

The Gospel According to St Matthew



Bible Notes

October – December 2007

50p

October 1st

Matthew 1 vv 1-17

It is not possible to teach history without bias. If you confine yourself to dates, to what happened when and where, your bias still comes out in your choice of what to you is significant – the Crusades or World War II, the Communist Manifesto or Cecil Rhode’s African adventures. Henry Ford said that history was bunk and many people feel that it is a waste of time learning about the past. Others, however, believe that history is important. Our history explains why we are the people we are. When I was at school, we were taught a generally optimistic view of British History. There were serious blots like the Slave Trade and the treatment of workers in the Industrial Revolution, but, generally speaking, the tendency of our island story was onwards and upwards. Earlier generations had learnt stories of the great men (especially the Englishmen) who had apparently changed the world. The generation after mine, facing up to post-colonial guilt and proper concerns about downtrodden minorities, were given a picture of history which played up the previously played down role of women and people of other races and which highlighted the exploitation of the natives of our colonies and the working class at home. The older view had stressed the benefits to poor and primitive people brought by trade, industrialisation and the Christian Gospel. The newer view confessed the damage done to other peoples’ cultures and environments – sometimes taking an excessively romantic view of unspoilt savages living in peaceful harmony with nature and their fellow human beings before the white man “interfered”. Unless teachers are misinformed or deliberately deceiving, there will be truth in any portrayal of the past, but no one version of events will be the whole truth. If we are to learn history’s lessons we have to be well-informed and open minded. Each “school” will have a different and valid perspective. The History of Israel, as told in the Old Testament, relates what happens in history to God and his dealings with the human race. It is one of the tasks of the New Testament to demonstrate that Jesus is the key to God’s plan for the whole of humanity and that means demonstrating, as St Matthew does here, how Jesus’ story fits into the much older story of what God has revealed to Moses and the prophets.

October 2nd

Matthew 1 vv 18-25

Everybody loves the Infants School nativity play. Unfortunately, however, there is a tendency to drift from the script as provided by the New Testament. A part has to be found for every child – sometimes leading to a whole menagerie of creatures most unlikely to have been present in C1 Bethlehem. Children must not be asked to read what they do not understand, nor to attempt to understand what they might find difficult. As far as possible, people who are not religious or who belong to other faiths must not be offended. Anything alarming is best left out. Children must not be disturbed or forced to confront unpleasantness. So we are apt to lose much of what the Gospel writers thought was important about the story. Here Matthew emphasises that the events surrounding the Birth of Jesus were in accordance with prophecy. This birth is God's plan, not an accident of history. An open minded seeker after truth ought to recognise that this child is God's Messiah.

October 3rd

Matthew 2 vv 1-23

What do we see here? We see again that Jesus' birth fits in with prophecy, it is the fulfilment of the Sacred History to which the Old Testament bears witness. Honest seekers of the truth find Him. Those who find Him include gentiles, not just those of Abraham's bloodline, who had had all the advantages of a proper religious upbringing. He is the redeemer but a redeemer is very much needed. This is a world in which tyrants massacre infants and a holy family are forced to become refugees. If we teach those people who only come to church at Christmas an escapist saccharine Gospel in which Jesus inhabits an imaginary world of sugar and spice and all things nice, we cannot be surprised that they see no point in Christian faith as a response to the world's needs and to their own problems. Jesus is not Father Christmas for adults who refuse to grow up and He should not be portrayed as such even to children.

October 4th

Matthew 3 vv 1-6

John the Baptist is the last in the line of Old Testament prophets. His preaching is prophesied and he preaches as a prophet. The message is serious and those who reject it are doomed. Our relationship with God is not a pastime; it is life or death.

October 5th

Matthew 3 vv 7-12

Pharisees are not bad people! They go to synagogue. They read the Bible. They are not afraid to pray in public. They try to lead decent lives. They dole out alms to the poor. They even give a tenth of their income back to God. We could do with a lot more Pharisees in our own congregations.

Or could we? Could I really welcome Pharisees into a church dedicated to St John the Baptist? Would our patron be turning over in his grave? But what is wrong with these God-fearing, church-going, highly respectable individuals?

They have robbed the Gospel of its power. They have domesticated God. They have worked out the extent of their obligations to Him. They know that they are better than a lot of other people and that, they think, is good enough, more than enough. They are curious about a powerful preacher who can still draw a crowd, but they are not going to change the way they live. They are not going to accept the implications of the biblical text they repeat every day: "Hear O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." They cannot comprehend that to love your neighbour as yourself is not to limit yourself to caring for members of your own community, but an open-ended commitment to the whole of the human race. They have robbed the Gospel of its power.

October 6th

Matthew 3 vv 13-17

John was the warm up artist. Now the Star comes on stage. This is the moment we have been waiting for since the dawn of time. Note, nevertheless, that He treats John with respect. Respect is vital to all human relationships. He also does what He tells us to do; He is baptized. God declares Him to be His Son and gives Him the Holy Spirit, just as He will to all those who come in faith to be baptized in Christ's Name. We are the children of God and He has given us the Spirit by Whom we call God Abba, Father.

October 7th

Matthew 4 vv 1-11

In many ways the temptations are about trust. Does Jesus trust God? Faith is all very well, but surely it is more important to eat than to pray. We're trying to do God's Work; why don't we see more success? Perhaps there isn't a God or perhaps He doesn't care. Think what you could do if you had power and money. You could do so much good if you were rich and powerful. Surely the end justifies the means and it won't hurt to compromise with sin, the world and the devil in order to get where you want to be. Those who invariably play by God's rules miss out on so much in life. Can you really say that a person who goes to church, prays and tries to live by what the Bible teaches is any happier, any more useful, any more fulfilled or even any more blessed, than a person who plays by the world's rules? Do you trust God enough to believe that the way the Bible teaches is the only way really to live – that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life?

October 8th

Matthew 4 vv 12-17

Three things. Jesus fulfils prophecy. What He is doing is what God always meant to happen. The message of Jesus is Good News. It is light in the darkness. The world needs Jesus, because Jesus really is the answer to our problems. It is serious. If we want to follow Jesus, we have to repent. We have to prepared to let Him turn our lives around.

October 9th

Matthew 4 vv 18-25

Let's take this at its most basic level. If Jesus said to you, "Stop whatever you are doing in your life and come and work with me," what would you say? There is plenty of need out there still, as there was when Jesus taught and preached, healed and exorcised all those years ago in Roman Palestine. Are we with Jesus or against Him? Or haven't we quite made up our minds?

October 10th

Matthew 5 vv 1-12

This is why the poor old Pharisees come in for so much criticism. They are good, religious people, but the thing is that the love of God is so limitless that it turns our accepted values upside down. What is good is displaced by what is perfect. We have to leave beyond our notions of what is good if we are to have any hope of enjoying the best.

October 11th

Matthew 5 vv 13-16

You want to be like Simon and Andrew and James and John and not like the Pharisees? Great. You will be the salt of the earth. You will be (like Jesus) lights of the world. You will be part of God's plan to transform this wicked world into the Kingdom of our God and His Christ. We need people like you. But you had better not turn out to be a Pharisee in apostle's clothing: a half-hearted believer; denying the power of the Gospel; limiting its demands on you, because you do not trust God for your life. Salt with no savour might as well be chucked out. What's the use of light which is hidden? It is a contradiction in terms. A true disciple of Jesus is a force to be reckoned with because he is filled with the transforming power of the life-giving Holy Spirit, but, if he tries to limit that power because he does not want to be transformed himself into a Christ-like person, capable of giving himself in love for the needs of the world, then he is no better than a Pharisee.

