exist through the Norman Invasion, the Middle Ages and the Black Death, the Protestant Reformation and the Civil War. They saw the Victorian move from agriculture to industry and the two world wars of the twentieth century. There must have been many times of joy and success and many of failure and despair, but God has always been faithful and He always will be. How we respond to His faithfulness is up to us.

September 24<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 64 vv 1-12

We cannot imagine what God has prepared for those who love Him. We know something of what it is to know God here and now. We experience Him in many different ways here on earth. We have some wonderful experiences. These are, however, only a foretaste of the infinitely better things which He has in store for us. It is in this light that we view the discouragements of the present.

September 25<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 65 vv 1-10

The reference is to the people of Israel. Their worship is lacking because it is not offered to the LORD in spirit and in truth. Because the praise isn't right, there is very little righteousness. But God does not abandon His people. He seeks them out and is always ready to reveal Himself to those who seek Him.

September 26<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 65 vv 11-16

I am writing these notes having heard the bishop preaching this morning. He reminded us that Israel's vocation from the very start was to be a royal priesthood, but often they turned out to be an unruly mob. The bishop said that exactly the same could be said for the Christian Church. Which are we – a royal priesthood or an unruly mob? Our vocation is priesthood, but what if we neglect our vocation?

September 27<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 65 vv 17-25

The exiles are returning to a land which has been devastated by war. Their homes had been taken away and given to strangers. No doubt, there were high death rates when war led to malnutrition and disease. (I cannot help thinking that modern Jews reading these words should think of the Palestinians living in refugee camps because their homes have been taken by the modern state of Israel. The Palestinians bear their share of the blame, but the situation urgently needs resolution). Even the farm animals would have suffered as shepherds were drafted into the army, killed or forced to flee, leaving their sheep prey for wolves. The vision of the return is the reversal of all that and this vision becomes a foretaste of Heaven.

September 28<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 66 vv 1-4

We aren't doing God a favour by worshipping Him. He is infinitely glorious. We ought to offer worship with awe, such praise leading to righteousness of life so that we please God in the Temple and in the High Street.

September 29<sup>th</sup> (Michaelmas)

Isaiah 66 vv 5-18

This is a summary of the message of the prophet. God certainly will establish His Kingdom. It is wonderful for the people who are on His side. Those on the other side, however- dishonest, violent, idolatrous, immoral, selfish, greedy, uncaring – these will get their comeuppance. God respects us sufficiently to allow us to make our own choice which side we shall be on. More than that He sends us Jesus and the Holy Spirit to invite us to choose the right side and to support and sustain us in that choice.

September 30<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 66 vv 19-24

I hope you have enjoyed and profited by this long study of Isaiah. It is a wonderful book, the fifth Gospel, and I hope that reading it together has been a real encouragement to you to remain faithful to God, trusting in His faithfulness to you.