

Bible Notes

October – December 2015

<u>1st October</u> Galatians 1 v1

I've just read an interesting article asking the question, Is the Reformation over? Of course it's over in the sense of all those arguments, persecutions and religious wars, which took place hundreds of years ago, when the likes of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and our own Thomas Cranmer concluded that the Church of Rome hath erred, not only in their living and manner of Ceremonies, but also in matters of Faith (XIXth Article of Religion) and that therefore the Church needed to be reformed. In particular, the Scriptures should be made available to everyone and in his own language. Our salvation depends entirely on Christ's merits and not on anything that we might do. We are saved by grace through faith. It is all of God. There is nothing we can do to justify ourselves before God. There is, in fact, no need to justify ourselves before God, because God has done everything necessary in Christ Jesus. All baptised Christians form a priesthood of all believers. Holy Communion is for everyone on every occasion it is celebrated. We have only one mediator and advocate with the Father, our Lord Jesus Christ. Thank God, the wars and persecutions are over and dialogue between Catholics and Protestants and Orthodox and between different kinds of Protestant has replaced conflict, suspicion and abuse. However, the article went on, in two senses the Reformation is not over and never can be over. The three great principles sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide, must be maintained in every generation – by Scripture alone, by grace alone, by faith alone. Moreover, ecclesia semper reformanda. The Church must always be reforming herself. She is a divine creation, but God, in His wisdom, has made His Church out of fallible human beings, who will never be perfect until they get to Heaven. So the Church on earth is always imperfect and will always be in need of reformation. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, Whom we must not quench by any misplaced sense of selfsufficiency.

Although, of course, also very much part of Catholic and Orthodox bibles, many Protestant evangelicals feel that St Paul's great teaching on our standing with God is most accessible to us in the Epistles to the Romans and the Galatians. Romans is his <u>magnum opus</u>. Galatians is shorter and simpler and sometimes read as an introduction to Romans.

Galatians 1 v1 I want to make one more point about the need to maintain the three great Reformation principles, sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide, whatever happens and then I really will start the study! Sometimes people assume that an evangelical Church is one in which they have a music group instead of an organ and sing worship songs instead of hymns and are fairly informal about their orders of service. That is not, however, what evangelical means. Evangelical churches may be like that, but not all informal churches are evangelical and not all evangelical churches are informal. An evangelical Christian is one who believes that the Bible is the Word of God and that one of the principal duties of the Church is preach the Gospel to all the peoples of the earth. The only duty more important than evangelism is worship. I should say that pastoral care and social action are equal second with evangelism in any list of Gospel priorities, but not all evangelicals would agree with me. An evangelical service is one which is true to Scripture, builds up the faithful in the Truth of Christ and commends the Gospel to those who have never heard it or who have heard it and rejected it. The best way to do this may be formal or informal, traditional or trendy; it would depend on the circumstances. Choruses and informality don't of themselves make an evangelical Church, if the Gospel isn't proclaimed.

I'm making this point because I want to share with you one of my concerns. The 1662 Communion service can be described as the most perfect liturgical expression of the doctrine of Justification by Faith that any church has ever achieved. It is absolutely clear in 1662 on what basis we stand before God, as sinners who have no right to enter into His Presence, who, on the contrary, are only deserving of condemnation, who can do nothing to save ourselves, but, who, in the amazing love of God, are saved by grace through faith and welcomed to His table, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by His body and our souls washed through His most precious blood and that we may evermore dwell in Him and He in us. It is all there in Common Worship, but I wonder if it is less clear than it might be, given the complex variations and options in the Common Worship service and a tendency to water down the language when talking about sin and judgment and other issues which casual churchgoers might find hard to understand.

Traditional services are not necessarily unevangelical if they proclaim the

Gospel.

October 3rd

Galatians 1 v1 Paul states that he is called to be an apostle not by man but by God. Mostly, the Church has always recognised that within the priesthood of all believers some are called to be ministers of one kind or another. But how do we recognise those whom God is calling? In Paul's case it is fairly clear. We know that the Risen Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus and commissioned him to preach the Gospel. How do we recognise the people God is calling to be, say, bishops, priests and deacons in His Church? How do we recognise the person God is calling to be vicar of this or that church? What other vocations may there be? Monk, nun, doctor, nurse, teacher, accountant in a Christian charity, parish administrator, youth leader? Or can any voluntary role or paid employment be a vocation? How do we know whom God is calling? It is obviously not sufficient simply to take people at their word. Sometimes "hearing God's Voice" is a symptom of mental illness. Quite sane people can be sincerely wrong about their vocation. Prayer, advice from friends and respected Christian people all help us to discern vocation. Ordination is preceded by a person believing he has been called by God and the Church testing that vocation in various ways. Ordination is the laying on of hands with prayer and, when the Church ordains someone, she is recognising that God has called that person. God will bestow the necessary gifts the ordained person requires to fulfil his vocation. The problem is that we have very little guidance about who might be called. The evidence from the Bible is that God sometimes calls the least likely people for the most important ministries. The men called (nearly always men, but sometimes women) would be written off by the world as too old, too young, lacking aptitude, inexperienced, untrained, and, quite often, unwilling to take it on. Paul had been one of the Church's deadliest foes! Nevertheless, it makes sense to enquire whether those offering themselves for ordination are mature enough, but not too old, in reasonable physical and mental health, caring enough to be pastors, passionate enough to be preachers, humble enough to lead worship and sufficiently intelligent to undertake appropriate studies. I do wonder, however, whether the Church has become too much like a secular corporation, recruiting the sort of people we think would be good as ministers, rather than seeking those whom God is calling. He is apt to surprise us!

October 5th Galatians 1 vv 1&2

Paul then is appointed by Jesus Christ and by God Who raised Him from the dead. These basic facts are at the heart of Paul's office. I sometimes feel that the Church does behave like a secular corporation with money and management, committees, personnel, buildings, structures, etc., and that these take up the bulk of our attention. Concern for God and Jesus Christ Whom He raised from the dead are just sort of there in the background. We do, of course, need to take a responsible attitude to money and management, the care of our buildings, and the welfare of the people we employ. We must not, however, put the cart before the horse or let the tail wag the dog. We exist, the Church exists, to glorify God, to preach the Gospel, to care for other people and to transform the kingdoms of this world into the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ. Also, even though Paul, is apostle called by God, he is not just one individual. He is one of the brethren, all of whom are joined in greeting the Church in Galatia. We are not individuals, but members one of another, members of Christ.

October 6th

Galatians 1 v3

Even the greetings of Paul's letters contain infinitely valuable teaching. Christian faith is at the heart of his correspondence and all his other management functions. He is not a manager who happens to be running a Church, but could just as well, on the same principles, manage any other organisation. It doesn't just happen that mission is the product of this particular company. Theology is not an afterthought tacked onto "best practice". Worship, evangelism, pastoral care are intrinsic to the way Paul leads the Church. If they were not, there would be no point. It is the Holy Spirit Who infuses everything Paul does.

October 7th

Galatians 1 v4

That he might deliver us from this evil world.

Not a comfortable concept for comfortable C21 western Christians. We don't recognise that the world is evil, partly because we are so cosseted from much of the evil that is in the world and partly because we are so complacent that there is nothing much wrong with the way we ourselves live. Unable to recognise that the world is evil, we cannot see the need for deliverance. Not seeing the need for deliverance, we lack any sense of urgency about sharing our faith with other people and we are fairly casual in our own commitment to worship and Christian service.

October 8th

Galatians 1 v4

God is not complacent about the evil in the world. On the one hand, evil provokes His wrath and indignation. Just read the newspapers. How would a loving, heavenly Father feel about the way His children are treating one another? And be very careful about saying that it is other people who deserve God's wrath. Are our lives really above reproach or is it merely that our standards are much too low? On the other hand, He has promised forgiveness of sins to all them that with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto Him. The price of that forgiveness is Christ's Death on the Cross. We are utterly dependent on God's Mercy. Knowing the love of God in our hearts, we cannot but share this good news with the world.

To whom be glory for ever.

One of the great achievements of the devil is to spread the rumour that worship is boring. Maybe church services are boring. Maybe we are bored by private prayer and when we read the Bible. I know I am sometimes. But the fault lies in me, not in the concept of worship. To worship in spirit and in truth is to do what we human beings are made for. It is what we shall be doing in all eternity. It is only when we are worshipping God that we are truly living and fulfilling our human potential. The devil is a liar and the father of lies and, when he tells people that they would be happier doing anything else other than worship, he is deceiving them. We become what we worship. If we worship material things in time and space, we deny our eternal inheritance as the children of God Who is Spirit. It is true that the people leading public worship have a role, by their choice of hymns, prayers, readings, etc. and by the manner in which they conduct it, to inspire the worship of their congregations. However, if we focussed less on the mundane aspects of worship, what we like and dislike about it, and more on the One Whom we are seeking to worship in spirit and in truth, I am sure we should find public worship a far more fulfilling experience.

October 10th Galatians 1 v6

Paul is really frustrated with the Galatians. With all the authority of an apostle, with the commission he received from Jesus Himself, with his tremendous knowledge of the Scriptures, with the power of the Holy Spirit, he has taught the Galatians the truth of Christ. No sooner, it seems, is his back turned than they are entertaining other teachers and other ideas which are effectively a perversion of the Gospel. Sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide. The Word of God, preached by Paul, teaches them that, without Christ they are helpless, but that Christ supplies their every need. They are not saved by obedience to the Law, even the Law of God. They cannot fulfil the Law's demands. Only Christ can do that. Christ has done that and His righteousness is imputed to all believers. To attempt to justify yourself is to attempt the impossible and it is an insult to God Who freely gives you everything you need. We depend utterly on God and God is utterly dependable. We owe everything to Him. Everything we have is God's free gift to us.