October 12th

Matthew 5 vv 17-48

The early Christians were accused of undermining the Law God had given to Moses (Torah). Jesus condemned the way its minutiae were applied to justify the self-righteous and to exclude others from the commonwealth of Israel and Paul demonstrated that the whole idea of self-justification before God was absurd. So Christians found themselves accused of lawlessness. In fact, to be baptized in Christ, to be the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, implies an openness to the Love of God which both transcends and fulfils the Law's requirements, which even the Pharisees admitted were summed up in the twin commandments to love God and neighbour. To be a Christian means to fulfil the Law more fully than any Pharisee ever could. To fulfil the Law is to sacrifice self on the altar of love, as Jesus Himself did, and as Christians do, in Him and with Him and through Him and for Him.

October 13th

Matthew 6 vv 1-18

Sometimes people ask me if I like to be complimented on a good sermon or a lovely service. The honest answer is "yes", but it ought not to be. The point of leading worship is to glorify God and to help other people to do so too. The point of preaching is to proclaim the Word of God, whether people like it or not. Both leading worship and preaching

ought to build up a Christian congregation (and its individual members) into the full stature of the Body of Christ. Often this means encouraging and comforting people, but it also means challenging and sometimes offending them too. It's what Jesus did! You and I, as Christians, ought to do what is right irrespective of what people think of us. We do not seek to be admired, neither do we go out of our way to be unpopular. We try to do what is right in order to please God and we are pleased if that pleases other people as well, but it makes no difference if it does not. We do what is right simply because it is right.

And I wonder whether this can cause problems in these days of "accountability". Clergy are reviewed every couple of years and churchwardens (representing the congregation) are asked to comment. Some parishes have worship or pastoral committees to plan services etc. All this can be very helpful. Feedback is useful in that it helps one to know whether one is doing the right thing. Involving more people means bringing more minds to bear on the question of what we ought (as clergy or as congregations) to be doing. On the other hand, all this "accountability" has the potential for undermining God's work. People think that they are being asked whether their vicar is popular, rather than whether he is being faithful to God. People can think that the point of a worship committee is to secure the service they want rather than the services God wants. We can obviously learn a lot from the way other organisations are run, but we must not lose sight of the fact that the Church is different. We are not a commercial organisation looking to make a profit. We are not a social club for like-minded people. We are not even primarily a philanthropic society. We are the Body of Christ.

October 14th

Matthew 6 vv 19-34

So how far will you go? Will you leave the world behind and follow Jesus? Will you join Him in proclaiming Good News to the poor, freeing the downtrodden, healing the broken, resisting the over mighty and reconciling the world to God? Or are you more worried about the mortgage and the children's education, living healthily, arranging a pension, the respect of your neighbours, getting on in the world? Or can you trust God for all those things? Are you for Jesus or against Him?

October 15th

Matthew 7 vv 1-6

It is only too easy to look round at other people and to think where they are relative to us? We may look down on people. We may feel complacent about ourselves because we are sure we are better than a lot of people. On the other hand, we might admire other people, even be envious of them. All this is beside the point. Other people are answerable to God, not to us. Only He knows what is really going on in their hearts. We need to get on with our relationship with God and stop comparing ourselves with other people. And there is no point in pushing our faith on those who are absolutely determined to reject us.

October 16th

Matthew 7 vv 7-20

God does respond to those who sincerely seek Him. We know how to treat our children. God knows how to treat us. If we are in Christ, we treat other people the way Christ treats them – with generous love. There are plenty of false prophets peddling their own brand of religion, but we can recognise true religion by its outcome. How do the people who preach these sermons actually behave? The Pharisees said all the right things. The problem was that they did not do them. The Way to God is Jesus and His love is open to all, but we are told that there are few who find the Way. We tend to equate success in the church with large numbers, but it is not necessarily so. False prophets can attract large crowds by telling people what they want to hear rather than what God wants them to hear. True prophets are quite often despised and ignored. Of course some congregations are small because their priest is useless and occasionally true prophets (like Peter on the Day of Pentecost) attract large crowds. What matters primarily, however, is that the sermon is the Word of God - whether the people will hear or whether they will forbear.

October 17th

Matthew 7 vv 21-29

It's not a matter of calling yourself a Christian; it is being a Christian. The people we are depends on our relationship with God and our relationship with God depends on trusting Him. We seek these words often enough. Do we really just Jesus enough to live by His teaching?

October 18th

Matthew 8 vv 1-17

Miracles are signs of the Kingdom. Jesus heals. He forgives. He reconciles. He overcomes all the powers of evil. So He touches the leper and makes him well. He cures a Roman centurion's servant. A Roman with faith will receive grace from God; a supposedly pious member of the chosen people will not if he has no faith. We still use a version of the centurion's words when we come to Communion.

“Lord I am not worthy to receive you,
but only say the word and I shall be healed.”

It is a great privilege that Jesus comes to be our guest in the Holy Communion, not something which we deserve or is ours by right, and when He comes, He comes with healing grace. How can people be so casual about coming to Communion?

October 19th

Matthew 8 vv 18-27

You either follow Jesus or you don't. There are no “ifs”, “buts” or “maybe later”. The time to hear His Voice is now. The time to say “Yes” to Jesus is now, to follow Him and to follow Him all the way. The Church is a boat, the Ark of Salvation. It has certainly been through some storms and, no doubt, will go through many more. The sailors (Surely there are no passengers!) may well get shaken up and terrified out of their wits, but they ought to have more faith. Jesus is with them in the Ark. There is nothing to fear either for themselves or for the Church. It will not sink.

October 20th

Matthew 8 vv 28-34

Jesus overcomes the terrible evil which has taken hold of these two unfortunate men. He shows His compassion for them in the terrible circumstances in which He finds them. He shows His authority even over dark, spiritual forces. He shows that He can, with Yahweh the God of Israel, defeat evil and heal body, mind and spirit in gentile territory as well as among the chosen people. And yet they ask Him to leave. People would rather suffer sin and its consequences than take the risk of asking Jesus into their lives and allowing Him to transform them, to lift them up out of the pit, to wash them clean of the mire, to lighten the darkness of their lives and to make them citizens of the Kingdom of God. They prefer the squalor they know to the cleansing He brings.

October 21st

Matthew 9 vv 1-8

I forget who said “Your God is too small,” but it is inevitably true. We just cannot comprehend the greatness of God. He is infinitely greater than our comprehension. This is why I find it hard to understand the half-hearted Christian and yet we all suffer from a degree of half-heartedness. If God is what we believe Him to be, then our relationship with Him determines our attitude to everything else. God fills our lives. If, however, on the other hand, there is no God, then religion is pointless and we might as well close the churches.

What I have just written would be equally true for Moslems and Jews and probably for believers in any of the world’s great religions. Our faith goes further, however. What God is is what Jesus is.

October 22nd

Matthew 9 vv 9-17

When I lived in London as a student, I often travelled some distance to church on Sundays. You could usually tell who else was on their way to church (and even sometimes the type of church they were going to) by the way they dressed and the sort of people they were. Some churches specialise in coloured people. Some are society churches. Some are mostly students or young families. Quite a lot of C of E churches are mainly middle class and a lot appear to cater largely for the elderly. In terms of numbers, C of E churches flourish in the prosperous suburbs. In terms of the proportion of the population we reach, we probably do best in villages.

So a church congregation acquires a certain social identity. People like us feel comfortable with us and we feel comfortable in welcoming them. If we are successful in attracting large numbers, we feel like a successful church and may not even notice that we are not reaching whole sections of the community we belong to. We may be afraid to rock the boat, to alienate what support we have got, by opening up to people we would not normally mix with socially. But Jesus called Matthew and He told the existing godly (the disciples of John and the Pharisees) that they would need radically to change their ideas if they wanted to be part of what He was doing.

