

From Leviticus to Christmas



Bible Notes
October - December
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50p

October 1st

Leviticus 1 v1

Studying Leviticus is going to be a challenge for us all. It's a difficult book and its relevance to our lives today may not be obvious. I was, however, recently asked about it and it occurred to me that not knowing about Leviticus leaves a big gap in our knowledge of the Bible and therefore of the Word of God. Leviticus is one of the five Books of the Law (Torah): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These five are the most important books of the Bible for Jewish people and, therefore, for Jesus and the apostles, for most of the early disciples and for the people who wrote the New Testament. The New Testament takes for granted that these Books of the Law are the Word of God. The New Testament understands and explains Jesus in the light of the Old Testament. It is not really possible to understand the New Testament and, therefore, the Christian message if we know nothing about them. So here goes!

The context is that God has sent Moses to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. Following ten plagues, the last of which is the death of the Egyptian first born, Pharaoh has finally let the people go. They have passed through the Red Sea and come to Mount Sinai where God has made a covenant with Israel – the Old Testament – given them the Ten Commandments and many other laws and has instructed Moses to make the Ark of the Covenant, to symbolise and actualise God's presence with His people, and a magnificent tent or tabernacle, with all the trappings required for worship, in which to position it whenever the tribes camp on their forty year long journey.

Moses meets God in the tabernacle and God tells Moses what he is to say to the Israelites.

We probably won't study all of Leviticus. It would prove too much for most of us.

October 2nd

Leviticus 1 v2

Leviticus takes it for granted that there will be animal sacrifices and that in itself is a strange idea to us. Why would anyone want to

sacrifice an animal and why would they think it would please God if they did. Yet the idea of animal sacrifice is present in many religions and, of course, horrifyingly, some religions have practised human sacrifice.

It seems to me that there are two ideas behind the sacrifice of living things. One, strangely enough, is the thought that life is sacred. Life comes from God. For millennia human beings have killed animals – for food, for their coats and sometimes just for sport. We still do. Many cultures regard life as in some sense sacred, as a special gift from God, and that means that they regard the taking of life, even of animal life, as something not to be done lightly. Life isn't cheap. If we kill for food or to obtain skins or some other animal product, we are obliged to kill no more than is necessary and to kill as humanely as possible. In a sense then, in a culture which thinks like this, the killing of anything is always a sacrifice. That is good news for animal rights and good news for the environment, which our reverence for life ought to prevent us from pillaging.

The other and more obvious thought behind sacrifice is that it is good to give. It is good to give to other people. It is good to give for God. It is good for us to give up something we might want. We might think (though this needs a lot of thinking about) that a gift will bring somebody else or God to think better of us.

October 3rd

Leviticus 1 v3

The offering has to be of the finest quality. It is no good offering to God second best or what you didn't want anyway. It's no good for your character to often second best. Why would you expect it to please God if you give Him what doesn't matter much to you? I think the same principle applies in Christian worship. Sometimes there is a feeling that God won't mind and the rest of the Church won't mind if we put less care into what we do in public worship than we would in putting on a concert or a play. I think that kind of attitude is bad for our own character development and bad for the Church's witness.

October 4th

Leviticus 1 vv 4-9

Read the rest of the chapter if you want to, but the principles are the same whatever the offering. You offer the best you have to God. It is a shared action between the priests and the people making the offerings. The offerings are the offerings of the people, but they have to be offered according to the correct ritual in the right place and under the supervision of the trained priesthood. This is to make sure that people stick to the true religion of the LORD (Yahweh, יהוה) and don't sacrifice to Baal or to any other of the pagan gods or mix up the worship of the LORD with any pagan rituals. We worship the LORD in Jesus Christ. Jesus tells us that God seeks people to worship Him in spirit and in truth. Our worship of the LORD ought not to be less than wholehearted, nor contaminated by any tendency to worship the things of this world – wealth, power, celebrity status, etc.

In many cases, once sacrificed, the animal is eaten by the family that brought it and their friends and by the sacrificing priests. It is a communal meal, shared with one another, and, in a sense shared with God. Some Christians think of Christ as the unseen guest at all their meals. Certainly the Holy Communion service is a communal meal, eaten in fellowship with one another and with Christ.

October 5th

I Samuel 2 vv 12-17

Rather than just ploughing through Leviticus, we'll look at its relevance in other parts of the Bible. Years after Moses, the Ark of the Covenant was kept in the Shrine at Shiloh. Eli was the priest but he was very old and his two sons, Hophni and Phineas, ran the shrine. They were in it for themselves. They took what they wanted. They defrauded the worshipers and they treated God with contempt. As a result, what you might call the weaker brethren became undisciplined and fell further from God, and those who came sincerely seeking after God were put off by the disorder at the shrine and the rapaciousness of the clergy. Christian ministers are in many ways different from Old Testament priests, but it is essential that they see themselves primarily as ministers (=servants) of God and of the people whom God calls them to serve, rather than as in any sense pursuing their own interests.

I worry about the increasing tendency to see the sacred ministry as a career, job or profession.

October 6th

Leviticus 2 vv 1-3

Animals weren't by any means the only things you could offer as sacrifices. There were offerings of bread and of what we would call cakes. There were harvest offerings of the crops of the ground, both at the beginning of harvest (first fruits) and at the end of harvest (ingathering). Offering the first and best of what you had was a way of acknowledging that everything we have comes from God. It was a way of saying thank you to God. It was an expression of trust that God would continue to care for you. Sometimes these offerings were themselves shared with the poor. Always they were a reminder to share what God has given so generously to us with other people, especially with those in greater need than we are.

Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendour, and the majesty; for everything in heaven and earth is yours. All things come from you, and of your own do we give you.

October 7th

Leviticus 2 vv 4-11

Normally any offering made of flour, bread or cake had to be unleavened. This was particularly important at Passover and Jewish people still take great pains to remove every trace of yeast from their houses before Passover. The houses are spring cleaned and every nook and cranny is searched for any sign at all of leaven. In many Jewish homes, the children join in and make a game of looking for any yeast at all which Mother has missed. Then Father comes home and checks what they've done!

Leaven then came to be a symbol for sin. Every nook and cranny of our lives has to be examined for sin and thoroughly cleansed before we can offer our lives as a sacrifice acceptable to God.

As Christians we no longer require the symbols which ritual provides. Our religion ought to be in spirit and in truth not merely in outward observances. An obsession with ritual can mask an emptiness of spirit.

But contrariwise, an ostentatious rejection of ritual can indicate an indifference to spiritual matters. We say we don't need dust and ashes to demonstrate our repentance and that is true, but, when we reject the rituals, do we then in reality always truly repent?

October 8th

Leviticus 2 v12

Pentecost or Weeks (called Whitsun traditionally in England) was the beginning of harvest in the warmer climate of Canaan. The Israelites offered the first of the year's crop to God. As we've said, this was a way of acknowledging that everything comes from God, of thanking Him, of expressing our trust in Him, of reminding us of our responsibility to share His gifts.

In the New Testament, the idea of first fruits is given spiritual significance. Jesus is the first fruits of the resurrection. We are the harvest. We are the crop and we are consecrated to God by the offering of Jesus. Those of us who already know Christ are then a kind of first fruits of the whole crop – of all those many more who will yet come to eternal life through the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. We are blessed. We are a thankful, joyful people. (Eucharist means thanksgiving). We are called to share God's blessings with the whole of creation. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Risen Christ and to experience the Holy Spirit (as all Christians do or we wouldn't be Christians) is to partake of the firstfruits of the heavenly harvest, when God's people will be gathered into their eternal home with Him.

October 9th

Leviticus 2 vv 13-16

Jesus takes up this point that every sacrifice is salted with salt in Mark 9 vv 49&50. *For everyone shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt. Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his saltiness, wherewith shall ye season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another.* In Matthew 5 v13, Jesus says to His disciples, *Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.* Not entirely easy to understand. But I think the point is that times may be tough. They will be. There will be serious challenges to face. Salt gives

flavour and salt is a preservative. Christians are vital for the flavour and preservation of the world, for the bringing in of God's Kingdom. We are useless if we lose our saltiness, if we lose what distinguishes us as Christians from the world at large. One such characteristic is to be at peace with one another and there are many more – the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, etc..

October 10th

Leviticus 3 vv 1-5 or to end of chapter.

I remember when I was a curate when these sections were read at our weekday services and the vicar said it made him think of Dewhurst's the butchers. I don't think it's necessary for us to go into all the gory details. The point is that this a fellowship meal. It seems gory to us. When we see our meat, it's all prepared for us. We don't see the animals killed or how the carcasses are dealt with. Unless, however, we are vegetarians we cannot claim that we are not complicit in what goes on in slaughter houses and meat-packing plants. These ancient rituals required the preparation of animals as food to be done with reverence, remembering where the animals' lives came from. Personally, I believe that it is OK to eat meat and to use animal products, but the animals must be well-treated when they are alive and killed as humanely as possible and the carcasses have to be treated properly – as various recent health scares have demonstrated. I don't believe that we are required to be vegetarians, but it is unethical to pretend that there is not a cost in bringing meat to our tables. And what about the ethics of rearing an animal, killing it, bringing it to our kitchens and then just throwing the meat away because we don't fancy it after all or because we've irresponsibly ordered more than our family can eat?

October 11th

Leviticus 4 vv 1&2 or whole chapter.

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we have sinned against you and against our neighbour in thought and word and deed, through negligence, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault.

Does an action have to be deliberate to count as a sin? What if we didn't know that something was sinful? Maybe when we found the £10

note we knew belonged to somebody else, we were taught to say *finders keepers, losers weepers*. What if we sinned without knowing it? Suppose in a genuine mistake we gave change of £10 when we'd been given a £20. What if we sinned when we couldn't help it? Suppose we sometimes just can't control our temper. None of these is as bad as deliberately singing, but people are still hurt. There is still a need for restitution, for atonement perhaps.