October 11th

The word Paul has preached to the Galatians is the Gospel. There is no other Gospel. Different churches may quite legitimately have different styles of worship, differing approaches to evangelism, pastoral care and community involvement, different social programmes and all manner of other differences, but there is only one authentic Gospel. *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried, he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures*. If you don't believe that, you aren't a Christian. You might be a very nice person, I might enjoy your company, we might work together for the benefit of the community, I certainly should not want to persecute you, but you are not a Christian if you do not believe that we are all alienated from God by our sins and that our only hope is in Christ Whose death on the Cross is the propitiation for our sins.

October 12th Galatians 1 vv 8&9

Is it likely that an angel from heaven would preach any other Gospel? Maybe Paul is engaging in hyperbole. Satan is, of course, a fallen angel. So it isn't inconceivable that some being appearing to be an angel would attempt to mislead Christian believers. It certainly isn't inconceivable that a human being might preach "another Gospel". It is so hard to believe that there is none righteous, no not one. It is so hard to believe that even the best human beings are not good enough. It is so hard to believe that there is nothing we can do to atone for our sins. It is so hard to believe that God loves us just as we are and that the vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives. It seems to corrupt morality if bad people only have to say they are sorry and then they are forgiven gratis. There are plenty of reasons why a human being might preach that in order to please God you must keep the Law, that, if you do keep the Law, you will earn God's favour, and that, if you don't, you will be punished. Such a Gospel puts the preacher in a position to dominate as the expert on interpreting the law and the one who dispenses whatever remedies there might be for sinners. A weak Gospel of good works is superficially more appealing than the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith, but it is pernicious, contrary to the nature of both God and man, and Paul says anyone who preaches such a Gospel is cursed.

October 15th

Is it the apostle's job to please God or to please men? If Christians observed the Jewish Law, the Romans might have regarded Christianity as a branch of Judaism. Judaism was allowed. So behaving like a kind of Jew might have saved Christians from being persecuted by the Romans, and indeed by the Jews. If a preacher upsets his congregation, they may go elsewhere or give up Church altogether. If a preacher wants to attract large numbers of people from the community into the Church, surely he should preach what they want to hear. If he doesn't attract enough people, his church may be too small and too poor to survive. Anyway, what right has the preacher to say what's what? Aren't all the people in the congregation part of the people of God, equally entitled to their own ideas about worship and mission? What makes the preacher special? The Bible is clear that the preacher's task is to preach the Word of God, whether or not people like it. It is God's Church and He will decide whether it lives or dies. He will decide what its mission is and supply the gifts and resources required to fulfil that mission. It is up to people to decide how they respond to the Word, but it is God's Word, not ours, and the preacher has no option but to proclaim the Gospel as it is written in the Bible.

October 14th Galatians 1 vv 11&12

Paul is absolutely clear that the Gospel he preaches comes from God not from man. In a sense, that is true for all of us Christians. We may have read the Bible. Our family may have brought us up to say our prayers and go to Church. Maybe our friends or colleagues have witnessed to us. In the end, however, it is God Who has made Himself known to us. We might have known that God made this wonderful universe. We might have known what the Bible says. We might have known the words of many hymns and prayers. We might have been really impressed by the words and deeds of our Christian friends. In the end, however, if we know God, it is because God has made Himself known to us. It is because His Spirit dwells in our hearts by grace through faith that we can address Jesus as Lord and God as Abba, Father. If you want someone to become a Christian, certainly witness to him or her, but, above all, pray that God will make Himself known to that person. Paul was given special insight because he had a particular task to perform, but we all depend utterly on God for our knowledge of Him.

It's become very unfashionable to say that you are religious. This is partly because of the Islamist fanatics who commit murder and claim to be acting in the name of God. But Christianity too is out of favour with many people in modern Britain. Traditional Christian sexual morality and gender roles are out of synchrony with C21 sexual freedom and the ideal of a tolerant, inclusive, diverse multicultural society. There is some resentment regarding faith schools, which are said to preserve divisions between communities and there is also resentment that church schools are often the best in an area and the suspicion that some families only go to church to get their children into them. It might surprise you that the Bible too is suspicious of religion. Very often the ancient Israelites in the OT were only too keen on "worship" at various shrines. They idolised the temple. They enjoyed attending sacrifices with the accompanying feasting and music (and sometimes drunkenness and prostitution in the case of Baal worship). The prophets condemn all this. What God requires is justice and mercy, obedience to His commandments. In the NT Paul himself criticises the Athenians for being too religious. They have innumerable altars and cults, but they don't know God. The Saul the Pharisee was very religious, no doubt struggling hard to conform his life to the minutiae of the Law. Yet he so far missed the point that he persecuted the Church. The point is to worship God. If you worship God in spirit and in truth you become like Him. If you know God, you will obey His perfect Law of love. You will be Christlike.

October 16th Galatians 1 vv 15&16

The initiative is God's. It is God Who has called Paul to be a Christian. It is God Who has called you and me. God has spoken to Paul and God has given Paul grace to respond in faith. It is God Who has called Paul to be an apostle and it is God Who has prepared good works for you and me to walk in. This is God's eternal purpose. So, although Paul was brought up to be a Pharisee and, as a young man, persecuted the Church of God, he can say that he was set apart to be an apostle from his mother's womb. Our lives are in the loving hands of God. It is in that faith that we can live and only in that faith that we can truly live. Thus being a Christian can never be an optional extra to whatever else you might do in life. Being a Christian is what you are and underlies everything else you do and sustains you whatever happens.

This is where Paul's Christian calling almost certainly differs from yours and mine. How do we recognise what God is saying to us? If you asked me that question, I would suggest you look at the Bible to see whether what you believe God is saying to you is consistent with what He has revealed in His written Word. I would advise you to interpret the Bible in the light of the tradition, the way the Church has always understood its message. I would encourage you to listen to Christian friends and particularly to the most respected members of our Church. Normally, this would all be good advice. But God is using Paul to reveal something which has so far not been appreciated. People have read the Bible, but not discerned this startling truth. Their traditions have obscured it. The current leaders of the Church have not grasped it. What God has revealed to Paul is that the Gospel is for everyone. It does not depend on being born a Jew. It does not depend on obedience to the Law. It depends on God alone and God is sovereign over all the peoples of world, of every race and language, male and female, bond and free. Paul reads the Bible (what we call the OT) in a fresh light, the Light of the Risen Christ Who appeared to him on the road to Damascus. In this light, he sees how the tradition has obscured God's Truth. In this light, he sees that it has not yet sunk in with the existing leadership of the church (Peter and the other apostles) what God has done and is doing in Christ. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul recognises in Jesus the key to understanding God and His relationship with His Creation, especially His human creation. So Paul overturns the religious authority of the Jewish establishment, while still respecting it, and shakes up the leadership of the Christian Church. We're not likely to be called to do that, perhaps, but it is what the reformers like Luther and Calvin and Cranmer had to do and it is not inconceivable that such visionaries will one day be required again in the contemporary Church. Maybe that time has already come.

October 18th (S Luke)

Galatians 1 vv 20-24

And they glorified God in me.

We celebrate saints like Luke and Paul. Do we celebrate enough one another? All Christians are saints. God had has chosen and called each one of us. We've all had experience of God. We've all, through His grace, attempted the Christian life. We should celebrate one another.

October 19th It is difficult to correlate Paul's chronology here with the account in Acts. Maybe we don't know enough to work it out or maybe it's like the stories of the Resurrection. It's hard to see how the four Gospels relate to one another. Truthful eye witness accounts do differ in detail. It's when a group of criminals have agreed on a story in advance that all the witnesses says exactly the same. We do know, however, that Barnabas acted as a sponsor for Paul. Naturally a lot of people were suspicious that a notorious persecutor now claimed to be a Christian but Barnabas had the grace to recognise both that Paul's conversion was genuine and that Paul's Godgiven gifts were just what were needed for the Church's mission. Vocation has to be discerned by the Church and we need people like Barnabas to recognise whom God is calling and to what kind of ministry, not only at diocesan and national level, but also in our own congregations. I always find it easier to attempt to do it myself than to recognise someone else whom God might be calling to minister and to encourage that person to do SO.

October 20th Galatians 2 vv 3-5

Paul's arrival at Jerusalem with his account of the version of the Gospel he had been preaching caused some consternation. The other apostles had not been anything like so bold in preaching to the Gentiles and possibly had not realised the full implications of Jesus, namely that we are saved by grace through faith and by nothing else. The traditionalists (whom the leadership of the Jerusalem Church hesitated to offend) were scandalised that Paul was welcoming into their Church Gentiles and not even requiring them to be circumcised and to keep the rest of the ceremonial Law. It seems that they tried to make Titus a test case, a Gentile Christian, who worked closely with Paul and who would eventually be a leader in the Church. They insisted that Titus must be circumcised. Paul's account here of what happened is obscure. On the one hand, Paul was anxious not to scandalise Jewish Christians and to cause a schism in the Church. Christ prayed that we should be one and any division in the Church is scandalous, usually more scandalous than any scandal that the schismatics are anxious to avoid. On the other hand, it is a most important point of principle that circumcision is unnecessary because the only necessary thing is faith. Probably Titus was not circumcised; the traditionalists' demands were not met.

These who seemed to be somewhat.

There always seem to be people in churches who seem to be somewhat more important than other people. Well, there has to be leadership. It makes sense that people who have a particular expertise should be listened to. It also makes sense that we should defer to those who are putting in the most effort. But some people's influence seems to go way beyond any formal position or expertise they may have and to exceed anything justified by the amount of work they put in. Sometimes they are deferred to because of what they used to do or because of the family they belong to or because of their status in the world. Sometimes, I suspect, some people get their own way because they are so "difficult" if they don't. It is worth remembering that *God accepteth no man's person*. Decisions in churches must be taken on merit, praying for God's guidance as to what He wants us to do, open to what He is revealing to us through the Scriptures and our sincere seeking after the Truth, not merely as individuals, but also as a fellowship.