October 23rd

Matthew 9 vv 18-38

Probably the worst thing that can happen to you is to lose a child as Jairus did, though other characters in this passage were in a bad way too. The woman had had this illness twelve years and it not only weakened her, but also restricted her life because she could not go out and mix with people socially. Two men were blind and one was dumb. Jesus shows compassion to all of them. He shows that He can heal and even raise the dead. Does it help us to believe that He loves us and could heal us and even resurrect our dead loved ones even when He does not? Can we believe that He loves us whatever happens and trust that what happens is in fact for the best? Can we pray in this faith? Certainly there is great need out there and Jesus needs plenty of people working with Him to meet the needs. Do we pray for “labourers” and we willing to become the answer to our prayers?

October 24th

Matthew 10 vv 1-15

Jesus gives these men a job to do. In fact this is the beginning of the Church’s mission to the world, to continue the work which the Father sent Jesus to do, to reconcile the world to God and to inaugurate His Kingdom of justice and peace. It is a daunting task. They will meet opposition as well as acceptance. Their task is to proclaim the message. The hearers are free to choose whether they receive the Word or reject Him, but there will be consequences to their choice. The apostles are not to take much in the way of worldly provisions, but note this. Jesus supplies them with everything they need in order to achieve the task He has given them.

Maybe we put the cart before the horse in our churches. Meetings often suggest that our first priority is to maintain our buildings, pay the clergy and equip ourselves with the things we think we need. We try very hard to make sure that we have enough “gold and silver”, spare coats and shoes and stout sticks for the journey. We spend 95% of our time at PCC on these sort of things. We spend nearly 100% of our money on them. And then we try to squeeze a bit more for charities and missions. I wonder what would happen if we did things the other way round. Suppose we spent 95% of our time and 95% of our money on worship, spreading the Good News, caring for the poor and sick and reforming

civil society. I think we would feel a lot better about ourselves. I think we would achieve much more of what Jesus wants us to do. And I think we would find either that the buildings and the bills would take care of themselves or that we didn't really need them anyway.

October 25th

Matthew 10 vv 16-39

What I said yesterday is not to say that we would find life easy if we were more faithful to Jesus. He demands our lives, our souls, our alls. Faithfulness to Jesus may well bring us into conflict with the world at large and sometimes with religious people and sometimes even with our own families. Which do we decide when we find that our duty to Jesus conflicts with what we need to do to get on in the world, or with people in the church who have lost the plot, or – hardest of all – with the demands of our own families? Jesus does not promise that it will be easy, but He does promise that God is looking after us.

October 26th

Matthew 10 vv 40-42

What all this is about is opening doors. No-one can be fulfilled as a human being without being in love with God. We are made to be the children of God. Our eternal life depends on knowing Him. Without God human lives are stunted and doomed ultimately to die. God does not desire the death of a sinner, but rather that he should repent and live. Yet, how can they hear the Word without a preacher. And who else is going to spread the Word if not you and I, who already know Him?

October 27th

Matthew 11 vv 1-19

People need God, but they will not acknowledge that need. It is as if they were blinded both to their need and to the only Way by Whom that need can be satisfied. So they eat, drink and store up possessions. They turn to drugs, sex and rock & roll. They follow religions and "spiritualities" from which the power is drained by an unwillingness to surrender the self to God. When someone does offer them the Word of Life they refuse to listen, justifying their refusal on the grounds that the preacher is not what they expect of a man of God. It doesn't matter whether he is a party pooper or a party animal. Any excuse will do for not listening to what God is trying to say to them.

October 28th

Matthew 11 vv 20-30

So does it make any difference whether or not people accept Jesus? We have got used to the idea of being non-judgmental. The élite in our world do not believe that moral standards are absolute. They do not believe that individuals are ultimately responsible for their actions “It is society or dysfunctional families which turn innocent babies into people who act antisocially.” It follows that wrong-doers need understanding, not punishment. Religion is a matter of opinion. Our world finds it unthinkable that a person’s relationship (or lack of relationship) with God could have eternal significance. We tend to assume that, if there is a Heaven, people will get there unless they are really, really bad and that certainly, whether or not they were Christians, whether or not they were baptised, whether or not they come to Church, will make no difference at all. An unbiased reading of the Bible suggests to me that this view is unjustifiably complacent. None of us deserves to spend eternity enfolded in the Love of God. The fact is that He loves us and the offer to spend eternity with Him is open to everyone, but it is a very costly gift. It was purchased by the Blood of Jesus shed at Calvary. Our eternal inheritance is not something which we ought to treat as cheap, not bother much about, and then expect to receive as by right when the time comes. It is a miracle if anyone makes it to Heaven. It is an astonishing act of grace that millions will make it. It is not something to take for granted, heedless of the Law’s demands for lives of self-sacrificial love, careless of any future judgment and indifferent to the pains He bore to secure our justification.

October 29th

Matthew 12 vv 1-13

Religion can cut us off from God. It can make us self-righteous. Then we feel we have no need of God. We feel that we are better than other people. We feel that God owes us. We can become very defensive of the status our religion gives. We can become very judgmental of other people. Thus observances like the Sabbath or church-going, giving up something in Lent, even the Bible and the Sacraments, all of which God gives to humanity for our benefit, get perverted. They become a burden, reasons for division, “holier than thou attitudes”, resentments. Being open to Jesus means being open to love. That is what these things are for. Anything else is perversion.

October 30th

Matthew 12 vv 14-21

A bruised reed shall he not break.”

These words were taken as the motto of the Prison Chaplaincy Service. Being gentle with people. Giving them every chance to come to Jesus. Making the most of every little effort they are able to make. Surely this should be the way we deal with everyone, not just convicts. Jesus longs for people to come to Him to have their hurts healed. We are His Hands, His feet. In union with Him, we reach out in love, open ourselves in love, open the Church in love. Whosoever will come, may come. Make it easy.

October 31st

Matthew 12 vv 22-37

One side or the other, Christ's side or Satan's. If Jesus (or anyone else) is doing good, what they are entitled to is our support, not nit-picking criticism and condemnation. If the forces of evil were divided, they would not be so strong. Equally, if Christians were united, how much stronger would the Church be to do good! To call good evil, to write off Jesus (or those helping Him in this or any age) as evil is to reject the Holy Spirit of God. We cannot ourselves be reconciled to God so long as we reject the Holy Spirit. If we are fearful that we may have committed this unforgiveable sin, we know that we have not. There is still some regard for God within ourselves. So let us repent of this spirit of faction, of self-righteousness which condemns those who sincerely seek to service God, but not in our way.

November 1st

Matthew 12 vv 38-50

Seeing signs. Recognising Jesus. Recognising God's authentic work. The Pharisees demand a miracle, but it is not a miracle they need. What establishes Christ's credentials is that He is God's Love in action. Notoriously wicked people in Israel's Old Testament history might have recognised Him. Now the religious leaders, even the Holy Family, don't see Who Jesus is or what His Word means for them and for the whole world. If you want to be open to Jesus, pray, read the Bible, faithfully attend Church, but always do so in a spirit of love. Without love we are nothing and our religion is meaningless. If we are open to the love of God, we can turn the world upside down.

November 2nd

Matthew 13 vv 1-23

So do you see the point of the parable? It is, after all, one of Jesus' best known. Great men and women have longed for the knowledge of God which Jesus brings. What a privilege it is for you and me to be His disciples. Hard-hearted rejecters of God are blinded, deafened; they cannot understand the parables. But what about us? Do we understand it? Jesus even explains it for us. So why then do so many people allow themselves to become unfruitful? Why do people who call themselves Christians turn their backs on the Church? Why do they allow themselves to get tangled up in the affairs of this world? Why do they back down in the face of persecution? Many of us learnt this story as children. Have we understood it even now?