October 12th

Leviticus 5 v1

We are members of a community and we have a responsibility to our community. This duty includes being ready to speak up and give evidence for or against someone, to tell the truth in other words. I think this is clear enough, but then we have to consider the circumstances. Obviously we ought to be prepared to give evidence, if we have it, of a serious crime and, if called to serve on a jury, to convict if the evidence points beyond reasonable doubt to the guilt of the accused. We must also offer evidence of innocence if we have it or, if on a jury, refuse to convict if there is no proof of guilt. Yet if we lived in a police state it wouldn't be right to assist the KGB or Gestapo or whatever to catch and convict the government's opponents. Neither, in my opinion, does it build community if we act as *telltales*, informing the authorities of every minor misdemeanour committed by our neighbours such as parking on a yellow line or installing double-glazing in a conservation area. We have a responsibility to the community which normally (but not always) means a willingness to cooperate with the organs of the state.

October 13th

Leviticus 5 vv 2&3

We use uncleanness to mean much the same thing as dirt. Some of the things referred to as unclean in the Bible would also be regarded by us as dirty or at least repugnant to touch – excrement, bodily fluids, the corpses of animals or people, animals you wouldn't fancy eating. There are also good hygienic reasons for not touching some of these things. But uncleanness in the Bible is not the same thing as what we mean by dirty or repulsive or unhygienic, even if all those categories to some extent overlap. A closer concept to uncleanness would be taboo. One of the ways we mark the communities to which we belong from

the ones to which we don't is by what we find acceptable and what we find repulsive. A lot of English people think it is disgusting that the French eat snails and horses – though they are perfectly nourishing and healthy. Some people in the Middle East think it disgusting that westerners exhibit so much bare flesh, though we enjoy soaking up the rays. A Sikh man feels undressed without a turban. A Jew or a Moslem thinks it is disgusting to eat pig, whereas a Hindu won't eat cow. We define who we are by our taboos. The Israelites in Leviticus define themselves as the people of God by avoiding ritual uncleanness.

October 14th

Leviticus 5 vv4&5

Words matter. We mustn't take the LORD's name in vain. I was always taught that meant that we should not use it as a swear word. I am sure that is true. It is also true (and quite probably what the commandment originally meant) that it means that we should not use the LORD's name to swear to a falsehood. Jesus says we shouldn't need to swear to the truth of what we say, because we should always speak the truth anyway. The old Testament warns against making promises which we either choose not to fulfil or can't fulfil. And of course the name of the LORD (יהוה) is regarded by Jewish people as too holy to be spoken and Christians believe that At the Name of Jesus* every knee shall bow. We should speak kindly and honestly. We shouldn't gossip. We should mean what we say. Our words ought to reflect our respect for God and for other people.

[If I may be permitted a personal digression here. I don't like Bible translations or tellings of Bible stories that use the name Yahweh for God. I think it is disrespectful to those who believe that it is irreverent to use the Name casually and I think it makes God sound like just one of the pagan gods you find in the Old Testament such as Baal or Milcom, and some listeners may not realise that the Old Testament LORD is in fact the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!]

October 15th

Leviticus 5 vv 6&7 or 6-19

* In Hebrew Jesus is Joshua (יהושע) It means the LORD is our salvation and you see it includes the same first three Hebrew letters as יהוה.

The view in Leviticus is that if you discover you've done wrong even though you didn't know it at the time, you should put it right. You should confess your sin and seek reconciliation or atonement. We would say sorry to God. We wouldn't sacrifice because we know that Jesus is a *full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, satisfaction and oblation for the sins of the whole world*. We ought surely, however, to try to make amends to a person whom we have unwittingly injured.

Notice that the offering expected is in proportion to the person's resources. A poor man is not expected to give as much as a rich man, though a rich man ought obviously to be ashamed if he tries to get away with giving at the poor man's rate.

October 16th

Leviticus 6 vv 1-7

At first sight, this all seems very strange to us. What is going on here? When we look more closely, however, Leviticus is considering what to do when an ancient Israelite behaved in ways which are only too understandable to us. He has obtained his neighbour's property either by deceit or by violence. He's got to give it back plus 20% compensation for having stolen it in the first place. By lying or stealing or committing robbery with violence, the criminal or sinner has not only sinned against another man; he has sinned against God in Whose image that man is made. When we fail to love our neighbours as ourselves, we fail to love God also. So we not only have to say sorry to our neighbours and to try to put right the harm we have done to them; we also have to confess our sin to God and ask His forgiveness for the sake of Jesus Christ, Who offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

October 17th

Leviticus 6 vv 8-13 or 8-24

In the good old relaxed days of yore, the clergyman who had taken the service used to stand at the church door and say farewell to each member of the congregation, shaking their hands, and asking after them and their families. O for the good old days when clergy had just one church to look after with a manageable size parish! (Maybe then the vicar joined the men in the village pub while the wives cooked the Sunday dinners!) Even in those days we once had a clergyman who disappeared into the vestry after the service and missed most of the congregation. I think he was shy. Some of us

are you know. But he also gave the reason that the vestment he wore at the altar for the service ought to be taken off before he went outside and talked to people about ordinary every day things. The idea of the clergy wearing special clothes for their sacred duties goes back at least to Leviticus and most of us still do so. I wonder why? My guess is that even if we decided it wasn't necessary to wear our traditional robes, people would still expect us to dress reasonably smartly and formally. I don't think you'd let me get away with taking a wedding or funeral in shorts and tee shirt. It's partly about dressing up to show respect for the congregation and the occasion. It's partly about showing respect for God. But it's also about making a distinction between the sacred and the everyday and I'm not sure that we should still be doing that in New Testament times. Probably more on this as we go on with Leviticus.

October 18th

Leviticus 6 vv 25-30

Our youth club used to congregate in the church after service. I remember a recently widowed and good Christian lady getting very upset because some of the youth were larking about round the altar. We're not comfortable today (40 years later) with people who don't treat the church and its furnishings with respect – probably attaching more respect to the altar or table and the pulpit than to the door mat, to the Bible than to spare copies of the parish magazine.

What Leviticus has to say about some objects being regarded as “holy” might seem weird to us. “Holy” here is much nearer to “taboo” than it is to “ethically pure”. But we still do have the sense that there is a difference between the sacred and the every day. We are less obsessive about it than Leviticus, but it is still there.

October 19th

Psalms 51

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

The Bible is quite clear that even in the Old Testament, ritual purity, holiness in the sense of taboo, is not primarily what God wants. What God wants is for His people to worship Him in spirit and in truth. To worship God is to grow more like Him. You become what you worship. God is love. God is just. God is merciful. It follows that those who are sincere worshippers of God are loving, just and merciful all the time and wherever they are and whatever they are doing. All this ritual purity we read about in Leviticus and some other parts of the

Old Testament is a sign and expression of God's people being like God, i.e. pure and holy, just and merciful.

Now surely, as Christians, we ought to be pure and holy all the time. We ought to be just and merciful at home and at work as well as in church. We ought to be good every day, not just on the Sabbath. *And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.* (Colossians 3 v17). So can there be any distinction for Christians between the sacred and the every day. Oughtn't every minute of every day to be holy?

October 20th

Leviticus 7 vv 1&2 or 1-21

There are two reasons why these provisions seem extraordinary to us. The better of the two is the fact that we know we don't need ritual sacrifices in order to be worthy to stand in the presence of God. We know that Jesus is our only mediator and advocate. Each one of us can come into the Presence of God the Father and address Him as Abba, Father, precisely because we don't depend on our own merits, but entirely and exclusively on the merits of Jesus Christ. We don't need to sacrifice because Jesus is a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. It isn't that we can come into the presence of God without being holy. The unholy would be annihilated by the presence of the thrice holy God. We can only come into the presence of God because we are made holy in Jesus. We are washed in the Blood of the Lamb of God.

The other reason that these ritual provisions seem extraordinary to us is that they are not our rituals. We all have rituals. The rituals might be different in different churches – stand, sit or kneel to pray, bow to the altar, cross yourself, genuflect, or ostentatiously reject all those things, arms in the air or hands together and eyes closed, listening quietly to the sermon or shouting Hallelujah at appropriate points, etc, etc.. We all have rituals. Do they help or hinder? Do they deepen our understanding of what Christ has done once and for all on the Cross or do they obscure the uniqueness and all-sufficiency of his sacrifice?

October 21st

Leviticus 7 vv 22-27

Food is far more important than fuel for the body. We eat together as families or groups of friends. We hold formal meals to mark special occasions. It is considered especially treacherous to cheat somebody you've shared food with. What we eat marks out the people we are, where we belong. When a child refuses to eat what is on the family dinner table, at least in part he is asserting his independence from the family. We don't eat "foreign" food because it isn't for people like us or we do eat "foreign" food because we want to define ourselves as cosmopolitan people. These food laws define the Jewish people as distinct from other people. Our cultural barriers are much more permeable nowadays but they haven't totally disappeared. It's just that they are harder to recognise from within.

October 22nd

Leviticus 7 vv 28-34

The life was considered to be in the fat and in the blood. Basically, this is why Jehovah's Witnesses won't accept blood transfusions. It makes sense if you accept the logic of the group and it defines the group. If you won't accept a blood transfusion, you're different. You're special. You might be ridiculed for it. The state might force your children to have blood transfusions in what the state considers to be their best interest. All this mockery and persecution serves only to strengthen your sense of belonging to the J.W.s and (paradoxically) it makes it psychologically harder for you ever to leave.

The same is true for the group identity of Moslem schoolgirls who refuse to take swimming lessons for reasons of modesty, for Sikhs who refuse to wear motorcycle helmets and for Roman Catholics in the days when they refused to eat meat on Fridays and insisted on going to Mass on Sundays even when everyone else in the party had to wait for them.

These "taboos" make groups stronger. We Christians have mainly rejected all these identity markers. Is it possible that the result is that there is nothing to mark us out as different from the rest of the world and that therefore (at least in countries like Britain) we only too easily assimilate into the culture of the world? Our mission is to transform the world but are we ourselves more likely to be transformed by the world?

October 23rd

Leviticus 7 vv 35-38

The Israelites in the Old Testament were called to be a holy people – a people separated for God. Within Israel, the priests were called to be especially holy. They were separated from the rest by all sorts of markers, including dress, anointing, a special role in worship, etc.. The holiness of the priesthood calls Israel to holiness. The holiness of Israel calls the world to holiness.

In the New Testament all Christian people are called to be a holy people. We are all kings and priests. We wear the garments of salvation. We are anointed by the Holy Spirit. We are consecrated by the Blood of Jesus. We enter into the holy of holies through Him.