October 22nd Galatians 2 vv 7-9

Although Peter had a big part at the beginning of the Gentile mission in the conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10), it would appear that none of the other apostles, at this stage, embraced it like Paul (and Barnabas?). Indeed they decide that it will be Paul who goes to the Gentiles and the others will concentrate on mission to the Jews. This will avoid any awkwardness. Note, however, that they remain friends. Although they don't quite agree, they still respect one another. They extend the right hand of fellowship to one another.

October 23rd Galatians 2 v10

Although they have decided to divide up the mission and, literally, to go their separate ways in advancing it, it is still one Church. The Jerusalem apostles ask Paul to take a collection from the Gentile churches to help to support the poor in Jerusalem. Paul is very happy to do this. It is all one Church. The Jerusalem Christians put in what they have. The Gentiles put in what they have. Everybody draws on what God has supplied. Ultimately, this is the origin of the Sunday collection. We might pause for thought if the greater part of that goes towards paying bills rather than remembering the poor.

October 24th

If you read Acts 10, you will see how God taught Peter that the Gentiles could be God's people too by telling him in a vision to kill and eat animals which the Jews would have regarded as unclean and therefore not for human consumption. It seems that Peter began to have table fellowship with Gentiles, but that he then faced criticism from some Jewish traditionalists, and gave in to them by withdrawing from eating with Gentiles. It is easy to see why a leader would look for a compromise which would keep the peace in the Church. It is hard to lead if some of the leading members of your congregation are telling people that you are wholly in the wrong. It is often necessary to compromise and to keep the peace and to preserve church unity if possible, but there are some issues of principle on which it is not possible to compromise. For one thing, the Jews had found it impossible to justify themselves by the Law. So it doesn't make sense to ask Gentiles to keep the Law. Secondly, to attempt to do so is effectively a denial that we are saved by grace through faith alone. Thirdly, if different groups within the Church refuse to meet, the Church is divided in the face of Christ's prayer that we might be one. I wonder what issues in our congregation or in our national Church are matters of principle which cannot be sacrificed and which are secondary matters on which compromise would be preferable to schism? Never forget just how schism is.

October 25th Galatians 2 v16

I'm just going to say, meditate on this verse. It is the very crux of our faith. No-one, nothing can be justified by the works of the Law. The Law just reveals the holiness of God, the holiness which is required of anyone or anything which dares to come into His Presence. Nobody, none of us, has the right to come into the Presence of God, trusting in his own righteousness. We cannot come into the presence of the thrice holy God because we are defiled by sin. We are selfish, unloving, self-centred. We cannot come into the Presence of God, but without Him we can do nothing. We are nothing. The wages of sin is death. Eternal life is knowing God. So our situation is hopeless. All of humanity has fallen short of the glory of God. The whole of creation, earthly and heavenly is unworthy of Him. Only Jesus has the right to come into the Presence of God. By grace, through faith our sins are repented of and washed away by His Blood, He dwells in us and we in Him, and by this token alone, we stand before God.

One of the reasons it is so hard accept the Gospel as preached by Paul (the Gospel he has received from Jesus) is that it seems to say that it doesn't matter how people behave. If, no matter how good you are, you are still not good enough, what is the point of trying? If, no matter how bad you are, you only have to repent and believe, why not carry on being bad? Indeed, if God's grace abounds when sinners are forgiven, why not sin some more so that God's grace can be even more abundant? This really is missing the point, however. God's grace sets us free, not free to live in a way that we know is wrong, but free to live in the way that really we know is right. Sin is sin, not because God is some spoilsport Who wants to take away all the things we might enjoy. Sin is sin because it destroys. Our self-centredness destroys ourselves. It destroys other people's lives. God sets us free from sin, not so that we can feel free to sin, but so that we can be free from sin. As worshippers of God, we grow to be more like Him; we become more loving. We seek to help rather than to hurt other people. We can love ourselves, not selfishly, but because we know that we are loved. We are justified. The justified are just.

October 27th Galatians 2 v17

A report has just come out that perfectionists are not good employees. We might think that the ideal employee is someone who is determined to do the job perfectly and will not give up trying while there is any imperfection at all still to be ironed out. This turns out to be untrue. The perfectionist is never happy. No matter how hard they try, there is always something wrong. They are not good colleagues to have. Because they are never satisfied, they are always stressed. They may not sleep well. Eventually they may break down. Every year, highly able teenagers commit suicide because they are afraid that they won't achieve perfection. But suppose you knew that you were accepted just as you are. Suppose you knew that you didn't have to be perfect in order to be loved. Suppose you knew that you are loved as the person you are not because of your achievements. Wouldn't you then be set free? You wouldn't have to worry any more. You wouldn't judge yourself. If you knew that God loved you just as you are, you wouldn't worry what other people might think of you. And being set free, you would find that you could do the job better than when you were so afraid of failure.

October 28th (St Simon & St Jude) Now suppose you accept everything we have thought about over the last two days, but then you start to think that, as a Christian, you ought to be earning your place by works of the Law. In Paul's time, it might be that you decided to give up pork. Nowadays, it might be that you decided that Christians shouldn't go to pubs. There is no reason why you shouldn't do either of those two things. The problem would arise if you thought that you must do something like that in order to be a real Christian or that people who called themselves Christians and still went to pubs (or ate pork) weren't real Christians. Either way you would be sacrificing the freedom God has given you in accepting you as you are by grace through faith. There is only one cornerstone on whom we all depend. There is no other and He is sufficient.

O Almighty God, who hast built thy Church upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the head corner-stone; Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their doctrine, that we may be made an holy temple acceptable unto thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

October 29th

Galatians 2 vv 18&19

Yesterday's meditation raises questions like do we have to go to church? Do we have to keep Sunday as a special day? Do we have to tithe our income? Are these practices a new legalism, things we have to do in order to earn our salvation? Do they distinguish us true Christians from those who say they are Christians but never come to Church, do the washing on Sundays and put a tip in the collection plate at christenings and weddings? If we come to church, keep Sunday special and tithe in that spirit, we are indeed forging afresh the fetters of the past. If we are Christians, however, we come to church because we love to worship in the fellowship of other Christians, to hear God's Holy Word, to participate in the Sacraments and to pray together. It is a matter of grace, not Law. If we are Christians, we are delighted freely to choose to live by the Ten Commandments, including to enjoy a foretaste of the rest which remains for the people of God. If we are Christians, we long to give freely as freely we have received. Having said that, we shall not be perfect until we get to Heaven and I think that, as long as we are imperfect and on earth, it is good to have some discipline, not merely to worship, to keep the commandments, to give when we feel like it!

This is complicated and I hesitate to think that I can put it better than St Paul, but maybe I can put it in the context of his other writings. In St Paul's thought, the Law kills. It is God's Law. It is perfect. It reveals the nature of God. And that is just the problem. The Law reveals just how far short we fall of the glory of God. There are only two choices – life and death. None of us qualifies for life. Therefore we must all expect death. The Law doesn't bring about this situation. Death was in the world long before the Law was revealed. The Law, however, makes the situation clear. Worse than that, the way human beings misuse the Law, it becomes an occasion for further sin. Forbidden fruit tastes sweetest. Those who think they are righteous look down on those they don't think are righteous. Those who really understand what the Law demands can only despair. Ordinary human nature (what Paul calls the flesh) is incapable of living in accordance with God's Holy Law and we are all therefore doomed to die. God's answer to this is to send His Son Jesus Christ, born of a woman, a true human being, but the only human being who has ever lived without the taint of sin. He alone deserves to live, because He alone is perfect love. The paradox is that perfect love is made manifest in accepting death, the punishment which He alone of all humanity did not deserve. His sacrifice of Himself in love destroys the power of death. Our sins are put to death with Him. Our flesh is put to death with Him. We are born again in His Resurrection life. We are new men and women. So our old man, the flesh is dead. Our sins are dead. We live. We are free. We are risen with Christ. This is accomplished at our Baptism and fulfilled when we enter Heaven. In the meantime we are still pulled between the flesh and the spirit. If, as Christians, we try to justify ourselves (even a little bit) by the Law, we are siding with the flesh and dishonouring Christ's free gift of Himself for our salvation.

October 31st (Hallowe'en)

Galatians 3 v1

Paul wants to know who has bewitched the Galatians. Not an inappropriate thought for Hallowe'en, but why does the Church keep All Saints at this time of year, when the pagans are celebrating darkness, death and magic? Because the Gospel is more powerful than all of them. We have the light of life and our lives are in the Hands of the living God.

1st November (All Saints)

Semper reformanda. The Church always needs to be reformed. The Church is the Bride of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit. She is nevertheless made up of fallible human beings. So long as we are on this earth, the flesh lusteth against the spirit, we are torn between what we were (fallen sinners) and what we shall be (like Him). We are the children of God, but we are yet not perfect. That means that we can go wrong as Christians and whole Churches can also go wrong. We always need to be reformed, to be brought back to those basics, sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide. The written Word of God is the Bible. We are saved by grace through faith alone.

O Almighty God, who hast knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord; Grant us grace so to follow thy blessed Saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those unspeakable joys, which thou hast prepared for them that unfeignedly love thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

2nd November (All Souls)

Galatians 3 v4

Sometimes we hear encouraging stories about people who used to maintain that they were unbelievers coming to faith in Christ. Sadly, we sometimes hear stories of the opposite happening – people who were once prominent Christians, who say they no longer believe. Perhaps they never did really believe, maybe they never had a relationship with God in Jesus Christ, but just went along with what was expected of them by family and friends and church. Maybe they are angry with God because He has allowed something terrible to happen and has not answered their prayers in the way they think He should have. Maybe they face intellectual doubts. Maybe they feel let down by the Church or its clergy. Maybe they are under pressure from non-Christian friends and colleagues. Maybe, the things of God in their lives have just dropped down their list of priorities, with so many other opportunities and demands on their time and energy. The Galatians are still religious, but they've lost their grasp on the crucial point that their faith is all of God. They have substituted a religion of works, of attempting to deserve God's favour, for a dependence on God in faith. Perhaps some of the people we mentioned above who have either deliberately rejected or drifted away from God have made a similar mistake. Let go and let God.