November 3rd

Matthew 13 vv 24-43

The Kingdom of God inevitably grows. It is like a seed growing into a tree, yeast making the dough rise. It grows by the power of God. We don't have to worry whether the Church will grow, still less whether it will survive. The Church will grow because God will make it grow. The only question is whether we are working with Him or against Him. Individual churches may die if their members do not sufficiently love God and one another, if they are not committed to proclaiming God's Good News to the world, but the Church can no more die than Jesus could be confined to the tomb.

We have to be prepared to leave things to God. You and I must make sure that we are found faithful, but it is God Who judges other people. We are not to pass judgment on others, deciding which are wheat and which are tares. There will no doubt be some big surprises on the Day of Judgment. If we meddle in God's work of judging the Church and the world, we are likely to do a lot more harm than good.

November 4th

Matthew 13 vv 44-46

If we find God, what we find is infinitely more valuable than absolutely anything else in our lives, even than life itself.

November 5th

Matthew 13 vv 47-58

The Parable of the Net seems to repeat the message of the Wheat and Tares. It could be that the Net refers to the Church and the Wheat and Tares to the whole world. In both Church and world, there are good people and bad people and God will sort them out on the Day of Judgment. We are very blessed if we can attain to even a glimpse of the profound truth in Jesus' teaching. We will bring together what we learn new each day and what we already know from the Old & New Testaments, from Church History, from personal experience, from what we have learnt from family, teachers and friends. For His family and friends, their very familiarity with Him proved a stumbling block. If, like me, you are privileged to pray every day, to read the Bible regularly, to participate often in Holy Communion, don't let these things become over familiar and merely common place. They ought to be familiar, but they are also the most special things we do with our time; they are what links our time with Eternity.

November 6th

Matthew 14 vv 1-12

The Herod family's history could have been written by the scriptwriters of *Eastenders* or perhaps *Dallas*. They were nasty, ruthless, rich, powerful, controlled by their lusts, and capable of violence. They were also vain, insecure and superstitious. In fact they were very much like not only the soaps we watch but the celebrities, over whose lives we pore in the tabloid press. I suspect that their lifestyle is one which many people secretly envy. Why else is there so much public interest in what they get up to? However, the way such people lives does a huge amount of damage to other people and is eventually self-destructive. This is life lived without God, life with no spiritual dimension, life with no real meaning. It is the only real alternative to religion and that is why an increasingly irreligious nation is sinking into a pit of vice, violence, meaninglessness and self-destruction. Whose side are we on, the Lord's or the World's? There is no room for compromise. A worldly Christianity lets down the world by downplaying both the need for repentance and the possibility of atonement. Are we prepared to nail our colours to the Cross?

November 7th

Matthew 14 vv 13-21

This is another very well known story about Jesus. But what does it mean? Why is it one of the few stories to be told in all four Gospels? Is it about sharing? Is it about trusting the Lord to provide? Is it a declaration that Jesus is like (or greater than) Moses who fed the Israelites with manna in the Wilderness? Is it a foretaste of Heaven – the heavenly banquet, when we feast eternally with God? Does it hint at Holy Communion, the meal in which Jesus would make Himself known wherever and whenever Christians break bread together in His Name? This story could mean any or all of these things, but what does it mean to you and me?

November 8th

Matthew 14 vv 22-36

“O ye of little faith.”

This is one of those phrases from the Bible which has entered the language, used, often half jokingly, by people who possibly do not know where it comes from. What a comforting phrase it is! Yes, Peter and the other disciples should have done better. They ought to have had more faith. But Jesus didn't abandon them because they hadn't. He didn't let Peter down. I sometimes feel overwhelmed. I sometimes wonder what is all about, whether it is all worth it, doubt my faith, but Jesus never lets go of me. How ever feebly I reach out to Him, His strong Hand is still there for me, even if I cannot feel it some of the time. So, cling on there. Cast your care on Him; He cares for you.

November 9th

Matthew 15 vv 1-20

What do we argue about? Do we worry about the things which really matter? How much time do we spend on trivia? Do we judge other people on things that are not really very important at all? It is not really very difficult to understand what we are supposed to do. We are meant to love God with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves. Anything which undermines those two commandments is evil – even if it is dressed up as religion.

November 10th

Matthew 15 vv 21-31

The story of this woman and her daughter is difficult. Why did Jesus not heal her without all this argument? It could be because even He could not do everything while He walked this earth as a man. He began the worldwide mission by preaching to Israel. Maybe this trip into gentile territory was meant to be a holiday. Ought we to focus on doing what we are supposed to do or do we dissipate our energies, attempting to meet every request for help? That is a question very relevant to the clergy. Do we insist on days off and holidays? How serious does a crisis have to be to make us give up time allocated for rest and recreation? Maybe, however, He did not heal the girl at once in order to give His disciples an opportunity to realise the scope of their work, that it was to include people of all nations, not just Jews. Maybe Jesus argued in order to give the woman an opportunity to develop her understanding as she tried to answer His hard and apparently harsh remarks. There is a school of thought which says that nice people always give people what they want when they want it, but this school is wrong. Such a policy wears out the carers so that they become useless and it is not good for the cared for to be too easily indulged. Instead of developing character and self-sufficiency, they become long term dependents. People like clergy can feel so fulfilled by being needed that they fail to wean people off their need. This is called co-dependency and it is a pathological condition!

November 11th

Matthew 15 vv 32-39

Having fed 5,000 with five loaves, Jesus now feeds 4,000 with seven loaves. The disciples have still not realised what the story means. Today is Armistice Day. The lessons learnt from the First World War were supposed to teach humanity that such horrors must never be allowed to recur. The 89 years since have seen a second world war and the loss of millions of lives in other bloody conflicts in Europe, Asia, Africa, South America and involving troops from North America and Australasia. No inhabited part of the world has escaped the ravages of war since Armistice Day 1918. We are very slow to learn the lessons and yet the Truth is so obvious. *Love God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself.*

November 12th

Matthew 16 vv 1-12

A lot of smart people don't get the point of Jesus. The Pharisees knew about the technology of their own day, how they tried to predict the weather. They could not, however, discern the signs of the times. Who is Jesus? What does it mean that He has come into the world. We have some very clever people in our world who miss the point of Jesus altogether, the point that God so loved the world that He sent His only Son to the end that all who believe in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. Mind you, before we get too smug, let us not forget that those close to Him missed the point of what He was saying as well. Arguing about bread when they should have seen that the point was to have faith in God, only too typical of many church congregations!

November 13th

Matthew 16 vv 13-23

And now they do get the chance to say for themselves Who and what Jesus is. He is the Christ the Son of the living God. Try to take that in. The God Who made everything that is became a human being like you or me, for you and me. If you believe that, you must offer Him back your own life as a living sacrifice. If you don't believe that, there is no point in calling yourself a Christian.

Peter believed it and, on Peter's faith and on the faith of millions like Peter, Christ would build His Church, a church which cannot fail to survive, grow and achieve the tasks God has given it. Peter straightaway gets things badly wrong again, but that does not stop Jesus from using him. We get things badly wrong, but that does not prevent Jesus from using us. He will not let us fail if we try, how ever feebly. The only way we can fail totally is if we turn our backs on Him. He does respect our choice, but He sustains and encourages everyone who turns to Him, no matter how weakly. Christ's Church will prevail. The question is do you or do you not want to be a part of what God is doing? You have a part in His plan, but He can manage without you. Can you, however, manage without Him?