October 24th

Leviticus 8 vv 1-9 or 1-36

This chapter describes the ritual for consecrating the priests. Some of it seems very strange to us, but some of it has been included in the ritual for ordaining Christian priests and bishops – which raises an interesting question in itself. Christian clergy are not the same thing as Old Testament priests. In the Old Testament, the priests mediated between God and the people. They led the worship and performed the most important sacrifices. They pronounced God's blessing. They interceded for the people and brought answers from God. They pronounced on questions of Law. In the New Testament dispensation Jesus is the High Priest Who alone mediates between God and humanity. In Him we all have access to the Father. The Church is the Body of Christ. All members of the Church are members of Christ. In Him we pray to God and receive answers. We offer ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice. We pronounce God's Blessing. We have access for ourselves to God's Word in the Bible. The rite of consecration to Christian priesthood is Baptism. The role of the Christian clergy is not to be priests on behalf of God's people, but to facilitate the priesthood of the whole people of God by our preaching and teaching, by the pastoral care that we offer, and by leading the whole Body of Christ in worship.

October 25th

I Peter 2 vv 9&10

Peter the apostle spells this out to the Christians of his own day. All Christian people are the people of God. Not just those who are Jews by birth. Not just those who are descendants of Abraham *after the flesh*. Everybody who has faith belongs to the people of God, following in the footsteps of Abraham, *who believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness*. This is a tremendous privilege and privilege brings responsibility. We are called that we *should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light*.

This means sharing the light of God with the world, by praying for the world and by demonstrating the love of God both in word and deed in our dealings with all humanity. Potentially all human beings are the people of God, members of this royal priesthood, the children of God, but only if they accept Jesus in faith.

October 26th

Leviticus 9 vv 1-7 or 1-24

No one is fit to stand in the presence of God. No one, not even the High Priest. God is holy and there is no fellowship possible between holiness and sin and all human beings have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It follows that the Jewish high priest has to make atonement not only for the sin of the people, but also for his own sin. Moreover, he is never purified once and for all. No matter how often he repents and confesses, he always falls into sin again, and so he has to make atonement for his sins time after time. This does mean that the high priest can sympathise with ordinary sinners like us, but it also means that he cannot deal with sin once and for all.

October 27th

Hebrews 5 vv 1-14

Moses' brother Aaron, of the tribe of Levi, was the first high priest under the Levitical dispensation and his successors as high priest were supposed to be his descendants. These priests could understand human weakness because they were only too human themselves. But human weakness cannot deal finally with sin. Only God can do that. In the Epistle to the Hebrews it is explained that Jesus sets aside the priesthood of Aaron in favour of a more ancient priesthood – that of Melchizedek, who was High Priest and King of Jerusalem in the time of Abraham. Jesus is Priest (and King) *after the order of Melchizedek*. He is without sin. So He does not offer sacrifice for

Himself. He does not need atonement with God because He is one with God. He can deal once and for all with sin because He is God. Yet He can sympathise fully with our weaknesses because He is also fully human and suffers all the trials and temptations of a human life.

Once, only once, and once for all, his precious life he gave;
Before the Cross our spirits fall, and own it strong to save.
'One Offering, single and complete,' with lips and heart we say;
But what he never can repeat he shows forth day by day.
For, as the priest of Aaron's line within the Holiest stood,
And sprinkled all the mercy-shrine with sacrificial blood;
So he who once atonement wrought, our Priest of endless power,
Presents himself for those he bought ~ in that dark noontide hour,
His Manhood pleads where now it lives on heaven's eternal throne,
And where in mystic rite he gives ~ it's presence to his own.
And so we show thy Death, O Lord, Till thou again appear;
And feel, when we approach thy board, we have an altar here.
All glory to the Father be, All glory to the Son,
All glory, Holy Ghost, to thee, while endless ages run.

October 28th (St Simon and St Jude)

Jude vv 1-8

What an experience it must have been to have known Jesus when He was on earth in the flesh! But what would you have made of Him? His disciples seem pretty generally to have missed the point. Then after He had died on the Cross, risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, what then? What did it all mean? The coming of the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the Gospel to every nation, to every race and culture? There were all sorts of ideas about Jesus and His significance from the idea of Him as someone Who came to reform the Jewish religion, a new kind of rabbi, to some sort of ethereal heavenly being Who wasn't really human but somehow mediated between Creation and a God Who was far too remote to have any direct interest in us. All these ideas of Jesus were wrong. The only way the Church could understand Jesus was by prayerful reflection on everything He said and did in the light of what God had already revealed of Himself in the Law and the Prophets – what we call the Old Testament. Jesus has to be understood in the light of the Old Testament and we see this going on here in this Epistle. Jude is correcting false ideas about Jesus in the light of the Books of Moses. And that is why we persevere with difficult books like Leviticus in order to understand Jesus.

October 29th

Leviticus 10 vv 1-7

I received a lot of my early religious education from people who were in no doubt that the Bible was the Word of God, absolutely true and relevant for every generation, including our own. So, as a child and a young man, I always just accepted stories like this simply as the way things are. It was in later life that I encountered Christians who were not brought up steeped in the notion that the Bible is straightforwardly the Word of God. Some people reading the Bible for the first time as Christian adults are shocked by stories like these. Some people just don't believe them. Some people think they indicate a more primitive period of history when people had more primitive ideas of God. Now I can't imagine that in Cuxton or Halling today God is going to consume with fire from heaven anyone who approaches His altar inappropriately. On the other hand, neither do I think we can dismiss these Bible stories as not the Word of God or as no longer relevant for us today. Read them in the Light of Jesus, Who, on this subject, says, *If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee, go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.*

October 30th

Leviticus 10 vv 8-11

Drunkenness was one of the problems at the shrine at Shiloh when Eli's sons Hophni and Phineas had corrupted the priesthood. Drunken people obviously couldn't concentrate properly on worshipping God in spirit and in truth. They might also lapse into disorderly conduct and vice. I doubt if we are likely to get people turning up to church drunk (except perhaps Christmas Eve!) I do think however that it is important that we come to church in a spirit to give worship our best attention and I have to confess that I'm not always as good as I ought to be here, arriving in a rush or tired or letting my mind wander on to other things – which are all trivial when compared to the worship of Almighty God. There might be a bit more to this than that, however. At the pagan shrines priests and people very often deliberately became intoxicated with alcohol and other drugs and engaged in frenzied behaviour and ritual prostitution. They were seeking thrills and “authentic” experiences just like so many people do today on the drug and club scene. Such behaviour harms the people who do it and causes them to hurt other people and it always fails to satisfy our basic human need for

love which can only be satisfied by God. St Paul says, *Be not drunk with wine wherein is excess, but be filled with the Spirit.*

October 31st

Leviticus 10 vv 12-20

This passage is confusing. I think what is going on is that Eleazar and Ithamar were supposed to clean up after the mess left by Nadab and Abihu when they *offered strange fire before the LORD*. Most of us do have taboos about holy things. In our church, we don't throw away the consecrated bread and wine left after Holy Communion. None of us likes to throw away an old Bible or prayer book. On a couple of occasions I've known people to be given *blessed* objects of which they didn't really approve. The objects in question have been *blessed* by sub-Christian faith healers. The recipients haven't liked to use them because they are not quite Christian, but neither have they quite liked to throw them away. Something similar is I think going on here. Things have been offered in worship and are therefore *holy* but the worship wasn't pure and the objects concerned are not an acceptable sacrifice and have to be disposed of properly. We still have the same religious impulses as our ancestors but they need to be understood and channelled in the Light of Christ.

November 1st (All Saints)

Leviticus 11 vv 1&2 or 1-47

This is the chapter which someone drew to my attention and led me to think that a study of Leviticus would be worthwhile for our Church. The list of foods the Israelites may and may not eat is a list of taboos. Some of the forbidden foods we wouldn't eat for hygienic reasons or at least we can imagine why there might be hygienic reasons for not eating them in a hot country before the invention of refrigeration. Some of the forbidden foods are still taboo to us, in the sense that there is no health or nutritional reason for not eating them, but we're still disgusted by the thought of consuming weasels or bats. The real point of this list of unclean and clean foods is not health or hygiene, however. It distinguishes between the people of God, the Israelites, who keep these rules, from the Gentiles who don't.

Looking at this in the Light of Jesus, Who is *a light to lighten the gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel*, people of all races are

welcomed into the people of God. It is not a matter of blood as in DNA inheritance (physical descent from Abraham); it is a matter of faith in the Blood of the Lamb. We are Christians, we are the people of God, people of every race and language, because we accept Jesus in faith. What distinguishes the people of God in New Testament times (our own times) is not their race, but their creed. The marks of belonging are not circumcision and the observance of the dietary and ceremonial laws, but Baptism and the consequent observance of the Law of Love in faith.

Jesus breaks down the barriers between humanity and God, between Jew and gentile, between the different races, languages and social classes. As members of His Body, we inherit His apostolic mission to continue to break down these barriers between people and God and between people and people. And yet there remains a boundary. People are not co-opted into the people of God whether they want to be or not. They are free to join, to accept God's grace, or to remain outside, to reject God's grace. We have no right to pretend that there is no difference. We have no right to assimilate the Church to the world. *We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle.* (Hebrews 12 v10).

November 2nd

Leviticus 12 vv 1-8

On February 2nd we keep Candlemas or the Purification of the BVM – the 40th day of Christmas. Mary is performing the rite prescribed here after the Birth of Jesus. A lot of societies believe that life is sacred and that a woman who has born a child is set apart (that's the real meaning of *unclean* here). Even some feminists approve, because it gives the new mother a rest both from the duties of ordinary life and from the obligation to take part in organised religion. The Christian custom of *churching* new mothers, when their first outing after the birth was to go to church for a short service, carried something of the same idea. Childbirth was a risky business for both mother and child and it was a wonderful mystery when both came through safely and a new life was born into the world. Medicine and technology have made it possible to plan our families and have made childbirth much safer. I think it is a big loss, however, if we lose our sense of awe at the coming of a new

human being into the world. We thank God for the child and for his mother and we thank God for the medical technology which makes the whole process so much safer than it used to be.