Let go and let God. If you read the Bible – all of it – you will see that it deals realistically with the world as it is – in which terrible things happen, even to good people. (We often read only the nice parts of the Bible, especially to children and then complain that it has nothing to say to us about real life. I think that is one reason why teenagers often reject religion. When the hormones kick in, the child-friendly faith they've been taught just seems childish and irrelevant to the challenges they are facing.) If you read the Bible – all of it – you will see that God is in everything that happens, good and evil, and that everything that happens happens within His Providence. You will also see that He is good and just and that He loves you no matter what. You must question, but you will be wise enough to understand that you will not always receive answers. You will accept the limitations of your own understanding. If you know God in Christ, you will not let the imperfections of other Christians, even ministers, divide you from Him. You will be humble enough to know that you too are a sinner wholly dependent on His grace for your membership of His Church. If you know God in Christ, you will not deny Him before men. Neither will you treat serving Him as less important than all the mundane chores you have to do, your hobbies or your interests. Those who achieve great things for the Lord, do so by grace through faith not as a result of their own virtues. Those who do anything worthwhile do so by grace through faith.

4th November Galatians 3 v6

Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. This one of those sentences of Scripture which many of us have in the back of our minds. It is very important to the thinking of St Paul and therefore to the Christian Gospel. Paul is quoting from Genesis 15⁶. The coming of Christ fulfils the Law. He did not come to destroy it. The New Testament is understood in the light of the Old Testament. It is not a repudiation of it. The point being made is that Abraham did not receive God's promises because of any good works that he did. His righteousness was not righteousness acquired by doing good things or refraining from doing bad things. Abraham was right with God because he had faith. He believed God. So, Paul demonstrates, justification by faith is not a new idea which comes in with Jesus. It is right there in the beginning, hundreds of years even before God reveals the Law to Moses on Mt Sinai and fulfilled in Christ.

5th November (Gunpowder Plot) In C17 England, the division was between Catholic and Protestant. In 1605, a small group of Catholic conspirators hatched a plot to blow up King James I and parliament. Thankfully, we can no longer even understand why catholics and protestants hated one another so much and we have turned the commemoration of the Gunpowder Plot (a terrorist outrage which would have destroyed much of London as well as the House of Lords where the gunpowder was secreted) into a festival of fun. For this reason, we can't understand the hatreds and fanaticisms which disfigure other religions in some of their manifestations in the modern world and Christianity itself, for example still in N Ireland. In Paul's cultural milieu, the division was between Jew and Gentile. Most people would have assumed that the Jews were God's chosen people on the basis of God's promises to Abraham. The Jews would justify God's favour to them by keeping the Law delivered to Moses. While they might be punished for breaking the Law, God would never utterly forsake His people. Abraham's name, however, means father of many nations. More than once in the Abraham stories in Genesis, God speaks of Abraham and his descendants as a blessing to all nations. The word for nations (גוימ) in eg Genesis 22¹⁸ is usually translated Gentiles or even heathen. God's eternal plan is that people all nations will receive the promises made to Abraham. They will all be the people of God and share the inheritance of Israel by grace through faith. Thus Paul can say God preached the Gospel to Abraham because God would justify the heathen by faith. [Genesis 22 is of course the story of Abraham not quite sacrificing his son, Isaac, which foreshadows the even more profound story of the sacrifice of the Son of God for the sins of the whole world.] The secular answer to religious wars and persecutions is to say that religion doesn't matter and that it will be a good thing when it dies out and people stop killing one another so pointlessly. The real answer is that religion matters more than anything, but that you have to get religion right. God is love. All human beings were made in His image to be His children. Christ died for every one of us. It is this faith which must determine our attitude to other people, never to oppress or harm them, always to respect them, but also passionately to desire for them that they may come to the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ, Who is alone, the Way, the Truth and the Life. We need to be as passionate as the fanatics, but consumed by love, not by hatred.

Imagine what it would take to be good enough to stand in the Presence of God. He is perfect love, perfect beauty, perfect wisdom, perfect justice, perfect mercy, utterly holy. How could you or I possibly come into His Presence and live? The answer is that we couldn't. If you go down that route, however, of justifying yourself by the works of the Law, you have to realise just what you are attempting. Any slip up at all and you've failed. If you aren't perfect, you don't get in. If you set out to qualify for Heaven on your own merits, you are quite literally doomed. You would only attempt to do this because you didn't have faith in the fact that God loves you as you are. You cannot justify yourself by living a good enough life to deserve to go to Heaven, but you don't have to. God loves you just as you are. All you have to is believe and faith itself is God's gift to you. God doesn't demand that you justify yourself. *The just shall live by faith* – another of Paul's favourite OT quotations (Habakkuk 3⁴).

7th November

Galatians 3 vv 13&14

There are only two choices in the Law (and indeed the rest of the Bible) – life or death, blessing or curse. You either belong to God or you don't. The Law can't make you a member of the people of God. You can't justify yourself by good works. What the Law can do is to reveal what sort of people we ought to be and, therefore, how far short we fall. What the Law brings, then, is knowledge of the curse of death – the just sentence on a fallen race. The blessing of life, eternal life, comes not through the Law, but through the Spirit of the Risen Christ. Jesus takes upon Himself the curse of death, which the Law prescribes for all those who do not live up to the standards which the Law sets. Deuteronomy 23²¹ states that the body of a convicted criminal hanging on a tree is a curse. So Jesus becomes a curse for us under the Law. By doing so, He sets us free from the Law, free from the curse, free from death. In Him, therefore, we have the gift of eternal life by God's free gift of Himself.

8th November

Galatians 3 vv 15-17

Covenants must be honoured. God would never break His Word. So, whatever the effect of the Law given to Moses on Mt Sinai, it cannot disannul God's promises made to Abraham 430 years previously. The Law was very wonderful but its function was not to undo what God had already done.

Paul emphasises that the promise to Abraham was made to his seed, singular, not seeds, plural. This point is often obscured in modern translations of the Bible (including the Common Worship version of the Magnificat). Rather than using the word seed (which literally translates the Hebrew and Greek) they go for descendants or children or some other plural word. Now Paul's point is that the promise is fulfilled in one Man, Jesus Christ. Only Jesus fulfils the Law. Only Jesus may come by right into the Presence of God. It is in Him alone, that Jews and Gentiles are heirs of the promises made to Abraham. Jesus represents the whole people of God at the Throne of Grace. We are the Body of Christ. In Him we are God's children, heirs of eternal life.

10th November

9th November

Galatians 3 vv 18-20

The Law obviously came from God and was very special. Just read the account in Exodus 19 and the chapters following. Moses was shown something of the glory of Heaven, even of God Himself. So what was the point of the Law, if faith is what puts us right with God? What the Law does is to reveal sin for what it is, that pernicious self-centredness which alienates human selves both from one another and from God, sin which is at the root of all the evil in the world, sin which is deservedly punished by eternal death. The Law is very wonderful. Angels are present at its unveiling and are instrumental in declaring what the Law requires of us. The mediator is Moses (though some people misunderstand at this point and think Jesus is meant here). A mediator is needed on Mt Sinai, because the people are not holy enough to enter into the Presence of God. There is a division between God and humanity, which Moses, under very special conditions, is privileged to bridge on Mt Sinai. On that green hill far away, Jesus Himself is the mediator of the much better covenant. Jesus. God and Man, Who fulfils all the Law's demands on our behalf and thereby opens the Kingdom of heaven to all believers.

13th November

The Law which God gave to Moses on Mt Sinai isn't bad. It is good. What is bad is to misuse the Law in the belief that by obeying the Law we may earn God's favour. It's the other way round. God loves us as we are. He died to make us good. He makes us good so that we can then be good. So do we have to obey the Law which God gave Moses on Mt Sinai? The NT makes clear that we can eat, contrary to the letter of the Law, technically unclean foods such as shellfish and pork. The NT also makes clear that Christians must obey the Law in terms of honesty, refraining from violence and sexual immorality. The official Church of England position (VIIth Article) is Although the Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the Civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth: yet notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral? What about Sabbath observance? Is it a rite or ceremony? Is it a civil precept to be applied in ancient Israel but not necessarily in Christian countries? Or is it a Moral matter? It is after all one of the Ten Commandments.

12th November Galatians3 vv 24-27

The Law is for bad people. The Law is for children. Mature Christians don't lead the Law because God has made us good. Good trees bear good fruit. The immature need the Law, even the threat and actuality of punishment, to keep them on the straight and narrow. Bad people certainly need the Law to control them. Mature Christians, however, do not need the Law. The old man, the flesh is crucified with Christ. We have been buried with Him in Baptism. We have been baptised into Christ. We have put on Christ. We are the children of God in Christ Jesus. Of course, we shall not be made perfect until we attain Heaven by God's grace. Until then, to that extent, we are all immature. The Law is still there as a guide. When we fail to listen to the Spirit at work within us, it helps to have the Law written in our Bibles, taught to us by our families and the Church, enforced, if necessary, by the state. We don't need the sacrifices. Christ has fulfilled all the Law's demands. We don't need the ritual. The Law itself recognises that morality is much more important than ritual. We do not expect England to have the same government as a middle-eastern state 2,500 years ago. We are, however, under an obligation to observe the moral demands.

Is it just me or is there a wider application of these verses? The sense surely is that God meant us to be free, freely choosing to act justly. Generally speaking, His sovereign Will was to create free human beings who had the possibility of choosing sin, rather than robots who had no choice but to follow the programme embedded in their robotic minds. On God's calculation, all the evils caused by human sin are outweighed by the blessing of human freedom. The commandments are necessary to limit the evil effects of the sin we choose to commit. Set free from sin in Christ,

however, mature Christians in whom the Holy Spirit makes His dwelling, we no longer need to be constrained by Law.