November 14th

Matthew 16 vv 24-28

He became human so that we should become divine. If we offer back our human lives to God, we enter into our inheritance as the children of God. If, however, we hold back, cling on to the things of this world, not only do we lose our eternity, but we also discover that flesh and blood and all material things are dust and ashes unless they are vivified by the divine Spirit.

November 15th

Matthew 17 vv 1-13

All of a sudden, three chosen disciples are given a clearer vision of the full nature of Christ. He is not only the man they eat and drink with; He is the incarnate God. Seeing something of Christ's glory leads them to reappraise their understanding of John the Baptist. If we see things and people in the light of our knowledge of Jesus, we see them more accurately, more the way they really are. I don't think that we should seek spiritual experiences. That can be self-indulgent. I do think, however, that we should be open to God and to what He is ready to show us of Himself. Come to Church expecting to meet Him where two or three are gathered together. Read the Bible as what it is, the Word of God. Just think of what a stupendous thing you are doing when you come to Communion. Remember Who you are talking to when you say your prayers. Do prayers have to be a monologue? Draw near to Him and He will draw near to you.

November 16th

Matthew 17 vv 14-27

Meet difficult situations with faith. He is with us whatever happens. He does care. Jesus lives, dies and rises again for us. What do we need to worry about? Certainly not taxes or political intrigue. Faith will support us in whatever we have to do, in all our problems and difficulties.

November 17th

Matthew 18 vv 1-14

Jesus clearly loved children. It is a terrible thing to come between a child and Jesus. We should not deceive children about matters of faith. We should not neglect to tell them about Jesus or fail to teach them to know Him in prayer. We should not discourage children because they are a nuisance. We should not insult them by assuming it is better to let

them do what their friends' families are doing than to insist that they attend Sunday School and/or Church. If we respect children as children of God, it is our sacred duty to introduce them to their Father.

This passage is not just about children. It is about the humility required of adult believers. It is about the wholeheartedness of our commitment.

November 18th

Matthew 18 vv 15-35

Every day, perhaps several times in a day, we say the Lord's Prayer. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us" or its modern equivalent. Forgiving others is at the centre of Jesus' teaching about human relationships. In the world outside the Church, grudges perpetuate wars and civil wars from generation to generation. They divide families. They undermine trust. They limit co-operation. A refusal to forgive eats up the person who will not forgive as well as poisoning the relationship with the person who caused the original offence. Sometimes people cannot even remember why "we don't speak to them." Refusal to forgive is a terrible thing and a denial of the very nature of God which is self-sacrificial love. And yet a refusal to forgive is often tied closely to our sense of fairness. We will not forgive because we are sure we have been wrongly treated. Why should we? We misuse words, claiming to forgive though we cannot forget, when really mean we won't forgive at all. Even churches are divided and weakened by the fact that people obviously do not mean what they say in the Lord's Prayer.

November 19th

Matthew 19 vv 1-12

What do you think about these words of Jesus? Until quite recently, I took them at face value. Marriage is for life. Divorce is a sin. It is wrong to marry again while a former husband or wife is still alive. Such a view of marriage reflects the relationship between Christ and the Church. Baptism is a permanent uniting with Christ. He doesn't "divorce" us, no matter what we do. Jesus loves me for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health. Nothing I can do would stop Him loving me – no matter how badly I let Him down. If I married, I would hope to love my wife like that and I would hope that she would love me like that. Our mothers generally love us in that

unconditional way and we do need people who will love us no matter what happens. We should not be abandoned when we are in deep trouble, even if the trouble is of our own making. It is a denial of Christian love to say that we would give up loving someone because they treated us badly.

Marriage as permanent protects shared assets like homes and pension plans and, most importantly, secures a home for any children. Divorce is a bad thing.

Yet people are human. Humans fail. Sometimes they find themselves unable to keep their marriage vows. Maybe they have just been abandoned by a faithless spouse. Maybe their partner's behaviour is so bad as to be intolerable or their problems are just too difficult to live with. What do we achieve by telling people that they must stay married or that they must remain single if they separate? How does it help to deny those marrying for a second time a church wedding, with its prayers for sacramental grace?

I have very reluctantly come round to the idea of re-marriage after divorce because I think it can be the best way to help people who have come through a rotten time and are now attempting to make a new start. But I am still not sure. I am not sure that, as a society, we can allow divorce and re-marriage as the solution to some people's unbearable difficulties, without so undermining the notion of marriage that *till death us do part* means no more than a pious aspiration. What do you think?

November 20th

Matthew 19 vv 13-15

I love to see our Thursday's Children playing in the church building after their service. They are so happy in their Father's House. They enjoyed the singing, the prayer and the Bible Story. Now they can run around and enjoy themselves in other ways. They and their parents can have an authentic experience of God. Church is a place where they can feel they belong quite naturally. So many young people grow up alienated from the Church. Do what you can to make any children or teenagers you know feel that they belong.

November 21st

Matthew 19 vv 16-30

Mostly, we turn this story the other way round. We tell ourselves, and we tell other people, that there is nothing wrong with being rich, provided that we keep the commandments and give a proportion of our money to the Church and charitable causes. We can live perfectly respectably, essentially ordinarily, and, provided that we are not too greedy and behave decently, we should be OK with God. Some Christians reckon on giving away a tithe (10% of their income). Most Anglicans think that tithing borders on fanaticism and I believe the General Synod recommends that we give only 5%. But very few of us give even that much. I don't know what is in the envelopes, but, going by the cash in the plate, the average weekly adult contribution is around £1. There are not many of us on £10 per week or even £20. Yet Jesus did not ask this man for 5% or even 10%; He asked for 100%. What could He possibly have meant?

November 22nd

Matthew 20 vv 1-16

This is another parable which really irritates people. Why should the people who work only one hour get paid the same as those who work all day? It just isn't fair. But that's just the point. God isn't fair; He is generous. And, if we want to be like Him, we had better be the same.

November 23rd

Matthew 20 vv 17-19

This isn't fair either, but Jesus accepts His destiny in a spirit of generous love.

November 24th

Matthew 20 vv 20-29

The apostles still certainly have not got the point. They want power and prestige and Jesus says that they are missing the point. He is the King Who reigns from a cross. Humility, self-sacrifice, these are the virtues required of those who want to be Christians, especially those who aspire to lead the Christian community. Ecclesiastical power struggles from PCC meetings to papal conclaves suggest that we are still missing that point.

November 25th

Matthew 20 vv 30-34

What is unusual about this miracle story? Mostly Jesus sends the people He has healed home. Often He tells them to tell no-one, but these blind men, as soon as they are cured, follow Him. Maybe this is because we are getting near the end. There were reasons for not revealing everything so long as Jesus was still preaching and healing around Galilee and Judaea, but we are coming to the time when He will be crucified and resurrected and when the Good News of His Victory over all the powers of evil must be proclaimed to the whole world so that people everywhere can become His disciples.

November 26th

Matthew 21 vv 1-11

I'm told that scouts are no longer allowed to ride donkeys. This is apparently for "health and safety" reasons, though I am not sure whether they are protecting the scouts or the donkeys. Most of us have happy memories of donkey rides and donkeys have a special place in our affections. Many donkeys have a cross on their backs and we used to be told that this reflected the role of a donkey in today's Bible story. I used to know an old man who took more trouble to come to Church on Palm Sunday than he did at Easter. He thought the palm cross he was given was something really worth having. Precious symbols. Jesus the humble King. Enthusiastic crowds. Children singing. A psalm of triumph. Yet overhanging it all, the Cross, the fearful death to be faced the following Friday. It is, however, only one week from today that Christ will be found to have risen, with all that that means for our eternity. The observance of Holy Week and Easter brings together precious symbols of the most wonderful story ever told and yet Christians will stay away from Church. They will not participate in the services of this week. Holidays will come before holy days and even those who want to take part will bow to the wishes of family and friends who want to do something secular. Mostly, we don't deliberately reject the Christian story. We just neglect it until it is quietly forgotten.