November 3rd

Leviticus 13 vv 1&2 or 1-46

What the Bible calls leprosy isn't what we call leprosy today. That is Hansen's disease and it is an infection of the nervous system, leading to a loss of sensation and injuries consequent on the inability to feel pain. In the Bible leprosy covers a number of conditions which affect the skin. They are distasteful, disgusting, unclean and may or may not be contagious. This kind of leprosy is regarded as defiling and is dealt with drastically for the same reason that the Israelites don't eat pork or shellfish. It is a matter of being different from the gentiles, pure and, therefore, holy. If we're honest, it has to be admitted that we are often more squeamish about skin conditions than other diseases. We don't like to see rashes, boils and blisters or even birthmarks. Sufferers try to conceal what's wrong with them. Teenagers obsess about spots. Plastic surgery seems a perfectly reasonable way to deal with otherwise harmless disfigurements. So the ancient Hebrews aren't so very different from us as we prepare to condemn them for the way they dealt with lepers. See in the Light of Jesus, of course, leprosy is treated with compassion and so ought other diseases to be, including the possibly self-inflicted and the infectious, like, say, AIDS.

November 4th

Leviticus 13 vv 47-59

How can cloth have leprosy? Later on we shall see that buildings can have leprosy too in the biblical sense. What Leviticus is talking about here is of course mildews, moulds and rot. Again you can quite see why you would take drastic measures to prevent them from spreading. As we discovered to our horror at St John's, dry rot can advance a foot a day and destroy anything in its path. Moreover the pink spores it sheds are dangerous to human health. So there are good practical reasons for dealing promptly with mould whether in your rafters or your linen cupboard. Nevertheless, as with the food laws, practical hygiene is mixed up with ritual cleanness and the latter is the more significant.

I suppose, in the Light of Jesus, we might think of how the need to be holy (=loving in the New Testament and, as Jesus points out, ultimately in the Old Testament) trumps the need to for hygiene and health as for example when a doctor or nurse tries to treat an infectious patient or a fireman enters a collapsing building to save life.

November 5th

Leviticus 14 vv 1&2 or 1-32

The priests were the people with the skills to recognise when a person was cured of leprosy. When Jesus healed lepers, He would tell them to go and show themselves to the priests. Then, as we see here, there was an elaborate ritual of purification. We try not to treat illness as making people ritually unclean, though there are people who refuse to visit in hospital or are excessively afraid of infectious disease or are afraid of being contaminated somehow by contact with illness or even mention of some illnesses. Some people won't even talk about cancer.

Hopefully, however, we recognise physical and mental illnesses as what they are and we do our best for people who suffer from them, not being repelled by distressing symptoms (physical or mental) or blaming people for illnesses that are not their fault or judging them for what may be (obesity, addictions, diseases associated with tobacco or alcohol, DIY or sporting injuries). Many diseases respond well to scientific, medical treatment. Many diseases clear up on their own. We ought not to lose our sense however that all healing ultimately comes from God and therefore to pray to God for the sick and to thank God for their healing.

November 6th

Leviticus 14 vv 33&34 or 33-57

This is the section I promised you about a house getting leprosy – presumably meaning rot or mildew or some such. The concept that I thought needed highlighting was v2 the idea that God had afflicted the house with leprosy. This is the biblical view that nothing happens outside the providence of God. There is no chance. Satan can do nothing unless God at least allows him to do it. Although people are morally responsible for the choices they make, nevertheless their actions necessarily contribute to the outworking of God's plan for the salvation of the whole of Creation.

That on first sight is hard to swallow, but isn't it harder to think that some things happen outside God's control – either by chance or as a result of Satanic or human wickedness?

November 7th

Leviticus 15 vv 2&19 or else whole chapter.

I give the option of reading only two verses because a lot of what the chapter says is disgusting and because its provisions lay a heavy burden on sick or unfortunate people, which we would quite rightly want to avoid doing. Taking the disgust first, a lot of us are squeamish about blood and other bodily fluids. They do seem unclean to us in the biblical sense as well as in the sense that blood and other bodily fluids can be sources of infection. They do have to be handled carefully especially in hospitals and sick rooms. On the other hand, while we might reasonably expect people both to respect our feelings of delicacy and to protect us from infection, we wouldn't want to add burdens to people who are already sick. You don't flaunt your dirty linen, but hopefully some compassionate family member, nurse or carer will deal with it if you can't!

November 8th

Mark 5 vv 25-34

Yesterday's reading explains the events in today's. Because the woman has been haemorrhaging for 12 years, she has been excluded from society by her *uncleanness*. Jesus shows compassion by allowing her touch. His virtue is transferred to her and she is healed. Her faith makes her whole in every sense. So we are made clean by Christ's righteousness when we come to Him in faith and then, as members of His Body, continue His work of healing and purifying the world.

November 9th

Leviticus 16 vv 1&2

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God
(Hebrews 10v31)

How do we feel about God? Are we in awe? Do we experience the fear of the LORD? Are we consumed by a passionate love for God? Are we astonished that He allows us to stand in His Presence and serve Him? Do we feel comfortable in God's Presence as in the presence of a loving father or mother? Do we think of God as a familiar friend? Or don't we care much about Him at all? Do we treat God casually?

Indifferently? Or even with contempt? I think all the first six responses there make sense, but the last are extremely dangerous to us and to the Church. We cannot live without a proper relationship with the Source of our Being and the Church cannot flourish unless her members honour her as His Creation.

Firmly I believe and truly, God is Three and God is One;
And I next acknowledge duly Manhood taken by the Son.

And I trust and hope most fully in that Manhood crucified;
And each thought and deed unruly, do to death, as he has died.

Simply to his grace and wholly light and life and strength belong
And I love supremely, solely, him the Holy, him the Strong.

And I hold in veneration, for the love of him alone
Holy Church as his creation, And her teachings as his own.

Adoration may be given, with and through the angelic host,
To the God of earth and heaven, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

November 10th

Leviticus 16 vv 3-8 or 1-34

We've all heard of scapegoats. Some of us at times might have felt that we have been made scapegoats on occasion. Well this is the origin of the term. In the ritual on the Day of Atonement it was thought that the sins of the people were transferred to the scapegoat which was then taken out into the wilderness to bear their sins away. We can possibly see the logic while finding it hard to see the sense. But, of course, this ritual is one of the ways of understanding what Jesus accomplished for us. He bears our sins. All our sins are laid upon Him. He takes our sin right away so that we may be at one with the thrice holy God.

November 11th

Hebrews 8 vv 1-13

In the Epistle to the Hebrews the author is explaining to the New Testament Church the significance of Jesus in the light of the Old Testament as revealed by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. The point is that the tabernacle with its holy of holies and the ark of the covenant are shadows of the heavenly reality. The priesthood of Aaron is a shadow of true priesthood the function of which is to form a bridge between Creator and Creation. The system of sacrifices in the Old

Testament is a shadow of the Atonement which God has wrought in Jesus Christ.

The Jewish high priest could only go into the holy of holies once in the year because he was a sinful man (like all human beings except one) and unworthy to enter into the presence of God. Jesus is eternally in the presence of God the Father, both because He is God the Son and because He is the man without sin.

The Jewish high priest had to offer sacrifice for his own sins. Jesus is without sin and is present in Heaven by right.

The Jewish high priest sympathises with human weakness because he is human. Jesus too is fully human and understands all our weaknesses.

Sacrificing various animals was no permanent remedy for sin, but Jesus is a *full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world*.

There is now a new covenant. The Ten Commandments of the Old Testament were written on two tablets of stone kept in the Ark of the Covenant. Under the New Testament, God's perfect Law of Love is written by the Holy Spirit on the hearts of believers.

Believers themselves, therefore, are empowered with Christ and in Christ and through Christ to enter into the Presence of God and, as a royal priesthood, to offer themselves, their souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice, *a reasonable, holy and lively sacrifice*.

November 12th

Mark 15 vv 33-38

Jesus utters that terrible cry of dereliction when it seems that in taking on Himself the sins of the whole world the scapegoat has separated Himself from the love of God because God and sin can't mix, but, when He gives up the ghost, when the sacrifice is offered by the high priest on the cross, robed in blood, the Atonement is made. The temple

veil is rent in twain and there is access to the Father in Christ available to all humanity through grace by faith.

Therefore we, before him bending,
This great Sacrament revere:
Types and shadows have their ending,
For the newer rite is here;
Faith our outward sense befriending,
Makes our inward vision clear.

In this hymn St Thomas Aquinas celebrates the way we proclaim Christ's Death in the Christian Eucharist until He comes again in glory and experience the reality of His Presence in the fulfilment of His Words, *This is My Body, This is My Blood*.

November 13th

Hebrews 9 vv 1-10

The film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is just one of many works of fiction based on the fact that the Ark of the Covenant would be really worth having. There is so much gold in its construction that it would be incredibly valuable for its metal content alone. It was also a marvellous piece of craftsmanship. It would have tremendous historic significance. There seem to be mysterious powers associated with it. Suppose a group of archaeologists found the lost Ark and exhibited in the British Museum. I reckon the queues to see it would stretch back to the Tottenham Court Road.

Yet what Hebrews makes clear here is that the Tabernacle and the Ark are mere types and shadows of Jesus. The true significance of the Ark was as a sign of God's Presence with His people and as a sign of the way by which human beings may enter into the Presence of God. And we don't need the Ark, the type or shadow. We have the Real Thing. Jesus is God present with His people. He may enter into the Presence of God through Him. So ought there not to be much more interest in the Real Thing than in the type or shadow?

November 14th

Hebrews 9 vv 11-14

The Tabernacle and the Jerusalem Temple were made on the pattern of Heaven God showed Moses on Mount Sinai. But nothing made by human hands could be an adequate dwelling place for God. As King

Solomon put it, *Not even heaven or the heaven of heavens could contain Him.* Tabernacle and Temple, Ark of the Covenant and Holy of Holies, none of them could be more than types and shadows of the eternal reality.

God is everywhere and, I think I can say without venturing into heresy, everywhere is within God. God is always and all time is within Him. And yet, the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily in Christ. So Jesus actually fulfils the function of which the tabernacle and temple are types. Jesus is the House of God. Those who are in Christ are also those in whom Christ dwells. So individual Christians are the temple of God, the dwelling place of God and the Church corporately is the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the place where God dwells. We are of ourselves no more worthy, no more clean or holy, than the Tabernacle or the Jerusalem Temple, but we are cleansed, we are sanctified by the Blood of Christ. As high priest, He has offered Himself in sacrifice for us, to cleanse us eternally from every stain, so that we may abide for ever in God and He in us.