Are we, however, as a society moving in the opposite direction? Most people no longer believe in original sin. Despite what they see in the world around them, they assume that babies are born good. If they grow up bad, it can only be because society has corrupted them. (How did society become bad and corrupting, if all human beings are born good? Where does evil come from?) Of course, people are not born good. We have to be taught right from wrong. Again, however, many people that there are no moral absolutes. Who are we to say that anyone else is wrong? Values are culturally determined. Human societies make up their own rules. The Law doesn't come down from God. Human beings make it up. Our society, therefore, lacks the confidence to teach the difference between right and wrong. Paradoxically, then, we don't trust people. We no longer expect people to mature, to become responsible and to act wisely. Increasingly, the authorities make our decisions for us. They regulate everything we do. They keep us under surveillance to ensure that we comply. The state is the universal parent and we are all children, never mature adults. Even the minions of the state (except perhaps at the very highest level) are expected neither to take responsibility, not to use their initiative. All that is expected is that they ensure all the right boxes are ticked.

Years ago, children were gradually given more freedom and responsibility – to play out, to light fires, to use knives. Most became sensible, responsible adults. Some hurt themselves badly or harmed other people. (The Law dealt with the latter.) Nowadays, however, is there are risk that we are bringing up a generation who will always be children and never adults?

This is one of the passages frequently quoted in support of the ordination of women. Paul says that men and women (just like Jews and Gentiles, slaves and freemen) are redeemed on the same terms – by grace through faith in Christ crucified – and, that therefore we are all one in Christ. So why can men be ministers or priests, but not women? Similarly, it is argued that Genesis 1^{26&27} states that God made men and women equally in His image and on the same terms. Maybe you agree. My response would be that neither of these passages is about ordination. Whereas the Bible states that men and women are equal, it does not say that they are the same. On the contrary, they are complimentary. Human society needs both men and women. Even feminists point out that Lehman Sisters would have been a different company from Lehman Brothers, whose recklessness precipitated the recent global financial crash. Men and women are different and we need both. There is a lot of overlap between what men and women can do, but men are better in some roles and women in others. Occasionally women did take leading roles in OT Israel and in the NT Church. Occasionally they were preachers, teachers or prophets. Far more often, however, these roles were taken by men and, on the few occasions when the Bible actually discusses these issues, it states that they should be taken by men. That is why I do not deduce from today's reading that the modern Church was right to decide to go against nearly 2,000 years of almost universal practice.

15th November

Galatians 4 vv 1-3

Galatians 3 vv 28&29

A middle class Roman household would have had at its head a man. Under him would be his wife and their children. Live in servants and slaves would have been regarded as part of the household. Slaves might be well educated people in "white collar" occupations, as well as drudges and menials. The children's tutor or schoolmaster might well be a slave. In such a household, the eldest son would be heir to the whole estate, but, so long as he remained a minor, would have been placed by his father under the authority of his tutor or schoolmaster. The boy needed to be taught the skills he would need as an adult. He needed to be protected from the dangers and the temptations of youth. His freedom would have been curtailed and he might well have resented it. Eventually, however, he would inherit the estate and if he had matured as he ought to have done, he would be in his turn a wise master. This is Paul's analogy for Christian maturity and freedom in Christ.

When the fulness of time was come.

Much was made of this in the early Church. Remember. What God does in Christ is His eternal plan for the cosmos. Everything that happens throughout the universe and in every age is within the knowledge and providence of God. Jesus came at just the right time, when His mission would succeed. We can't know all the reasons why Jesus came when He did – the condition of Israel, the power of Rome, etc. – but one point often made is that the Romans had opened up the seaways and built the highways and imposed a peace which made it possible to spread the Gospel in a way which would not have been possible for some time before or after the Roman Empire.

17th November

Galatians 4 vv 4&5

The Son of God is born of a woman. That is the crux of Christian faith. The world's religions believe all sorts of things about God or the gods – some of which we would agree with, some of which we wouldn't. The world's religions have all sorts of accounts of the way God or the gods communicate with human beings – manifestations, visions, dreams, meditation, holy books, the grandeur of Nature. All these things have their place in the Christian revelation too. What is unique to our faith is that God became one of us, and it is in this light of the Word made flesh that we evaluate every claim about what God is like or how He has communicated His Will to humanity.

18th November

Galatians 4 v5

To redeem them that were under the law.

The tutor might well have been a slave. He might have been a very knowledgeable man. He might have been respected and well-treated in the household. But he would not have been free. In order to be set free, either his master would have to grant manumission, or he would have to be redeemed. The price of his freedom would have to be paid. The son would have as little freedom as the slave. In theory, his father could have him put to death if he so chose. Living under the Law could be good, but it was not freedom. The person living under the law was a slave to the Law (and indeed condemned to death by the Law). In a way, Jesus sells Himself to the Law in order to pay the price of our redemption and freedom.

Adam is described as the son of God. Adam stands for the whole human race. We are all meant to be the children of God. Like the prodigal son in the story, however, we take what our Father gives us, abuse His generosity to us, leave home, waste our lives and find ourselves destitute without Him. We forfeit our inheritance as His children. We are compelled to offer ourselves in service to an employer who is so mean that we are reduced to thinking about eating pig food. Jesus, however, is the Son Who always remains true to the Father. He gives up His heavenly inheritance of His own free will and assumes the form of a slave. As a slave, He unjustly endures the painful and humiliating death of a rebel slave. His life, then, is our redemption. He pays the price. He dies our death. We, therefore, who have forfeited our inheritance as the children of God, are born again. We are adopted back into the family. We are the children of God. Jesus taught us to call God, our Father, and that is just what His Spirit dwelling in us enables us to do.

November 20th

Galatians 4 vv 6&7

The New Testament is written in Greek. Greek was the language generally used all around the Eastern Mediterranean (and, by the educated classes in Rome itself. Julius Caesar probably did not say Et tu Brute {Latin}. Far more likely he said $K\alpha\iota$ $\sigma\upsilon$, $B\rho\upsilon\tau\epsilon$ {Greek}.) This use of Greek as a lingua franca is one of the reasons, perhaps, that Jesus could be said to have come in the fulness of time. However, Jesus Himself would spoken Aramaic and so would His disciples and the Christians in the Holy Land. So some words of Aramaic appear in the NT, words that were so precious that they were preserved in the original language even by people who did not know Aramaic. One such word is Abba. What a precious thought it is that we may call God Father. When you pause to think Who God is, how could we possibly presume to address Him as Father. Yet that is just what Jesus taught us to do.

November 21st

Galatians 4 v7

Not a servant (the Greek means slave), but a son. If you and I are the children of God, we are the heirs of God. What can that mean? Everything that exists belongs to God. What can it mean to be God's heir. To say that we are heirs of eternal life into say that we are more privileged than we can conceive.

The Galatian Christians, before they were converted, were Gentiles heathens, pagans. They worshipped false gods, idols. They observed all kinds of religious rituals, but they were meaningless. Their gods couldn't answer prayer. Often the ethical element in pagan religion was very weak. When they became Christians, they knew the one, true God, the God Who does answer prayer, the God Who is just and merciful and demands that His people are just and merciful too. More importantly, before they knew God, God knew them. As Christians, we are God's people, called to be holy because He is holy. The one true God is, of course, also the God of the Jews. He has made Himself known in the OT as the God of justice and mercy. He only makes Himself fully known, however, in Jesus Christ. Where the Galatians have gone wrong (perhaps partly from habit) is that they have taken rituals and observances from the Jewish religion, almost treating the LORD like one of their pagan gods, but they have missed out on the substance of faith in God – which is not about ritual to propitiate a fickle and destructive deity – but about love and justice and mercy, the fruits of our being justified by grace through faith. Their observance of Sabbaths etc. is effectively meaningless ritual rather than an expression of genuine faith.

November 23rd

Galatians 4 v11

What is the relationship between the pastor and his flock? Paul, as apostle and missionary, obviously feels responsible for his flock in Galatia. They are the fruit of his labour and his labour will be in vain if the Galatian sheep go astray. Pastor means shepherd. Rector means ruler. Vicar means instead (the one who does the work of an absent rector, although the meaning has now changed and rectors and vicars are much the same thing). Minister means servant. The meaning of Father is obvious. Priest looks as if it means someone who comes between God and other people as a mediator. There is no place for that kind of priesthood in the Christian faith. In the Christian sense, a priest is a presbyter or elder. A bishop is an overseer, a superintendant. All these words seem to distinguish between the clergy and the people. Yet surely the clergy are members of the people of God. All Christians form part of a royal priesthood. All Christians are called to full time ministry. We, all of us, offer pastoral care to one another. We look out for one another. We are all therefore responsible for ourselves and for each other.

Be as I am; for I am as ye are.

In the end, we all – clergy and people, pastor and flock - stand before God on the same terms. We are justified by grace through faith. Everything depends on Jesus and nothing on us. Within the Body of Christ, there are different ministries. We have different gifts, different opportunities and difficulties, different ministries. We are all different and we all are what we are by the grace of God. God has made each one of us unique because there is a unique place for each one of us in His work to redeem the cosmos. Our clergy have their calling and it is to be respected. Clergy do have a special responsibility to preside at worship (especially Holy Communion), to preach and teach the Word of God, to lead the pastoral and evangelistic ministry of the whole congregation to one another and to the wider world, to take a representative role in representing the Church to the world outside the Church. Nevertheless these are the responsibilities of the whole congregation. All Christians relate to God directly through Jesus Christ. From Him each receives the grace to acknowledge God as our Father; from Him each receives his or her commission to do God's work; from Him each receives the Holy Spirit and the gifts he or she requires to the good works God has prepared for us to walk in. A congregation is not made up of children dependent on their minister. A congregation is made up of people, including clergy, all dependent on God as our Father.