November 27th

Matthew 21 vv 12-16

The story of the money-changers is often quoted somewhat cheaply at those unfortunate cathedral guides who have to collect the money in those sacred edifices where it has been decided that there will have to be an admission charge. I am among those who instinctively feel that is wrong to charge people to go into church and almost always refuse to go in where there is a charge. But can it be much worse than keeping churches locked so that people cannot go in at all? How are cathedrals supposed to pay for the facilities visitors demand, for cleaners and guides, and to repair the damage that vast numbers of visitors do to ancient buildings? By and large, when asked for voluntary contributions, most people are not sufficiently generous to cover costs. So who should pay for cathedrals? Endowments are generally nothing like enough to meet C21 expenditure. The parishes cannot afford to subsidise the cathedral! If we accept money from government, we may find that he who pays the piper calls the tune. St Paul's Cathedral was turned down for a lottery grant because it was too Christian in its appeal! Why shouldn't the visitors pay, especially if many of them treat the cathedral with no more respect than they would treat a stately home or a castle? Are we, however, at risk of again missing the point of Jesus. The children sang "Hosanna". The sick were healed. It was the chief priests who carped and grumbled. Without trees, there would be no wood, but we need to pray that we don't fail to see the wood because of them.

November 28th

Matthew 21 vv 17-22

If Jesus asked us for some fruit, some sign that we are willing to do something for Him now, what would we say? "You're asking too much" or "Ask again at a more convenient time" or would we simply say, "Yes, Lord, anything you ask, whenever You like"?

November 29th

Matthew 21 vv 23-27

There are, of course, such things as genuine questions. We really want to know the answer. But sometimes questions are a way of catching somebody out, not a charitable thing to do at all. And sometimes questions are a way of prevaricating, an excuse for not getting on with whatever needs doing.

November 30th

Matthew 21 vv 28-32

When I'm feeling resentful, I sometimes think of this story. I'm usually the one at diocesan or deanery meetings who grumbles about something we are being instructed to do. Others say nothing or are even enthusiastic about the proposals. So I get a reputation as being leader of the awkward squad. However, having protested, I usually go and do as instructed, whereas, quite often, I find afterwards that those who kept quiet or even enthused have done nothing. There are those who talk a lot about their faith and what they are going to, but actually don't do much. In fact they may even be a bad influence with their judgmental attitudes. On the other hand, people sometimes surprise you by what they are willing to do just because they do not set themselves up to be anything in particular.

December 1st

Matthew 21 vv 33-41

In its context, this story refers to the history of the Old Testament. God had given Israel so many privileges. He had set them free from slavery in Egypt. He had brought them into the Promised Land. Far more important, He had given them the Torah of love so that He would be their God and they would be His people. But where were the fruits of living as the people of God – the love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance? These were sorely lacking as you can see for yourself if you read the Old Testament. So God sent His messengers the prophets to proclaim His Word. Instead of hearing the prophets and repenting, only too often they maltreated the prophets and carried on with their selfish existence, living no better than the people of the world around them, the nations which did not know YHWH and had not received His Law. At last the Word of God became flesh; YHWH sent His Son. Jesus taught them how to live by Torah properly understood. He showed them by His example what it means to live as a child of God. And they crucified Him. And stupid people ever since have seen this as a reason for despising the Jews, when, in fact, we Christians would be better employed asking ourselves whether we truly live by God's Torah of love, whether we have indeed received Jesus into our hearts and whether in fact we do bring forth the fruits of the Holy Spirit? Or do we live just like other people who do not know God, do not read the Bible and hardly ever come to Church?

December 2nd

Matthew 21 vv 42-46

The notion of the stone rejected by the builders becoming the keystone because it is chosen by God goes back to Psalm 118, the great psalm of the Pilgrim Feasts which no doubt everyone was singing this Passover Week in Jerusalem. It is an idea which is taken up a number of times in the New Testament and ties in with other pictures of Christ and His Church. Jesus is the Rock. He is the firm foundation on which we can build our lives. His teaching is a rock on which the wise man can build his house. Faith in Jesus makes Peter a rock upon which Jesus will build His Church. We are all living stones, built up into a holy temple in which God is pleased to dwell, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone. When the children of Israel were thirsty in the Wilderness, water came springing out the rock, water to drink, water to wash in. Jesus is like that Rock, from which the water of life, the Holy Spirit, pours in the spring of Baptism, to wash us clean, to give us life, to bear up the Ark of Salvation, the Church of God. We see this symbolised in the fact that water flowed mingled with blood when His side was pierced at the Crucifixion. We re-enact this drama when we mix a little water with the wine in the Communion cup.

It is wonderful to build one's life on Jesus the Rock. The alternative is a godless life doomed to judgment and death.

December 3rd

Matthew 22 vv 1-14

I suppose I am an impatient person. If some treat is proposed for next week or next month, I always want to know "Why not now?" In the same way I hate putting off jobs. If something needs doing "Why not now?" I have to confess to being a bit non-plused by people who book weddings years ahead. "Why not now?" I confess that sometimes we ought to take more time to think about what we should do and how best to do it, but, certainly in the matter of decision-making in the Church, I believe that the dangers of procrastination far outweigh the danger of precipitancy. I've often said to Church committees, "We've got all the information about this that we're ever likely to get. Why don't we make a decision?"

Whatever reasons (good and bad) we might advance for putting off decisions in our daily lives, there is no excuse for procrastinating about God. Now is the time of salvation. Now is the time to decide.

December 4th

Matthew 22 vv 15-22

Do these Pharisees really want an answer to their question? Or are they really just trying to catch Jesus out, to find an excuse for not following Him themselves? I suggest that generally it is pretty obvious what we should do with our money. We should be generous! The “ifs” and the “buts” are just excuses.

December 5th

Matthew 22 vv 23-33

Mark Twain wanted to know if dead babies remain babies for ever in Heaven. Alf Garnett got into a debate about whether an amputee’s missing leg would be waiting for him in Heaven. If you haven’t the imagination or the depth of perception to realise that any heavenly existence must be utterly different from life on earth, you can think up a million ridiculous questions to shake the faith of simple believers and to give yourself confidence to disbelieve in an afterlife in which you have to account to God for the selfish way in which you have lived this life.

December 6th

Matthew 22 vv 34-40

The Pharisees knew perfectly well their obligations to God and neighbour. They also knew that Jesus knew what they were. This is not questioning seeking information; this is questioning as an excuse for inaction. “When all is said and done there is more said than done.” Would that be a fair description of your relationship with God? Would that be a fair description of the Church’s programme?

December 7th

Matthew 22 vv 41-46

This is another popular text in the New Testament, arguing from another well known psalm – Psalm 110. Psalm 110 obviously to Christians is about the Messiah – King and High Priest. Probably many Jews would also see the psalm as a prophecy of the Messiah. What Jesus does, by a clever piece of word play, is to demonstrate that the Messiah is not merely David’s successor, but his Lord, his God incarnate.