Lord, we thy presence seek;
May ours this blessing be;
Give us a pure and lowly heart,
A temple meet for thee.

November 15th

Hebrews 9 vv 14&15

The Bible story is basically that God pours out His blessings on humanity, human beings reject His love, the consequence of this sin is death, and God acts to redeem His people. This is the story of the Garden of Eden, the Flood and umpteen stories in the Old Testament. Even God's good gifts are perverted by sinful human beings so that the things which ought to have been for our profit are used by us to drag ourselves down. In Christ we are set free from this original sin to live God-like lives. That's worth pondering and wondering why we don't take God up on His promises.

November 16th

Leviticus 17 vv 1-7 or 1-16

The reason people are supposed to bring their beasts to be killed to the priests is the danger that they will sacrifice their animals to pagan gods

or to distorted versions of the LORD. We've got used to the idea that religious people are nice people. We certainly are. Also that religion isn't particularly important. Going to church, a lot of people in Britain think, is a generally harmless activity which sometimes does some good in that church is a good place to make friends, the Church conserves many of Britain's historic buildings and does a great deal of charity work. We tend to assume that people of other religions are really much like us except they wear "funny" clothes, say different prayers and keep different holy days. So long as they send their children to school, support themselves by honest work and don't interfere with other people, we are quite happy to let people practise religion in any way they want.

In such a comfortable society as ours, we forget what a powerful force religion can be – the religious wars, riots, persecutions, the Inquisition, fatwas, etc. Religion is a very powerful force in human nature and a significant number of human beings will put faith before family, friends or nation. The Church, synagogue, temple and mosque are always alternative sources of power and influence to the government and the organs of the secular state and so they should be. Remember Hitler and Stalin. Some of what passes for religion, however, is downright evil. That is why Leviticus wants to ensure that religion is practised in accordance with the Law of God and not at the whim of human beings.

November 17th

Leviticus 18 vv 1-5

When a footballer or a film star is caught taking drugs, committing adultery or drinking while drunk, the cry goes up that these people are supposed to be role models. TV dramas and soaps are supposed to offer positive role models for working women, ethnic minorities, the disabled and gay people. The idea is that we somehow absorb our values from the culture, the people around us and especially that we try to copy the people we admire. In the end, however, it is not the characters in *Eastenders* or Premier League footballers or even our parents and teachers; it is from God that we should take our standard.

November 18th Leviticus 18 vv 1-19 or 20 or don't read these verses.
You probably don't need it spelt out that incest is wrong. It's not just that children born of incest may be more likely to suffer deformity. It is that family relationships are of different kinds. The relationship between brothers and sisters or parents and children is a different kind of love from the relationship between husband and wife. Love does not have to be expressed sexually and, except in the circumstance of Christian marriage, it ought never to be so expressed. You need to be able to trust your in laws, cousins, siblings, etc., to care for you without exploiting you. I think it is also important to point out that it is possible and a great blessing to have close friends, without any sense that sex could come into the relationship. I fear that one reason why some people advocate "gay marriage" is that they do not recognise the possibility of deeply caring friendships without any sexual connotations.

November 19th Leviticus 18 v21
People do terrible things in the name of religion – including the human sacrifice of their children. People who do terrible things in the name of religion do not know the LORD.

November 20th Leviticus 18 v22 or vv 22-24
Yuk! I couldn't miss out v22 because a lot of Christians who never otherwise refer to Leviticus use this verse as a proof text against the practice of homosexuality. Maybe they are right to do so, but they need to ask themselves this. If they don't think that a lot of the other provisions in Leviticus are binding on Christians in C21 Britain, why do they insist that this one is? It seems to me that you can argue that this is a provision for a desert tribe 3,000 years ago which needs its own distinctive code of behaviour to avoid assimilation with the surrounding culture. Similarly you can argue that when St Paul speaks hundreds of years afterwards as a vice, what he is referring to is for the need for Christians to distinguish themselves from the corrupt Roman practice of forcing boys into prostitution. You might then argue that a faithful "gay marriage" in C21 England is an entirely different thing and there is nothing wrong with it. Or you might argue that God

intended sex for man and wife within marriage and that every other kind of sexual activity is sinful, but you do need to think it through.

November 21st

Leviticus 18 vv 25-30

As I wrote a few studies back, since childhood I've tended to accept the Bible as it is without questioning the stories it tells. However certain things come as surprises to new readers! One thing that came up lately – obvious when you think about it – is that if God set the Hebrew slaves free and led them out of Egypt (obviously a good thing), and brought them into the Promised Land, they had to displace and dispossess the people who were already living there, the Canaanites, etc. (morally maybe harder to justify). Insofar as there is a biblical justification for taking over the land of Canaan from the existing inhabitants, it is that the Canaanites were corrupt and did not deserve to live there. They worshipped false gods. They are accused of human sacrifice. They practised cult prostitution and used alcohol and other drugs to get “out of their minds.” The implication is that their social order was lacking in the concepts of justice and mercy. The idea here seems to be that a society can be so out of kilter morally that it forfeits the right to exist. Now there's a thought. Suppose we thought that Nazi Germany was such a wicked state that it had forfeited the right to continue to exist. How many Germans would we be justified in killing in order to bring about its demise? Would we be entitled to take over its assets and its land? Is there a point where Syria or Zimbabwe or wherever sinks so low into barbarism that morally (and militarily) superior nations have the right or, perhaps, duty to intervene and destroy their governments? If so, how much damage to property is justifiable, how many lives taken? A minority of Jews today believe that the Israeli state has the moral right and duty to deal with present day Palestinians in the same way as their ancestors dealt with the Canaanites. I'm sure most of us think they are wrong, but then why are we fighting in Libya?

November 22nd

Leviticus 19 vv 1&2

Reaching chapter 19 with this study, I feel like I've just swam across the bay in choppy water and against the tide and have now reached a sun-bathed stretch of sandy beach. Most of the following provisions

are definitely ethical in a way that we can understand rather than about ritual purity and holiness, which makes less sense to us. Anyway, the people of God are to be holy, because God is holy. As Jesus says to us, *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.*

November 23rd

Leviticus 19 v3

Honouring parents and keeping the Sabbath are two of the Ten Commandments. It is curious if we think one is important while disregarding the other. Those who think the Bible does women down ought to note that we are told to honour our mothers as well as our fathers. Those who think it out of the question that we should fear God ought to note that we are told here to fear our parents in the same way. It's the same Hebrew word (אָרַא yara) as in the words *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*. Whatever it means to fear the LORD, it is the same sort of thing as the reverential love that good people, the LORD's people, have for their parents. Jesus was fulfilling the Old Testament, not annulling it, when He taught us to address God as *Father*. As for the Sabbath, obviously Christians are not slavishly following a regime of works of the law. We changed the day of obligation to meet together for worship from Saturday to Sunday – the day Jesus rose from the dead. On that Easter Sunday, He made Himself known to His disciples in the breaking of bread, as He still does. I should have thought that we would have been even more enthusiastic in our attendance at the Sunday Eucharist and keeping the rest of the day as special than Orthodox Jews are in the observance of Saturday.

November 24th

Leviticus 19 v4

Some of you may remember a speaker, whom we all respected very much who used to address us every year, telling us about when he was invited into a Buddhist shrine and found himself expected to bow down to the image inside. I think he swallowed hard and bowed so as not to offend his hosts who had courteously invited him into their place of worship. When we were in the Holy Land, we took off our shoes when we went into the mosque and I had to put on a cap when I entered the Jewish sacred library at the foot of the Wailing Wall. But should we? It is a matter of love for other people to show courtesy to them and to their beliefs. On the other hand, it would be wrong to compromise our

beliefs or to let other people think either that we were not Christians or that our Christian principles were not important to us. I think the measure by which to judge what we should do would be the highest Christian principle of them all – love, but you have to work out what it means to love in each situation.

November 25th

I Corinthians 8 vv 1-13

Once the Gospel had spread beyond Israel, the Church found itself inhabiting a pagan world. Christians were not of the world, but they had to live in the world. So how far could they compromise with the world in which they lived without compromising their citizenship of Heaven? This is a question we still have to ask ourselves, perhaps daily. In the ancient world, whenever an animal was killed for food, it was in some sense a sacrifice. We've seen in Leviticus that for the Jews to kill an animal was a sacrifice to the LORD. The beast had to be killed in a certain way and there were rules for how the carcase was to be dealt with. This is still the case in that Jews require their meat to be kosher and the Moslem equivalent is halal. The pagans in ancient Corinth effectively sacrificed their food to their pagan gods, their idols, even when it was slaughtered in the public slaughter house. So ought Christians to be eating the meat that was on offer in Corinth, knowing that it had been offered in sacrifice to idols? Paul's robust view is that the pagan gods don't really exist. Idols are nothing. So it really doesn't matter. Thank the one, true God for your food and eat it without asking questions. On the other hand, you don't want your pagan friends to think that you believe there is anything in their pagan religions. So don't eat with them if they make a point of saying that the meal is a feast in honour of a pagan god. Also, there may be Christians whose consciences are troubled by the thought that the meat might have been offered to an idol. Don't offend their consciences by insisting on your right to eat anything you want. The principle is love. *Knowledge puffeth up but charity edifieth*, says Paul. What he means is that it is easy to be proud of your knowledge that idols are nothing, but it is more important to love other people and to build them up by your faithfulness to the Truth than it is to show off your sophistication. I think it was the London Borough of Harrow which recently announced that all the meat served in school dinners would be halal

meat. Their argument was that there are a lot of Moslems in Harrow schools who won't eat any other kind of meat and it won't hurt the rest of us. Some people object on the grounds that they believe halal and kosher methods of slaughter are inhumane by modern standards. Some other people are concerned that they are being dragooned into conformity with the norms of another religion. Some say it doesn't matter. What do you think?