November 25th

Galatians 4 vv 13-15

We are not told the circumstances in which S Paul first preached in Galatia. The inference is that he was detained there by ill health when on his travels perhaps to other places. From these verses, it would appear to have been an illness which might have disgusted the Galatians – an infection, a boil, a suppurating wound? This is all conjecture. What is clear is that there are two lessons here for us. One is to take advantage of interruptions to our plans and circumstances we might not have desired. We might be in hospital or stranded somewhere by a tube strike or unable to pursue a chosen career because of exam failure or forced to give up work to look after a relative. We can ask what new and different opportunities do we have to serve God in our changed condition? The other lesson is that the Galatians had the sense not to be put off Paul's preaching by extraneous circumstances.

November 26th

Am I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth? There is a lot of resistance to Christian preaching and teaching. Many people just won't go to church or anywhere else where they might hear a sermon. They switch off religious TV and radio programmes. There is a campaign to remove Gideon bibles from hotel bedrooms. There are objections even to the one minute *Thought for the Day* on Radio 4. Quite a lot of copies of these notes are left unread in church. Even, among those who go to church, there is a great deal of banter about the sermon and its length – some good natured, some perhaps not. It is difficult to evaluate preaching. Some "sermons" may not be the Word of God at all, but the preachers own thoughts about things. People who hear sermons should always listen in the light of their own knowledge of the Bible and read the Bible for themselves to check on what they are not sure of. Some sermons are the Word of God in the sense that they are a fair exposition of Scripture, but they may not be relevant to the needs of the congregation actually present. Some sermons may have the right message for the congregation there present, but not be expressed very well. The preacher is too softly spoken or uses too many hard words or fails to explain difficult concepts. Congregations have a responsibility to help preachers by their constructive criticism. Sometimes, however, the resistance to sermons seems to come from an unwillingness to hear the truth. We have made up our minds and we're not listening to anyone, not our rector, not the apostle Paul, not Jesus Himself, if they challenge what we have already decided.

November 27th

Galatians 4 vv 17&18

The Galatians became Christians when Paul preached to them face to face while he was detained in Galatia by whatever infirmity he suffered from there. Subsequently, other preachers have persuaded them that salvation by grace through faith is not sufficient. They must perform various works of the Law if they wish to be saved. Maybe the Galatians believed them because their message is easier to grasp. *In vain the first-born seraph tries to sound the depths of love divine!* It is almost incredible that God loves us just as we are, irrespective of our sinfulness. Maybe these other preachers were more prestigious, coming with good reputations from centres of excellence like Jerusalem. Maybe they were in better physical health and better looking than Paul!

So what do you do when you hear a sermon and you are not sure whether or not it is true? You look at Scripture. So Paul, desperately trying to persuade the Galatians of the truth of the Gospel of justification by faith alone, refers them to the Bible (what we call the OT). The argument is that Abraham was promised a son by his wife Sarah. When Sarah lost hope that she would ever conceive, she persuaded her husband to sleep with the slave girl Hagar, who then did conceive and bear Abraham a son, Ishmael. Sarah did eventually give Abraham a legitimate son, Isaac, by the grace of God, and Hagar and Ishmael were turned out of Abraham's household. God protected them and Ishmael became the father of the Arabs, while Isaac became the father of the Jews. Paul explains this story in what must have been an entirely new way. Isaac was the child of the promise, which Abraham received by faith. Ishmael was conceived because Sarah lacked faith. His mother was a slave. To attempt to earn one's place in the people of God by observing the Law given on Mt Sinai is to enslave oneself to the Law. One would only do so if one lacked faith. One would never be right with God by striving to keep the Law. But salvation is God's freely given gift, His promise, to be received by faith alone. Why strive for what cannot satisfy, when everything we need is freely given by God Himself? Why give up the freedom God has given us in Christ and become enslaved to religion?

November 29th Galatians 5 v1 In what sense are Christians set free? We are free from the fear of death. We are free from the devil. We are free from the Law's demands. We are free from troubled consciences. We are free to serve God without fear. We serve God Whose service is perfect freedom.

Long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin and nature's night, Thine eye diffused a quickening ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

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

30th November (S Andrew) This is good news for the whole world, for Jew and Greek alike, for people

of every race and language, of every tribe and nation. This freedom in Christ is for everyone. All that is required of us is faith and faith itself is the gift of God. Our mandate as Christians is to proclaim this Good News to the ends of the earth. Andrew is often thought of as the first missionary because, as soon as he met Jesus, he brought his brother Simon, who became Peter on whose faith Christ built His Church. Later on, it was Andrew who introduced some Greeks to Jesus. So Andrew witnessed both to his own family and to strangers, to foreigners even. Herein is his example to us.

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

1st December Galatians 5 v7

When you start this job, you are very optimistic. The parents of children you are asked to christen listen attentively to what you say and promise to bring their children up in the Church. Couples arranging weddings say how much they enjoyed the services at which their banns are called. Confirmation candidates are interested and committed. Large numbers of people are moved by the Christmas services and other big things we do. You know what I would say now, if it wasn't too painful. Even people who have attended church all their lives drop out because they have other things to do or because of some disagreement within the fellowship, sometimes quite a minor one. We pastors are left as puzzled as Paul. If you once knew the truth, how can you ever drop out of God's Church? One answer of course is that such people never really belonged. Another answer is that their commitment is suspended rather than departed and one day, by God's grace, they will return. In the case of the Galatian Christians, they were seduced from the truth by false teachers. What they should have asked themselves was what was the effect of faith on their lives? What difference did it make to their lives to believe in God? Why would they be prepared to give that up?

Galatians 5 v8

Many, many people believe that you don't have to go to church in order to be a Christian. You can pray. Plenty of non-churchgoers pray daily and I think almost everyone prays in a crisis. If you equate being a Christian with being a nice person, of course there are many nice people who don't go to church. Some of them are nicer than some of us who do go to church. What happens, of course, is that people who call themselves Christians but don't go to church miss out on the means of grace – reading the Word and hearing it preached, Christian fellowship, common prayer, the Sacraments. They drift away from Christ as they drift away from His Church. Their children and grandchildren may hardly know anything of Jesus at all, except what they learn in comparative religion at school. The local Church is weak if it is unsupported by worshipping, praying people. There are too few people and not enough money for us to fulfil our mission. When there is only a tiny minority of practising Christians in a country, politicians and officials can disregard the teaching of Jesus in legislating and in social policy. A judge recently stated that it is only a minority of committed religious people who care any more about sexual morality and that, therefore, people in public life should feel free to behave any way they like in their private lives.

3rd December

Galatians 5 v9

A little leave leaveneth the whole lump.

Before celebrating Passover, Jewish families take great care to see that every scrap of yeast or leaven is removed from their houses. Yeast symbolises sin. It has the power to transform a whole loaf. Sin is the same. A little sin pollutes a whole person. A little sin in a community or in a church pollutes the whole body. A small number of false teaches have contaminated the Galatian Church. Starting out a little way on the road to justification by works, the Galatian Church is in serious danger of losing its grip on justification by grace through faith. It is in danger of ceasing to be justified at all, in which case it would be dead in sin.

What do you think it is about the Church in modern England that makes us so weak compared with the Church in other countries and the Church in our own past?

4th December

Galatians 5 v10

Paul believes that the Galatians will come through. It is after all the work of God. It is the false teachers who will come under judgment. I do not share the general gloom and doom about the Church in England or the Church in this parish. We are, after all, God's Church and He has ample resources to enable us to live and to fulfil our mission. I do sometimes wonder, however, whether God's plan for His Church in England (or in this parish) will be fulfilled by the existing established denominations? Just my thoughts with which you may or may not agree: historic buildings which consume a disproportionate amount of our money, time and effort; a Gospel of cheap grace, which seems to say that, given that God is so nice, it doesn't really matter what we believe or how we behave; a belief that mission is about recruiting more people like us in order to preserve out existing set up rather than recognising the imperative to share the Good New with everyone because they need it and because it is to the glory of God that all kinds of people know Him and love Him; a willingness to conform ourselves to the world's view of ethics and morality, rather than to hold fast to what the Bible teaches; an oppressive bureaucracy dedicated to the avoidance of risk rather than the challenges of mission; decision-making bodies which are made up of an elite within the Church – paradoxically a conservative elite in the parishes and a liberal elite at national level; centralisation which narrows the scope of the local Church to develop its mission. The question is whether any of us are false teachers who will face judgment for an etiolated Church?

5th December

Galatians 5 vv 11&12

We would regard circumcision as a major obstacle to mission. It was rather different in Paul's day, however. While the necessity of circumcision did put Gentiles off adopting the Jewish religion and would have put them off becoming Christians had it been required, Paul's life would have been much easier if he had gone along with it. All the first Christians were Jews and many of them hadn't yet woken up to the idea of the Gentile mission and the doctrine of justification by faith. Why offend them? Why cause trouble? Why risk losing the support of the Church you've already got? Why upset the Romans, who tolerated the Jews, but not the Christians? Because there are some things which are more important than unity and a quiet life – one of which is justification by grace through faith.

7th December Galatians 5 v15 Maybe it is because religion is one of the most important things in our lives, but, sadly, churches can be quarrelsome places. Jesus prayed that we might be one. Love is the Christian virtue. God is love. Paradoxically, this may be the reason that we find it hard to deal with disunity. On the one hand, any argument quickly becomes a matter of principle and neither side feels able to compromise. On the other hand, we feel angry with other people or ashamed of ourselves for damaging the unity of the Church by getting into an argument. On the third hand (!), we may feel that love precludes us from exercising discipline. So we may create an environment in which people very strongly hold opposing views and they cannot be discussed in a rational, prayerful atmosphere. We are called to be perfect and perfect people would not fall out. But our inability to agree or at least to agree to differ poisons our fellowship and impairs our mission. I think we would have to be prepared to accept leadership to make it work, albeit servant leadership on the model of Moses or Paul or, best of all, Jesus.

8th December Galatians 5 vv 16&17 The flesh lusteth against the Spirit.