December 8th

Matthew 23 vv 1-12

The Pharisees know Torah. They teach and preach Torah. Insofar as they teach God's Law of love, Christ disciples must follow what they say. No preacher leads a perfect life and there will be times when any clergyman has to say, "Do as I say, not what I do." The Church has even found it necessary to define as doctrine the fact that sacraments are not invalidated by the unworthiness of ministers. So don't be too hasty to leave a church because you think the vicar is a rogue. In fact you might be copying his actions rather than obeying God's Word if you act selfishly, insensitively or schismatically.

On the other hand, it is important not to be self-righteous or self-important, to put one's self between other people and God. These are perhaps special temptations for Christian ministers. St James warns us of the risk in becoming a leader in the church. Maybe one aspect of your prayers for your bishops, priests and deacons should be for the gift to think of themselves soberly as they ought to think.

December 9th

Matthew 23 vv 13-33

Coming between people and God. How are people to meet God? One obvious way is to come to church. They might come specifically because they are seeking. They might come because they want something – egg baptism or marriage. They might come because their friends come. Then again people might form their own assessment of God from the way their Christian friends, neighbours or workmates behave. Are we like the Pharisees, building barriers between people and God? Or can we point the way to Him, if necessary clear the Way. Do we put people off by bothering them about inessentials like where they sit and what they wear? Do we make them feel unwelcome if they disturb us? Do we appear to be "holier than thou" and/or hypocrites? Do we give people the impression that we are so desperate for supporters that we will take anyone? Or do we reflect the love of Jesus Who stretches out His arms on the Cross to invite and welcome every single human being unconditionally into fully reciprocally committed belonging?

December 10th

Matthew 23 vv 34-39

Abel was of course the first murder victim. Zacharias was a priest in the Old Testament, murdered for telling the king he was wrong to turn his back on YHWH. Now we could, with many Christians in the past, condemn the Jews for their bloody history, culminating in Deicide, the murder of God. Only God weeps over His errant people. Jesus weeps over what they are doing, not only to Him, but also to themselves. God does not desire the death of a sinner, but rather that he should turn from his wickedness and live. We ought not to gloat over other men's sins and their inevitable punishment. What we should be doing is working for a world in which these acts of wickedness do not happen. We should be working with God for the Kingdom of God and, as John the Baptist taught, preparing for God's Kingdom begins with our own repentance.

December 11th

Matthew 24 vv 1&2

A few days from this discussion, Jesus' frail human flesh would be crucified. Most people would think that they had successfully got rid of Him. Everyone present in Jerusalem at that time would surely be dead in decades at the most and the names of nearly all of them would soon be forgotten. That much was obvious. The Temple, on the other hand, was made of stone. It was magnificent. It was backed by royal and imperial power. Almost everyone would have expected it to last for ever. But they would have been wrong. The Temple would be destroyed in less than 40 years, but the carpenter from Nazareth would prove not only to be eternal Himself, but also to have the gift of eternal life for all His followers.

So what matters most, preserving our buildings or worship? Money or prayer? Career or Christian commitment? The world's demands or God? Maintaining our status or humble service? Belonging or Mission?

December 12th

Matthew 24 vv 3-8

When did humanity start expecting the end of the world? Today the fashionable doom is global warming. A few years ago it was nuclear war. Some scientists like to talk about the death of the sun destroying our earth and everything on it. Others talk about the "Big Crunch", the catastrophic end of a universe which began in a "Big Bang." It seems

logical to think that a universe which had a beginning will have an end. And, once we accept that there is going to be an end, it is natural to start asking questions about what that end will be. It makes sense to ask Jesus because God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, created and sustain the Universe. The end will be in God's Providence. We approach the end, therefore, with faith.

December 13th

Matthew 24 vv 9-14

You and I were brought up in a Christian country. The Church was wealthy. Our laws were broadly Christian. Christians occupied many powerful positions and those people in power who were not Christians would have hesitated not to show respect to the Christian Establishment. Being a Christian was much the same as being a good citizen of our country and virtues like chastity, abstinence, moderation, honesty, industry and thrift could be expected to lead, if not to prosperity, at least to comfort and freedom from want. Christians could be comfortable and comfort is an invitation to complacency.

In C1 AD, Christians were in a minority. They were often abused and sometimes persecuted. They did not have much influence in government or industry. Being a Christian was not a way to get on and earn respect. So, by and large, people were either highly committed Christians or they did not claim to be Christians at all. And what do we learn from that as we have to inhabit an increasingly post-Christian Britain? Do we drift with everybody else towards a more secular society or do we make stand on the things that really count? I don't see how the Gospel can ever be preached to the whole world if we just back down in the face of opposition or discouragement.

December 14th

Matthew 24 15-22

We have to understand that this chapter is about two events. It is about the absolute end of the world when there will be new heavens and a new earth and the former things will have passed away and it is about the end of the world as Jesus' own generation knew it. Not too long after the New Testament period, the Jews would rebel against Rome. After initial successes, their forces would be defeated and the might of Rome would destroy the Temple and the Holy City. These verses speak

of the horrors of war and defeat. Many Christians would remember these words and escape to safety before the final destruction of Jerusalem. It is, I think, fair to apply the basic principles of these verses to every crisis in subsequent history. There are horrors of war and rumours of war, earthquakes and famines in every generation. The thing is to discern the sign of the times, to trust in God, always to be on the side of His Kingdom of Justice and Peace and to lift up our heads because our redemption draws nigh.

December 15th

Matthew 24 vv 23-51

Keep faithful. Don't be led astray from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Be ready. You don't know when you will die. You don't know when the end of the world we be. You might have to give account to God for your life at any time. So be ready.

December 16th

Matthew 25 vv 1-13

The point of this parable is not that you shouldn't share with other people! The point of the story is that we must be ready. It is a wonderful thing to spend eternity in the presence of Jesus. The alternative hardly bears thinking about. We cannot live as if we were hardly bothered about God at all and expect to join the Heavenly Bridegroom at His Wedding Feast. I know that none of us deserves to get in. I know that the fact that any of us gets in is solely down to His mercy. But I cannot think that it is right so to take His mercy for granted that we effectively despise it, in practice living virtually like atheists until we want something from God and then reminding Him that we always called ourselves Christians.

December 17th

Matthew 25 vv 14-30

A talent was a large sum of money. St Luke records Jesus telling a similar parable to this in which the servants are given pounds. It must, however, be under the influence of the story recorded by Matthew that our English word "talent" came to have its modern meaning. The meaning of the parable is perfectly clear. God has given us everything we have – our money and possessions, our abilities, our time and opportunities - and we are answerable to Him for how we use them. Do we consider this when we apply for jobs or decide how to use our time?

December 18th

Matthew 25 vv 31-46

Another easy parable. The only real question is whether *the least of these my brethren* are fellow Christians or absolutely anybody who needs our help. Given the interpretation of the *neighbour*, whom we are to love as we love ourselves, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, I should say that it means that we are to see Christ in the face of absolutely anyone who needs our care or attention. So this parable is easy to understand, but how many people have actually succeeded in living up to it?

December 19th

Matthew 26 vv 1-5

There is a famous story about a little boy in the house of a great pianist. The little boy sits down at the piano and makes a horrid row, bashing the keys as only little boys can. The pianist sits down beside him and joins in the playing, turning the boy's terrible din into a beautiful piece of music. We are like the little boy. We plunk the keys: sometimes trying to make a din, sometimes not caring, sometimes doing our feeble best to make music, but God is the great pianist whose infinitely greater contribution makes sense of our efforts as part of His infinitely greater composition. So, here, human beings, good and bad, act freely in ways which lead to the Crucifixion of Jesus. They are all responsible for what they do, yet it is all part of God's infinitely greater plan.