November 26th

Romans 14 vv 1-9

In Rome, Paul encounters a similar problem. The Church is rowing about what St Paul considers to be trivia, what Christians should eat and drink, what Sabbaths and holy days they should observe. It is far more important to build one another up into the full stature of Christ. Don't exclude people because their faith is weak or their understanding limited. But don't bully them either. Or get them into pointless arguments about things that don't matter. It's God's place to judge people, not ours. And we will all have to give account of ourselves to God – we ourselves as well as other people. If we want to stand before God with a clean conscience, we would be advised to be supporting other Christians in their faith, not undermining them.

I latch on to Paul's teaching here. Why do we in the Church have so many rows about things which matter so much less than our relationship with God and with one another? When I think of the damage done in our own parish by rows over things which in the end don't matter!

And yet we do have to decide what services to hold on Sundays and other occasions, what vestments and frontals to use, what kind of music, what sort of social events, how we spend our money and look after our buildings. All trivial relative to our Christian calling. All potentially destructive of our Christian fellowship. Yet unavoidable because decisions do have to be taken about them. No wonder I hide away from PCC whenever I can!

November 27th

Romans 14 vv 10-23

Years ago I had a Christian friend, fairly new to the faith I think, who believed that all Christians should avoid alcohol. He cited this passage in Romans to say that we ought not to risk bringing other people down by what we eat or drink. Alcohol is so dangerous to people who use it irresponsibly that it would be better if we all gave it up so as not to put temptation in their way. I don't think he was right in all cases, but he had a point. Anyway Paul is reviewing what it means on the one hand to be unclean (see Leviticus) or on the other to be acceptable to God (see Leviticus). Paul's point is that it all depends on love.

November 28th

Leviticus 19 vv 5-8

We're back to what constitutes a proper sacrifice. I suppose by the third day it wouldn't be as fresh as it was to begin with. Only the best for God, don't forget. Also note that being right with God is a condition of being a member of the community. Faith is a corporate thing. We belong to God as individuals and as a community of faith. We belong to one another. I've just heard of some Dutch pastors who think you can have Church without God. They think that belief in God is no longer tenable in the modern world but that the fellowship of the Church, the community of faithful people is a good thing which ought to be preserved. On the other hand plenty of people think that you can have God without Church, which I suppose you can, if, say, you were marooned on a desert island, but it makes very little sense in the light of the Bible's teaching about membership one of another, membership of the Body of Christ.

November 29th

Leviticus 19 vv 9&10

Environmentalists like this. Don't be so greedy that what you take out of the land is unsustainable. Put something back. Allow Nature to recover. It is Good News for the poor. Don't use up everything you have on yourself and then put the rest in the bank. Leave something for other people. Most of us aren't farmers. So we'll have to work out for ourselves in our own lives how not to be so selfish as to consume what is unsustainable and how not to be so busy looking after number one that we have nothing left for anyone else.

November 30th (St Andrew)

Leviticus 19 vv 11&12

So why shouldn't we steal, lie, swear or blaspheme? Because we might get punished? Because we'd be hurting other people? Because society can't function if most people aren't honest and decent? Because if we cheat other people, they might cheat us? All these are pragmatic reasons for being decent and honest. They are all good reasons. But the ultimate reason for being good, the principle on which goodness is based, is *I am the LORD*. Goodness is the very nature of God. Goodness is therefore the nature of the people of God. Potentially it is the nature of all people because we were all made in the image of God and that is why the Gospel must be preached to every nation.

December 1st

Leviticus 19 v13

Some people quite deliberately put off paying bills until they are more or less forced to pay them. They calculate that the money is better earning interest in their own bank accounts or they regularly order more than they can readily pay for and balance their creditors one against another. And some people just can't be bothered to pay up. I've even known the Church to be slow to pay tradesmen and I've counselled the tradesmen concerned to quote Leviticus 19 v13 to the diocesan office or whomever. It is not loving or kind to keep people waiting for payments due. I'm not sure it doesn't amount to dishonesty to keep it earning interest for yourself when it ought to be in the hands of the person who has done a job for you. Delayed payment of bills causes tremendous problems for some small businesses who find themselves having to borrow money at interest to maintain their cash flow.

December 2nd

Leviticus 19 v14

Disability Discrimination legislation is fairly recent, but Leviticus got there first. It should surely go without saying that people who are blind, deaf or otherwise disabled should be especially looked after. Yet we still hear terrible stories about people being mocked, abused and even assaulted just because they suffer from some form of disability. Why shouldn't we do these things? *Fear thy God. I am the LORD*. These disabled people were made in the image of God. Christ died for them. It is God's nature to love them. It is the nature of the people of God to love them.

I am going to stick my neck out here. I don't believe that there are ethical principles independent of God. Nothing exists independently of God. Neither do I believe that certain laws apply only to believers whereas other laws apply to everyone. The universal law is love and all people are called to live by that law of love. All people are called to faith. That is why the Gospel is preached to every nation. All human beings are called to Christ like perfection, to divine holiness. We can have no truck with the notion of other standards for non-believers. All human beings are called to faith in God through Jesus Christ.

December 3rd

Leviticus 19 v15

Justice is impartial. It is easy to see why a bad judge might favour the rich and powerful and to see why that is wrong. But it is also easy to see why a kind-hearted judge might favour the poor and weak and I find it harder to see why that is wrong. But it is. If a rich man moves his boundary to take in part of a poor man's field, that amounts to theft and he should be made to put it back. But if the poor man moves his fence to take in part of a rich man's land, it is still theft even if the poor man needs it and rich man might not miss it. The judge has to judge impartially. Which is not to say that there isn't room for mercy and compassion. Having established guilt by an impartial process, sentencing might well take into account all kinds of mitigating factors. If a community's lawful government imposes taxes on the rich to provide for the needs of a poor, that is not theft. And of course a rich person might voluntarily decide to be generous to the poor. Indeed he would if he believed the Bible. But justice mustn't be perverted in the interests of the poor any more than it can be in the interests of the rich.

December 4th

Leviticus 19 v16

Leviticus is about community. God's people belong to God and God's people belong to one another. This is much more the case for the Christian Church than it is for ancient Israel. We are bought with a price. Christ died for us. It is spelt out in the New Testament that we are the Body of Christ – a much more intimate relationship, when you think about it, than a holy nation, but we are that too. *Charity edifieth.* Love builds up. Love which is the characteristic Christian virtue, love

which is the very nature of God, builds individuals and it builds community. Gossip, tale-telling, etc. destroy community. We all love gossip. Probably that is a manifestation of original sin. This brings me back to something we looked at earlier. When we looked at Leviticus 5 v1 I wrote *We are members of a community and we have a responsibility to our community. This duty includes being ready to speak up and give evidence for or against someone, to tell the truth in other words.* But I'm fearful of the destructive effect of us all spying on one another and informing petty bureaucracy of every minor infringement of trivial regulations. The second half of the verse probably means we ought to give honest evidence if a member of our community is facing a capital charge.

December 5th

Leviticus 19 v17

This is the obverse of v18 which I'm looking forward to getting to. But it's so important on its own. Don't hate. Don't nourish hatred. Don't hold grudges. No Christian should say, *I'll never forgive him or her.* Neither should we say, *I'll forgive, but I won't forget,* because that usually means we won't forgive either. It's difficult isn't it, to forgive freely? It's hard not to remember, to feel wronged, to bear a grudge. It's what we have to do though for our own health, for the health of the community and for the health of the person who has wronged us.

The second half of the verse is difficult to translate. The meaning seems to be that we have to deal with a neighbour's sin in a way which leads to the restoration of his relationship with God and with the community.

December 6th

Matthew 18 vv 15-20

When I first studied for the ministry one of the points made was that the concept of the Church (Ecclesia, ἐκκλησία) in the New Testament derives in part from the congregation (qhl, קהל) of Israel in the Old Testament. In fact William Tyndale, one of the first and greatest translator of the Bible into English uses *congregation* in preference to *church* as the translation of ecclesia. I think in Tyndale's mind the word *church* had come to signify the mediaeval Catholic Church with

all its vices – including the persecution of Bible translators. Anyway, the point is that congregation or church, Old Testament or New Testament, the people of God is a band of brothers (and sisters). Families fall out. Communities fall out. Congregations or churches fall out. So how do we deal with this falling out? The point both in the Old and New Testaments is restore unity, to restore the love between the wrongdoer and God and between the wrongdoer and the rest of the congregation. So Jesus here gives directions for the way to deal with disputes in the Church. The injured parties should try to sort things out privately. Then with the help of two or three trusted friends. Finally the matter should be brought before the whole Church, which, as the Spirit filled community, can act with the authority of God. You'd have to be sure to get it right, which would mean remembering that the purpose of any disciplinary action is restoration.

December 7th

Matthew 18 vv 21-35

The one who sins against one of us is described as a brother. We'll see when we get on to Leviticus 19 v18 what is meant by brother or neighbour. For the present let's say a brother is a member of the Church, a member of Christ. That is what members of the congregation are. We are members of Christ and members of one another. Quite reasonably Peter wants to know how often he has to forgive his Christian brother. Some people are very difficult. They are always offending us whether deliberately or unwittingly. How much do we have to put up with from people?

Jesus' answer is that we should always forgive. No-one's offences against us can compare with our offence against the thrice holy God. We are not worthy to stand in His Presence and worship Him. We fall so far short of the love of God and yet His love is so great that He provides our propitiation, our atonement in the Death of His Son. Love as the defining characteristic of the Church has always to be preserved at the cost of forgiving 490 times or 490,000,000 times.

December 8th

I Corinthians 5 vv 1-13

Paul has to work out these principles in the Church in Corinth – the congregation of the Lord. It appears that some of the Corinthian

Christians have come to the conclusion that they are effectively above the Law. They are justified by faith, not works. The spiritual realm is all that matters. So it doesn't matter much what they do with their bodies. One person in particular has gone so far as to commit incest with his stepmother. Paul is horrified. When he says we are justified by faith, not works, he doesn't mean that we're free to do anything we like, no matter how wicked. Our justification by faith sets us free from sin, free to live pure lives in accordance with God's perfect Law of Love. The fact that the spiritual and eternal are the true reality does not mean that the bodily and the time-bound are utterly unimportant. Our bodies are the Temple of the Holy Spirit and must not be defiled by wrongdoing. St Paul insists that this wicked person be disciplined, indeed he is to be put out of the Church for the sake of the whole congregation. Do we have that authority? If we have, should we use it? I'm afraid I do believe that with heavy hearts we sometimes have to let people go if their staying would destroy our fellowship.