Ordinary human beings live in the flesh. That's Paul's word for ordinary human nature. In heaven, we shall live purely in accordance with the Spirit. Between becoming a Christian, however, and going to heaven, we have to live on earth as strangers and pilgrims. We are pulled in opposite directions by the flesh and the Spirit. We seek to resist the pull of the flesh (of sin, the world and the devil) and walk in the Spirit. *Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God.* (Romans 6¹³). We can only walk in the Spirit by the grace of God. We therefore cannot neglect the means of grace – Christian fellowship, prayer, the Bible, practice, etc..

9th December

Galatians 5 vv 19-21

This isn't an exclusive list. These are the sorts of thing of which ordinary human nature is capable. Read the newspapers. Watch TV. Look at the world around you. Examine yourself. Can you still deny Paul's diagnosis? Are you never struck by the sheer futility of much of what is said and done and thought? Having no sense that human life can only be fulfilled in relation to God, people seek fulfilment in the pursuit of the false gods of appearance, health, material possessions, alcohol and other drugs, self-centred human relationships, sport, power, money. None of them can satisfy and their pursuit for their own sake produces only disappointment and death. *They which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God*.

10th December

Galatians 5 vv 22&23

Again this is not an exclusive list, but it is what we expect to find in people who walk in the Spirit. Notice the contrast between the works of the Law (what you strive for in your own strength by the sweat of your brow) and the fruits of the Spirit (that which grows naturally by the grace of God.)

11th December

Galatians 5 vv 24-26

When you read in the newspapers accounts of war crimes and terrorist outages and, indeed, of ordinary crimes, do you ever wonder how human beings can do these things? Or when you see images of human suffering, do you ever ask yourself how we can pass by on the other side in the face of so much need? Crucifixion is a really terrible way to die. I don't believe in the death penalty, but, if I did, I couldn't envisage inflicting it in such a horrifying manner. Maybe we forget just how horrible crucifixion is because, on the one hand, it is something we never see, but, on the other hand, we are so familiar with the concept. We are always mentioning it in Church. A cross is for many people an item of jewellery. So we don't realise just what Jesus endured for us and neither do we consider what a tremendous thing Paul is saying when he says that we have been crucified with Christ. The first couple of questions at the head of today's study represent the enormity of the task of bringing in the Kingdom of God. Christ's crucifixion is God's answer. Our crucifixion with Him enrols us in His battle to overcome evil with good and the commitment required of us is no less than the commitment which He made to us.

This vexing question of church discipline again. Every one of us, as an individual, stands before God in Christ and every one of us is personally responsible to Him. All we Christians have the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is our own personal mediator and advocate with the Father. I am sure that all the readers of these notes have personal access to their own Bible in a language they can understand. Very few readers of these notes will be unable to come to Church to make their own personal communion and those who can't have only to ask for communion at home. However, we are not alone with God. We are the Body of Christ. We are members of one another. We are responsible for bearing one another's burdens and for building one another up into the full stature of Christ. I used the rather oldfashioned sounding phrase making our own communion because I wanted to emphasise our personal relationship with God and our personal responsibility to Him. However, the reason the phrase sounds oldfashioned is that we have largely stopped using it as it can convey the image of a large church building with a handful of people sitting as far away from one another as possible, hardly taking any notice of one another, coming up separately to kneel at the altar rail to receive the consecrated bread and wine. That is not what communion means. We are members of one another. It therefore follows that we care enough about one another to put one another right when we go wrong, remembering Paul's warning about the need for humility. It should also be that the church leadership (while certainly not having a monopoly on the spiritual) ought to be spiritual enough to take a lead in imposing discipline. This becomes very difficult in congregations which will not accept authority and are not agreed on the sources of authority (the Word and the Holy Spirit), but rather think that everyone's opinion is as good as anyone else's and that matters can be decided by everyone voting for what they want.

13th December

Galatians 6 vv 2-5

The law of Christ is love. If we love one another, we support one another, we help one another, we build up one another. By their fruits shall ye know them. It is not a matter of our reputation or standing in the community that matters, certainly not the claims we make for ourselves (possibly deceiving ourselves in the process). It is about how we live, for which we are all individually answerable to God.

14th December How should preachers live? Some people think the best model is the man who has another job which pays his wages and then he does not have to be a burden on the Church. Paul was like that. He earned his living as a tentmaker. In the C21 Church of England, such ministers are called Self Supporting Ministers. More often, however, it has been thought that ordained ministry and various kinds of missionary and pastoral work are full time occupations which don't leave the minister time to earn a living by doing another job. Paul seems to expect this model to be the norm and that the Christian congregation should normally support its ordained ministers, missionaries, etc.. In the Church of England we have been cushioned by the generosity of rich people in earlier generations who endowed the Church with money or land. There is therefore no provision in the 1662 prayer book for taking a collection during services except Holy Communion, when the money was to be used to provide for the poor. The clergy were expected to live off their glebe and endowments and the buildings were maintained by an arcane mixture of voluntary labour, donations and various legal obligations falling on certain individuals or institutions. This inheritance (largely administered by the Church Commissioners) is nothing like sufficient what with centuries of inflation and (in many places) it never was. So, one way or another, we have to support our clergy from the giving of Christian people. I suppose the question they have to ask themselves are whether we are worth it? If not, do we envisage part time ministers, unpaid ministers or ministers shared with other churches? Would they be better or worse at offering pastoral care, leading worship, preaching the Gospel and leading the Church's mission in the community?

15th December

Galatians 6 vv 7&8

God is not mocked.

How much does God matter? Is faith simply a crutch to support our living in this world? Is God an optional extra or a last resort? Does it make any difference to Him what sort of people we are and how we live our lives? Is religion like a ticket to heaven, to be kept in a back pocket or left on one side until we're ready to go there? If God is, He is all in all. He must either be everything to us or nothing to us. There is no room for half-heartedness, for a lukewarm religion. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he reap.

Sometimes we do get discouraged, but we need to persevere. If we are doing God's work, it will bear fruit, even if we don't see it ourselves. It is worth sharing the Gospel with unresponsive people, continuing to pray even when we can't see any possibility of improvement in a situation, if it is God's Will, working away in a church and community which doesn't appear to us to be growing or even to have a future. Always do good, while we can. Start at home, with the family, the household of faith. Charity begins at home. But it doesn't stop there. It flows out to embrace the whole world, just as the love intrinsic in the Holy Trinity flows out to encompass the entire cosmos.

17th December Galatians 6 v11 How do we know the truth? They shall be all taught of God (John 6⁴⁵). But how do recognise which teaching is of God and which is false? Paul has had much to say in this epistle about how his authority has come from God. Christ revealed Himself to Paul on the Road to Damascus. As we read the NT, we see how Jesus was with Paul and made Himself known to Paul throughout his ministry as an apostle. Paul understands what Jesus reveals to Him in the light of the Scriptures and he understands the Scriptures in the Light of Christ. So that the Galatians will know for certain that this letter comes from Paul and that therefore it has his authority, the authority with which Jesus endued him, Paul points out that it is in his own handwriting (probably just these last verses, with a scribe having taken the rest down). Incidentally, some people think Paul wrote large letters because he had poor eyesight, but that is just conjecture. What is important is the balance between our own personal understanding of God's revelation of Himself to us (which is genuine if we are Christians, but will not be made perfect till we get to heaven and know as we are known {I Corinthians 13¹²}), what we are taught in church and elsewhere, what we read in the Bible and whatever else purports to teach us the truth. Of these, the Bible is the surest guide. We need to know what the Bible teaches, which we can only do if we read it frequently. The marvellous thing about the Bible is that there is always more. Even when we reread familiar passages, God speaks to us in new ways. It is also true that we must respect the Bible. There is a tendency just to reject or ignore difficult passages and teaching that doesn't fit very well with C21 western ideas. That would ultimately destroy the Church.

18th December

The preachers who had misled the Galatians by opposing Paul were in fact wrong. Had they been right, life would have been easier because the Jews would have been less likely to persecute the Christians and the Romans would probably not have bothered to persecute the Church, thinking that Christianity was just another Jewish sect and therefore tolerated under Roman Law. What they taught made sense to people. It was more in tune with the zeitgeist. It appeared to be more relevant. Superficially a Gospel of you get what you deserve is much more attractive than one which says you depend entirely on the mercy of God. You don't have to admit that you are a helpless, hopeless sinner. You can feel superior to other people who don't seem to live up to your standards. You can use the stick of possible punishment and the carrot of possible reward as a means to get people to conform to what you believe to be the right way to live. Time and again in the Bible, we encounter false prophets who are much more popular than true prophets because they tell the people what they want to hear. If we in the Church today set aside those aspects of biblical teaching which we find uncongenial and simply tell people what they want to hear – that C21 western culture is OK and that God is on their side – we let down badly people outside the Church and really there is very little reason for the Church to exist. If we don't live out God's Truth, but simply model ourselves on what the world regards as acceptable, what use are we to God or to the world? So we need to study the Word at the greatest possible death and consider its message for the world today. That is the Truth by which the Church must live and which Christians must proclaim to the world in word and deed.

19th December

Galatians 6 v14

Hymns or choruses? Or worship songs? Ancient or modern? What really matters is that the words we use in worship accord with the Word of God manifest in Scripture, with the Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ. These words of Paul are taken up in Isaac Watts' great hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross", which is so well known. Doesn't it sum up what it is to be a Christian? God loves me so much that He died for me while I was yet a sinner. Because of His ineffable love poured out on the Cross for me, I am His and He is mine for ever. I owe everything to Him and it is my duty and my joy to offer up my life as a sacrifice of praise.

Galatians 6 v17

21st December (BCP St Thomas' Day)

could employ.