December 20th

Matthew 26 vv 6-13

There are various reasons for giving money away. You might give to a good cause or to a poor person because you are trying to meet an obvious need. You might want to give to someone you love just because you love them and what a problem it is when they seem to have everything. You might give lavishly in order to impress other people with your wealth or generosity. Again you might give lavishly in order to be rid of the material possessions which you find are holding you back on your spiritual journey. All these reasons (except the third) are good reasons for giving. I wonder what most motivates us?

December 21st

Matthew 26 vv 14-25

These verses illustrate nicely the point about human beings making their own decisions and acting of their own free will, yet everything working out just as God had always intended. People often wonder about the motives of Judas. It is among our nicer traits that we try not to think too badly of him. Maybe he was disillusioned by Jesus' failure to capitalise on Palm Sunday to start a revolution. Maybe he thought that by betraying Jesus, Judas could force Him to act decisively to inaugurate the Kingdom of God. Maybe Judas was just greedy for the reward money. We simply cannot know, but we ought to note, as we examine ourselves, how easy it is to slip from being a disciple to being a traitor to our Lord.

December 22nd

Matthew 26 vv 26-30

Participation in Holy Communion is evidently a sacred duty laid on Christians by our Lord Himself on the very night before He died for our salvation. There may be some question about how often we should celebrate the Eucharist. Most Christians belong to churches where it is the norm to celebrate Holy Communion every Sunday (the day He rose from the dead) and on certain other "feasts of obligation" such as Christmas Day. There is an alternative school of thought (in for example Presbyterian churches) which fears that familiarity will breed contempt and Holy Communion is celebrated much more rarely, but with very great care to see that the participants are serious about what they are doing. What is clear, however, is that our participation in Communion is not a matter of our personal whim or taste, a reflection of which service we enjoy most, something to be fitted in, if at all, with our busy social life. To share in Holy Communion is a duty we owe Jesus. We may want to decide for ourselves how often we do this, but we must decide on the basis of what we believe would please Him, not on pleasing ourselves.

December 23rd

Matthew 26 vv 31-56

Gethsemane is a very human story. We see the humanity of Jesus. It is important to remember that He is both fully human and fully divine. We underrate Him if we play down His divinity or if we think about Him as though His humanity were somehow less real than ours. We also see the humanity of His disciples, confused, weak, frightened, not sure what to do, even lacking in faith, but they remain His disciples. He does not abandon them, even though they might be said to have abandoned Him at least for the moment. We see the humanity of a human being who can become a traitor. There are also the human authorities committing an act of cruelty and injustice for political reasons and the human soldiers and police only doing a job, only obeying orders. It is this mixed up humanity which Jesus became human in order to redeem – just as much the Christmas message as the Easter one.

December 24th

Matthew 26 vv 57-75

And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God.

That is the key question. It is because we believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God that we celebrate Christmas. But if we answer the high priest's question in the affirmative, we cannot help but raise two more questions.

- What difference does it make to the cosmos that the Son of God became a human being and lived and died and rose again?
- If Jesus is God incarnate - conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified, dead and buried, risen from the dead, ascended into Heaven, sitting on the right hand of God, confidently expected to return to judge both the quick and the dead – what response is expected from you and me?

December 25th (Christmas Day)

John 1 vv 1-14

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

December 26th

Matthew 27 vv 1-10

Today is the Feast of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. The most basic symbol of the Christian faith is the Cross. Jesus died on a cross for the salvation of the world. When we become Christians, we are baptised into his death. We share His resurrection. Sin and death are crucified with Him. We have eternal life. We Christians do not, therefore, fear death and many Christians have followed Stephen, bearing witness to Jesus by dying a martyr's death. The death of Judas, unlike the death of Stephen, is, however, a tragedy. In despair he commits suicide. No-one should be that desperate. If he had turned back to Jesus, Jesus would have received him back with love. As CHRISTians we reach out in love to all desperate people and help them to find forgiveness and healing in Christ if we possibly can.

December 27th

Matthew 27 vv 11-28

Today is St John's day. One of my favourite couple of verses in the Bible is from the First Letter of John (3 v1&2) *Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.*

Barabbas means "son of the Father". Barabbas, son of the Father, escapes the cross, the death which, by the rules of his time, he deserved, and Jesus dies in his place so that Barabbas and all the rest of us sinners can become (through faith in Jesus) true children of the Father and heirs of eternal life.

December 28th

Matthew 27 vv 29-44

In the Church's calendar on 28th December we remember the Holy Innocents, the babies who were killed in Bethlehem because Herod thought that Jesus was a threat to Herod's kingship. Well, Jesus is the King of the Jews. He is King of all the nations. He does not need to worship the Devil in order to rule the world. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords by right. But He puts aside even the worship of Heaven in order to receive the truest glory of all, the glory of self sacrificial love. In doing so, He teaches us the truth about status. He teaches us what leadership is about. He teaches us what life is really all about. His death is redemptive. It is a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. All human beings have to do is to repent and believe. If we do so, we are baptised into His death, the flesh, with all its worldly lusts for power and possessions, is crucified with Him, and we live eternally in the love of God – a life of love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance. This is what it means to say that Jesus is King.

December 29th

Matthew 27 vv 45-66

TV soaps often wring our emotions. People go through terrible emotional crises. Usually, each episode finishes on a cliff-hanger – to make sure we tune in to the next. Sometimes I think that the Bible can be too familiar. You and I know these stories so well that it is quite possible to read them (even out loud in church) without even thinking much about what they mean. We only half listen when they are being read to us. They are not always read well enough to grab the interest of newcomers to the church. Yet these familiar stories are much better stories than you ever get in a TV soap. They are far more gripping.

I can think of two possible reasons why people are not gripped by them. The first is that often we do present the stories badly. They do need to be read in such a way that people can hear them, have their imaginations seized by them and, so far as is possible with such profound literature, understand them. The other reason, of course, that people do not allow themselves to be gripped by these stories is that they are too challenging. If we took them seriously, we'd have to make too many changes in our lives.

Today's reading does finish on a cliff hanger. Why is the tomb guarded? What will happen in tomorrow's exciting instalment. Don't let familiarity with the story spoil the wonder of it all. And, next Easter, yes, do come to Church on Easter Sunday to break bread with the Risen Lord, but also, before hand, attend the Holy Week services in which we experience the narrative which leads up to the Easter Event.

December 30th

Matthew 28 vv 1-15

This is not the resuscitation of a corpse. Every week on *Casualty* you can see someone apparently dead brought back to life by modern medicine. There are a few cases in the Bible of the definitely dead being brought back to life by a miracle. But they all died again in due course. They were all buried. Their bodies rotted away in the soil of Palestine. What God does on Easter Day is utterly different. It is to proclaim the whole truth of the whole Christian Gospel. Jesus is His Son. All the powers of Death and Hell have been vanquished by the Cross. There is eternal life for all human beings who live in the eternal love of the Son of God. No wonder Easter is so joyful with its music and flowers and bell-ringing and everything we do together in the Church to reflect and to declare the resurrection of the One Who is our life.

December 31st

Matthew 28 vv 16-20

If all this is true, if it is true that God so loved the world that He did all these things so that all over the world people could have eternal life in Christ, that Gospel must be proclaimed to everyone. We must tell our children and our neighbours. We must proclaim it on the streets of our own nation. We must declare it to people of all nations. It would be a dereliction of our duty to God and to other people if we failed to do so. All those who receive the message, become part of the Church, Christ's Body. They are baptized into His Death and Resurrection. They learn to keep His Commandments, summed up in the Law of Love. They become part of the mission to the as yet unbelieving world. It is truly amazing what it means to be a Christian. May 2008 be a great and joyful adventure for us all.