December 9th

II Corinthians 2 vv 1-11

It's nice to know that the story we considered yesterday had a happy ending. The evil-doer who was put out of the Church at Corinth came to his senses and was received back. That was always the point – to restore him to fellowship with God and with the fellowship of the Church and to preserve the integrity of the Church – unity with God and with one another in fellowship with the Spirit of Him Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

The early Church had a saying *Extra ecclesia, nulla salus*. It means that there is no salvation outside the Church. Sometimes this was used uncharitably and people really meant that there was no salvation outside their particular branch of the Church. Sometimes it was unchristian gloating at the fate of unbelievers. But disentangle it from all that. Salvation is inextricably bound up with belonging to the people of God. For this reason we have to be as generous as possible in setting the boundaries of the Church to include as many people as possible within the fellowship, but we cannot for the same reason remove the boundaries altogether. No defining boundary, no community.

December 10th

Leviticus 19 v18

Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

It is well known that when Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment in the Law, He chose to love God, with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, which comes from Deuteronomy 6, and then adds that this is the second. *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.* In fact the connection is implicit here. As with all these other commandments in this chapter, the reason for the commandment is *I am the Lord*. God is love. Characteristic of the people of God is love. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record Jesus saying *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*. In John's Gospel Jesus is recorded as saying *This is my commandment, That ye love one another as I have loved you, Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends*. Some people think that in John Jesus is limiting the boundary of our love to the Church, but it is in John that Jesus teaches us that *God so loved the world*. Can He mean the people of God to do any less?

December 11th

Luke 10 vv 25-37

And who is my neighbour?

The lawyer knew perfectly well that God's Law was summed up in the commandments to love God and neighbour. He had read it for himself in the Hebrew Bible. But *who is my neighbour?* In the OT context, the neighbour or brother would appear to mean fellow Israelite. Israel was the people of God, a royal priesthood. They were to be united in love for God and for one another. This was so because of the nature of God. He is one. He is love. But the story Jesus tells challenges this assumption. Two leading members of the congregation of Israel – a priest and a Levite – fail to show love to their fellow Jew. But a Samaritan, whose status is much more dubious, not being a proper Jew, is obedient to the commandment. As St Paul will say later in Romans, a non-Jew can obey the Law for conscience sake whereas a Jew, despite all his advantages in terms of possessing the Scriptures etc., may fail to keep the Law. So the boundary is much wider than might have been supposed. The neighbour is not just the fellow Jew. Anyone is potentially a neighbour and therefore a brother. Anyone is

potentially a member of the congregation of Israel, the Christian Church. I should say that this implicit in the Old Testament, but it only become explicit in the New.

December 12th

Matthew 22 vv 1-14

A popular vision of the Kingdom of Heaven was a great banquet. The Israelites assumed that they (and probably they only) were invited by God. But when God sent His Son they failed to recognise Him. They got on with their ordinary everyday lives and they missed out on the invitation. The King then invited the people whom the wealthy and the ostentatiously pious would have regarded as riffraff. The Church is open to everyone. Heaven is open to everyone. Jesus is a light to lighten the gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel. There are no boundaries of race, gender, class or status. Jesus is for everyone. Anyone can come to the banquet. But the man who turned up without a wedding garment was turned away. You do have to change. God is calling a holy people. People who do not want to be holy – separated for God – exclude themselves. In order to be made holy you have to accept God's grace by faith in Jesus Christ. Those who reject God's grace exclude themselves. It is the only boundary, but it is very real.

December 13th

Romans 12 vv 1-5

In this chapter Paul talks about the nature of the Church. It is never a closed fellowship. Anyone can join through faith in Jesus Christ. It should bother us that most churches are fairly monochrome, that we succeed mainly in recruiting people like ourselves. Fresh Expressions gets round the problem of reaching people who don't *fit in* with the regular Sunday congregation by providing other types of gathering at other times, but at the risk of creating a multiplicity of churches each catering to its own clientele. Such a church is less than the Church. Church is for everyone. We belong to Jesus and He belongs to us. He belongs to God and so do we. We belong to one another. We are members one of another, united in Christian love – young and old, rich and poor, black and white, male and female – and we achieve this because we are transformed by Christ, through faith. We are changed. We have put on the wedding garment. We are a royal priesthood, a holy nation. We are separated for God. We are clean in Christ. We

are separated from the world by our holiness, the holiness which Christ imparts to us. Christian holiness is, however, manifested in love not in adherence to Levitical regulations. St Paul exhorts us not be conformed to the ways of this world with its divisions, alienated from God and alienated from one another.

December 14th

Romans 12 vv 6-21

We are all different, but we are all part of the whole. God has made us different. He has given us different talents and resources. He has given us different opportunities. That is how He means us to be. This is why we can say that each one of us has a specific calling, that God has prepared good works for each one of us to perform. We all have a unique vocation and there is something lacking in the Church when any of us fails to play our full part. But the part that we play is in the context of our membership of this worldwide fellowship of love, the Christian Church. So St Paul lists here some of the characteristics of God's holy people. These correspond to the provisions of Leviticus 19. What is about us that shows that we are members of the people of God? We love. We're hospitable. We're generous. We work hard. We use our gifts to God's glory and for the benefit of other people. We pray. We trust. We endure. We forgive. We don't resort to evil means even to achieve good results. Above all, we love.

December 15th

Romans 13 vv 1-7

Leviticus envisages Israel as the people of God living independently of other people, a nation with its own government. In St Paul's day, the people of God, the Church, were a minority in a secular state. So St Paul gives directions for living in the world, even though Christians are not of the world. The state and the world outside the Church are to be treated with respect.

In time of course the Roman Empire would become at least nominally Christian and the nations of Europe which succeeded it would be regarded as Christian countries. In that respect, they came to see themselves as more like ancient Israel than the New Testament Church – nations under God, self-governing by Christian principles. This is still the theory in England, with an established Church, a necessarily

Anglican head of state, bishops in the House of Lords, etc. An avowedly Christian nation presents certain opportunities and temptations – especially the temptation to assimilate. A minority Church in a secular state has other opportunities and other problems and that of course is what is increasingly confronting us in *post Christian* Europe.

December 16th

Romans 13 vv 8-10

Whether the people of God constitute the nation state, as in ancient Israel or as in Christendom era Europe, or whether the people of God constitute a separate body within a non-Christian culture, as was the case in New Testament times and is increasingly the case today, the defining characteristic of the Church is love. A godly nation is different from other nations. A holy nation is a nation which practises justice and mercy. It is a nation whose life centres on authentic worship and worship can only be authentic if it is performed by a just and merciful community. A Church in a secular society is distinguished by its love. *See how these Christians love one another.* The Church in the secular world is the salt of the earth, the leaven that leavens the lump, the light of the world. It can only be these things if its defining characteristic is love – love for God, love for people. This is true holiness. The love of God compels our worship. Authentic worship compels love for the people of God.

December 17th

Romans 13 vv 11-14

Israel in the Wilderness was on its way to the Promised Land. That is the context of Leviticus, commands given by God through Moses as they journeyed through the Wilderness towards the land of Canaan. The Promised Land would prove not to be the final fulfilment of the promise. *There remaineth yet a rest for the people of God.* The story of Israel is fulfilled in Jesus. He fulfils the Law and the Prophets. He is the High Priest. He is the Temple. He is the full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice. He is the embodiment of Love, the Incarnation of God. Jesus constitutes the Church, proclaiming the Good News to the whole of Creation and pouring out His Holy Spirit. The Church is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the Body of Christ, fulfilling her vocation as the people of God to complete the work of Christ. She

does this in the light of eternity, the understanding that all these blessings which we enjoy now are but types and shadows of the good things which God has in store for those who love Him.

December 18th

Matthew 1 vv 18-24

Years ago I was at a youth weekend at Graham Cheeseman House. I was still a youth at the time. This story came up and one of the girls thought it would have been harsh for Joseph to abandon his fiancée when he discovered she was pregnant, although he knew that he was not the father. What do you think? It would mean accepting that the girl he loved had betrayed him. It would mean bringing up another man's child. He might have gone on and married her because he was too weak to imagine living without her. He might have gone ahead and married her because he was strong enough to give Mary another chance. I should think it was possible to be both too weak to live without her and strong enough to get over the hurt and give her another chance. As it was, God sent an angel in a dream to explain to Joseph what was really going on. The Baby was the Son of God. He was to be *God with us* – Emmanuel, Jesus, *The LORD saves*, because He will save His people from their sins. But other people wouldn't have known that and possibly drew their own not very nice conclusions.

December 19th

Luke 1 vv 5-25

Only Matthew and Luke tell us about the Birth of Jesus. Mark begins with His Baptism when He is 30 years old and John sets the story in the context of eternity. Jesus is the Word Who was with God and Who is God. Both Matthew and Luke understand and explain the significance of the Birth of Jesus in terms of the fulfilment of the Old Testament – the Law and the Prophets. For Matthew Jesus is the child to be Born of a Virgin, the Saviour.[†] Today's passage in Luke actually reads like a bit of the Old Testament. It recalls births such as those of

[†] I know that modern scholars point out that Isaiah 7v14 in which the birth is predicted in the original Hebrew refers to a "young woman" rather than specifically to a virgin. The Greek translation of the OT has "virgin" however and that is certainly how Matthew, inspired by the Holy Spirit, interpreted it. So I don't really think that we have to worry too much about this point. Within the community of faith, the Church, we know that Jesus was born of a virgin and we know that His Birth is the fulfilment of God's plan for the redemption of the whole created universe, partially revealed in the OT. People outside the community of faith probably wouldn't believe that Jesus was born of a virgin anyway.

Isaac, Sampson and Samuel, whose wonderful lives are heralded from the very beginning by the miraculous circumstances of their births. John the Baptist is the last and greatest of the OT prophets, the one who fulfils the role of Elijah the archetypal prophet and forerunner of the coming of the Kingdom of God.