My puppy, Tommy, won't let any reference to Thomas pass unnoticed! Apart from that, I was interested to notice that we've got to the verse where Paul says he has the marks of the Lord Jesus. Some people think these were the stigmata. Some people (notably S Francis of Assisi) develop marks where Christ was wounded on the Cross. It was when doubting Thomas saw the wounds of the risen Jesus that he believed and exclaimed," My Lord and my God!" Jesus said, "Because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed." Paul may or may not have had the stigmata. He certainly bore the marks of the Lord Jesus in modelling his life on that of Christ. Through Paul many have believed, and, believing, have life through His Name. Paul invites

22nd December

Christians, "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ." (I

Corinthians 11¹) That would be the most effective kind of evangelism we

Galatians 6¹⁸ I do sometimes get cross and tired and sometimes when I am cross or tired I'm not as attentive as I ought to be to my prayers or to the message of the Bible. It is important to worship even when we don't feel like it. It is a duty to owe to God. It is something we do on behalf of other people. If we only pray when we feel like it, we shall pray less and less often till we hardly think about God at all. So while it's better to worship full of joy, it's still right to persevere when we aren't full of joy. Morning and Evening Prayer both finish with the grace (the longer version with which Paul finishes II Corinthians rather than the version here). So, sometimes if I have been cross and tired saving my prayers in Church, I find myself very much helped as I walk down the path home by these wonderful words.

23rd December

Isaiah 57 vv 1-21 Two days to Christmas! Now we've finished Galatians, we'll take a look at some of the daily readings appointed for the rest of the year. God so loved the world that he sent his only-begotten Son. We human beings have made a terrible mess of things. Even the people of Israel, despite having Moses and the prophets, had really fouled things up. Violence, dishonesty, greed, selfishness, indifference to the plight of other people, disfigured the land of Israel and disfigure the face of the whole earth. The reason is that men and women who do not acknowledge the fatherhood of God cannot either recognise the brotherhood of man. It is our ignorance of God, our lack of belief in Him, our propensity to worship idols that is at the root of all the troubles which beset this world. Our relationship with God ought to be like what the relationship ought to be between man and wife – the offering of self in unconditional love. Instead, human beings are like adulterers, unfaithful to the one true God, offering our lives up to the false gods of materialism, worshipping the works of our own hands, rather than the One Who made us. So there is a dreadful judgment to look forward to. God is just. God is not mocked. The cry of the oppressed penetrates to the Throne of Grace. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked. And yet, there is mercy. I will not contend for ever, neither will I always be wroth...Peace, peace to him that is far off, and to him that is near, saith the LORD; and I will heal him. The Christmas message – healing and peace God's gift to an

24th December (Christmas Eve)

evil and suffering world.

Isaiah 59 vv 1-21

People think I'm a bit of a pain because every year I try to resist the tendency for Christmas to swallow up Advent. Why not hold our Christmas parties throughout December? Why not put up the Christmas decorations? Comfort and joy must be good things. The sooner Christmas comes, the better. But why Christmas? Why is Christmas Good News? Why celebrate the Birth of the Saviour? Because the world needs a Saviour. We saw vesterday and we see gain today that the world of humanity has rejected God and the consequence is evil and all the suffering which follows from it, that we are helpless to help ourselves. We are under judgment. That is why we need a Saviour. Forget the four last things of Advent, judgment, death, hell and heaven, and there is no need for Christmas. It's just an excuse to eat, drink and be merry.

I wish it could be Christmas every day.

Well, it can. How can I say that when I've just been moaning about treating the first 24 days of December as though they were all Christmas day? Actually, it's just because I take the Advent theme of the four last things, judgment, death, hell and heaven, seriously, that I can rejoice in a Christmas which fills time and eternity. It is only when you treat the darkness seriously that you truly value the light. Christmas isn't forgetting the world's troubles and your own personal troubles while you enjoy a shallow few weeks in a haze of eating, drinking and shopping, only to go back to humdrum misery in the new year. Christmas deals with our troubles. God so loved the world. The light shines in the darkness. The Gospel is proclaimed. God is doing what we cannot do. He is redeeming the cosmos. He is setting us free from sin and the fear of death. Jesus is God's gift to us. For by grace are ye saved through faith. This is what we are celebrating, our freedom in Christ. We shall live in this freedom eternally. We have the Spirit of the Risen Christ. The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy and peace. It is Christmas for Christians every day. Our calling is to love generously, to give freely every day, to give as we have received. It is more blessed to give than to receive. It is Christmas every day for those who walk with the Lord.

26th December (S Stephen)

Genesis 4 vv 1-10

The death of the first Christian martyr and the murder of Abel by Cain might seem like something of a comedown the day after we celebrate the Birth of Jesus. Not so much a comedown (at least in my opinion) as going to the Boxing Day sales. Talk about Christmas making no lasting impression! Can't people think of anything better to do than shopping? Going to Church? Spending time with friends and family? Even spending time alone, maybe enjoying a walk or a good book, film or music? The shallow Christmas which began at the end of December has now been wrung out, exploited for commercial gain and packed up for another year. Some people even take down their decorations! But Abel's murder reminds us of what happens when human beings turn their backs on God. Stephen's martyrdom reminds us of the price of being on God's side as He deals with sin, the world and the devil, and it also reminds us of the reward. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God.

27th December (S John the Evangelist)

Moses was specially privileged in his relationship with God. It speaks of him seeing God, face to face, though later on it says that even Moses did not see God in all His fulness. Elsewhere, it says that when Moses came out of the presence of God, his face shone. He had to put on a veil. Don't we sometimes come out of church with our hearts uplifted and our faces shining? I know I do, though not always. I am only human and sometimes things just get on top of me. St Paul (II Corinthians 3) writes about the veil being taken away in Christ. When we turn to the Lord the veil is taken away. The Lord is the Spirit. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. Beholding the Lord, we ourselves are changed from glory into glory – a theme taken up in those wonderful hymns "Love divine" and "Shine Jesus Shine."

As we gaze on Your kingly brightness, so our faces display Your likeness, Ever changing from glory to glory, mirrored here may our lives tell your story, Shine on me, shine on me.

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.

28th December (Holy Innocents)

Jeremiah 31 vv 1-17

In the story of Herod's murder of the baby boys in Bethlehem, S Matthew quotes this passage as a prophecy of the coming of the Messiah. In its original context, it refers to the time when the Babylonians invaded the Holy Land. Jerusalem was besieged and eventually taken. Surrounding villages, such as Bethlehem, were in the war zone. It isn't hard to think of such towns and villages in the world today, where mothers weep for the children they have lost. The story looks back to Pharaoh's order to kill the Hebrew boy babies. This wicked world desperately needs a Saviour. Jeremiah prophesies that the Lord will redeem His people. After the fall of Jerusalem, the exile in Babylon, but the exiles will return and it will be like the Exodus all over again. God will bring His people home. This becomes a prophecy of the coming of Jesus. God's people are the faithful of every nation. Their home is in heaven. Jesus is the Saviour Who redeems us and brings us home. But in all the comfort and joy of Christmas, the Birth of the Redeemer, never forget why the world so desperately needs a Saviour. Without Him we are lost in sin

Isaiah has sometimes been called the fifth gospel. There is so much Good News in it, Good News for all nations, fulfilled in the coming of Christ. If you read Luke 4, you will see that, right at the beginning of His ministry, just after He had been baptised by John and tempted by the devil in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, Jesus went into the synagogue at Nazareth, read the first few verses of this chapter and explained that they were that day fulfilled in Him. God promises so much: peace, healing, freedom, good news for the poor. This is life in all its fulness, joy in abundance. All God's promises are fulfilled in Jesus. This is all ours by grace through faith. Our commission is to share this Good News with the world which God so loved. There is a sting in the tail, however. The people of Nazareth refused to believe Jesus. They even tried to kill Him. We are warned that the people of the world will treat Christ's people in the same way that they treated Him. In faithfulness to Christ, we experience something of heaven on earth, but that doesn't mean that our earthly lives will necessarily be easy. It does mean that He is with us in everything. We can be thankful in all things if not for all things. If we are faithful, we shall find that the Lord does add to our number those whom He is calling.

December 30th Isaiah 63 vv 1-19

The first six verses are difficult. Christians have always taken them to refer to Jesus, but, in their original context, they appear to refer to a mighty warrior, bloody with the blood of his vanquished foes. Unless we are pacifists, we probably do value military heroes who fight for the right with weapons of war and liberate the oppressed by conquering the oppressors. We celebrate victory in two terrible world wars. Yet we also feel that this is not how things are meant to be. There must be a better way. And so we come to Jesus. Insofar as these verses refer to Jesus, the Blood which dyes His garments is His own Blood. His victory is the offering of Himself in love. He overcomes death by submitting to death.

Who is this that comes from far, With his garments dipped in blood, Strong, triumphant traveller-- Is he man, or is he God?

I that reign in righteousness, Son of God and man I am;

Mighty to redeem your race, Jesus is your Saviour's name.

The Bible begins with the story of God and the whole human race. God creates us in His own image. We rebel and are cast out of the Garden of Eden. We go through the Flood. We are divided into nations following the destruction of the Tower of Babel. After that, the focus narrows to Abraham and his family, then Isaac rather than Ishmael and Jacob rather than Esau. Israel divides into northern and southern kingdoms and the northern effectively ceases to exist. The southern kingdom (Judah) is reduced to a faithful remnant. Finally the focus is on One – on Jesus. Jesus fulfils God's plan for humanity, freely accepting for Himself as a man perfect obedience to God's Will. From Him flows out the eternal Gospel which is to be preached to all nations, to the whole human race. By grace through faith, believers everywhere, of every race and language, of every people and nation, are adopted as the children of God, coheirs with Christ, His Body and His Bride, the Temple of the Holy Ghost. The story of history is the story of God's faithfulness and human faithlessness. Human faithlessness brings misery and pain. Justly, humanity is condemned. God's faithfulness brings redemption, forgiveness, atonement, life and love and eternal joy. All that is required of us is faith. Still many rebel against God and refuse to hear His Word, but, as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them who believe on his name. On this last day of the year, we reflect on the progression of time, the way history works out. We are that much nearer the Kingdom of God than when we first believed. Still God, in His mercy, gives time for men and women to repent. What will the coming year bring? We are God's stewards. Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.

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 for ever 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!