December 20th

Luke 1 vv 26-38

In the Old Testament, the miraculous births are to women who are barren or who are too old to have children. So it is with John the Baptist. But the miracle regarding the Birth of Jesus is greater still. He is to be born of a virgin. Mary will conceive through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is possible to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and to believe that Joseph was His biological father. Quite a few Christians do believe that for either or both of two reasons. One reason for thinking that Joseph must have been Jesus' biological father is that some people just don't believe in miracles. They don't believe that God ever does anything to change the course of this world. Such people have to discount a lot of the Bible and of Christian history as well as the personal experiences of many people. Why do they pray if they don't think God intervenes in the affairs of this world? The other reason for believing that Jesus must have a human father is because He has to be in all respects like us. But then He also has to be fully God. I'm happy with the traditional formulation *God, of the Substance of the Father, begotten before the world: and Man, of the Substance of His Mother, born in the world.*

December 21st

Luke 1 vv 39-45

This episode is what we call the Visitation – when Mary visits her cousin Elisabeth who is already six months pregnant. The two women are so overjoyed that their utterances have been preserved and are still used in our worship today. Mary's song is of course the *Magnificat*, sung at Evening Prayer in the Church of England. Again it is rich in the Old Testament. It is very similar to the song Hannah sang at the birth of the prophet Samuel hundreds of years previously. Hannah's song was part of Mary's heritage as it is of ours. No longer saying Mattins and Evensong, we've lost these intensely personal devotions – the psalms and canticles. I wonder whether this loss has diminished our personal relationship with God. Maybe we no longer have the words to express our personal devotion, our hopes and fears, our

penitence, our praise and worship. Hymns and spiritual songs are all very well but they aren't inspired by God in the same way that the Bible is. We're too impatient to give the time and effort to what may seem (and may actually be) difficult. I may of course be wrong about this as part of the reason for our lack of zeal, but I am genuinely puzzled as to how we have all become so indifferent towards God. If God is, God matters more than anything. Indeed if God is, everything else has to be understood in the Light of God. On the other hand, if there is no God, then obviously religion is of no importance whatever, or, worse than that, it is a pernicious lie. What makes no sense at all is a half-hearted response to God. Surely we must either deny Him or offer Him ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice.

Elisabeth's words form part of the *Ave Maria* (lines 2&3). The first line is the angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary. It is only the last three lines that can cause anxiety to us Protestants. Maybe Mary and the saints in heaven do pray for us. It would seem to me logical that they do as their wills in heaven are totally united with God's Will for us, but the Bible says nothing about asking their intercession and we don't have to as we all (like them) have direct access to the Father through Jesus the Son.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee;
blessed art thou amongst women,
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

December 22nd

Luke 1 vv 46-56

What do the words we say mean to us? We hear the same Bible readings again and again. We same the same prayers. What do they mean to us? I expect we all have to admit that sometimes we're not paying attention and they don't mean much at all. We might also have become fixated on one particular meaning – the explanation we were given when we were young, or an interpretation that meant something to us at a particularly significant times in our lives. But Bible readings and many traditional prayers have many meanings. Every time we come to them, they may have something fresh for us, if only we are open.

For some of us the *Magnificat* is epitomised by a cathedral choir singing a traditional translation such as the 1662 prayer book or the mediaeval Latin version to a classical musical setting. For others of us, it's Evensong in the church we grew up in. The *Magnificat* speaks to us of motherhood or of the mystery of the Incarnation. In some parts of the world, however, where there is great poverty, the most obvious meaning of the *Magnificat* is that the Kingdom of God brings social justice.

December 23rd

Luke 1 vv 57-66

We're getting near to Christmas. In the northern hemisphere we celebrate the Birth of Jesus at midwinter. The days are short. It's dark for fifteen or sixteen hours. It's cold outside. Although we don't know what time of year Jesus was born, it made sense for the Church to take over the old pagan midwinter festivals and make them a celebration of the coming of the Light. John is the forerunner. He will prepare for the coming of Jesus. He tells us to get ready because the Kingdom of God is at hand. What do we need to do to be ready for Jesus? John tells us to repent. What do you and I need to repent of this Christmas? What does the Church in Cuxton and Halling need to repent of? What does England need to repent of?

December 24th (Christmas Eve)

Luke 1 vv 67-79

Zechariah's song is what we call the *Benedictus*. Earlier generations would have known it by heart because it was sung at Mattins. In Jesus, God is fulfilling His promise. It's all there in the Old Testament. It's promised to Israel in the words of the Law and the Prophets. It is now clear that this Salvation is for the whole of humanity. All the pain and sin, all the darkness, the conflicts, the poverty, the betrayals and infidelities, the violence and dishonesty, the sheer selfishness and indifference to the need of other; the world, the flesh and the devil; sin and its wages, death: God is going to deal with all this in Jesus Christ. John the Baptist is going to prepare the way and it is going to happen now. As we read the Gospel we shall see how the plan unfolds in the words and deeds of Jesus, His teaching and miracles on the Cross and the consequences of that Death in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit so

that the people of God, in Communion with Jesus, shall participate in the mystery of the Resurrection and Ascension. I don't know whether we'd appreciate this more if we made more use of these ancient Gospel resources. I do know we don't appreciate these things one thousandth of enough.

December 25th (Christmas Day)

John 1 vv 1-14

Ever since I was a curate I've been complimented on the way I read this Gospel. Forgive me for being immodest! You might not agree anyway. But the reason I think I read it well is because I love it so much. These fourteen verses sum up the Christian Gospel. There are of course people who don't believe that there is a God. They form a minority of human beings. There are also people who claim to be agnostic. They don't know. Often, I think, they really mean that they don't care. For Moslems and Jews, God is wholly other. For deists and philosophers God is detached from Creation. For pantheists, everything is an aspect of God. For some other religions, God may be manifest in a variety of forms. What we believe as Christians is that God is; that God is the reason for everything; that God is wholly other, but that He is so intimately bound up with His Creation, that He is born into it; that we human beings are so special to Him that He is born as one of us. He made us to be like Him. He set us free and we reject Him, but His love for us is such that He pays the ultimate price to win us back so that we may live in Him for ever.

December 26th (St Stephen)

Acts 7 vv 51-60

It's handy for Christmas quizzes to know that what everybody else calls Boxing Day the Church calls St Stephen's Day, but is there any more to it than knowing when King Wenceslas looked out? *God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son to the end that all that believe in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.* We know that God gave His Son to die. We know that it is necessary to lose our lives in order to gain them, to renounce the world for the sake of our soul. Jesus is the faithful witness and the Greek word for witness is martyr (μαρτυρ). Those who follow Jesus find their lives in Him, life in all its fulness, eternal life. But their calling is to take up their cross and follow Him. All who have found eternal life in Jesus

are called to be witnesses. Many have, for their witness, become martyrs in the modern sense of the word. They have given up their earthly lives as a witness to the One Who brings us eternal life. Stephen knew his Bible. He fixed his eyes on Jesus. With that experience of the Word of God, he was able to become like Jesus, forgiving his tormentors and entrusting himself to God in all eternity.

December 27th (St John)

I John 1 vv 1-10

There are five books in the New Testament attributed to John – one Gospel, 3 letters and the Revelation. Whether they are all by the same John is another matter, but they do have similarities one with another. Scholars speak of a Johannine school. They all say a lot about love and light and joy and the Lamb of God. Our first verse today speaks of the reality of the Incarnation of the Son of God. The second person of the Blessed, Holy Trinity could be seen, heard and even touched. That experience is passed on from those first apostles to all who believe through their testimony. We are those who have not seen and yet have believed. Filled with His joy, we are called to shine as lights in the world. Living in His love, we are here to bring life to the world. *Jesus is the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world. Blessed are those who are called to His supper.*

December 28th (Holy Innocents)

Matthew 2 vv 8-13

Jesus was born into a wicked world. It is a world which needs redemption. Herod killed the young children. The story refers back to Pharaoh ordering the deaths of the firstborn in ancient Egypt. It is set in the context of the tremendous loss of life when the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Holy City in the sixth century BC. You only have to open your newspapers to see pictures of starving children, to read about wars and natural disasters. I'm writing these notes on the weekend when riots began again in our cities. It is a wicked world which needs redemption. Sometimes we treat all this as theoretical. We behave as though the Gospel were only of significance to Church people – and sometimes as not of very much significance to them. But it is a wicked world which God so loved. It is vitally important whether we are for Him or against Him. And there is no middle course.

December 29th

I John 2 vv 1-11

The first couple of today's verses used to be read at every C of E Communion service. They are still there as an option, but somehow we don't take up the option very often. They refer back to Leviticus – the need for propitiation. We have to be put right with God. Only God can put us right with Himself and He does this in Jesus. Sinners cannot come into the presence of God and live. Sinful nature is so contrary to God's holiness that it is consumed by it. It is like matter and anti-matter meeting in that destructive collision beloved of science fiction writers. Sin (and sinners) cannot survive the presence of God. Jesus, however, is the sacrifice that takes away the sin of the world and He is the advocate (Paraclete, Παρακλητος) Who pleads for us before the Throne of heavenly justice. Having been redeemed in Christ, having been set free from sin, having been born again into eternal life with Him, it follows that we must be people of love and light.

December 30th

I John 2 vv 12-17

Living up to being a Christian. Living up to the Christmas Good News. We often wonder why the *peace and good will* don't last and the New Year's Resolutions aren't kept. To be a Christian means to be transformed. It is not enough to sew a Christian patch on the old garment of our lives in the world. We are born again and the Holy Spirit works in our lives to transform us into the likeness of Christ. We know the Bible stories. We experience the fellowship of the Church. We participate in the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. We pray. It follows that we are Christ-like people full of His Life, shining with His Light, overflowing with His Love. But we do have to cooperate with God's grace. *God so loved the world* and in that sense so should we love the world, devoting our lives to the world's salvation, but we mustn't love the things of the world. We mustn't offer ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice to money or power or celebrity or fashion or drink or drugs or any of those worldly things. They all perish and so do all those who put their trust in them. Life is only to be found in God and we shall only find Him fully when, through Jesus, we offer our whole selves to Him.

December 31st

I John 2 vv 18-21

The coming of Jesus brings in the last times. He fulfils all that had gone before in the history of the universe, particularly that minute, but key revelation of God at work in human history in what we call the Old Testament. The coming of Jesus ushers in the new age of eternal light and life and love for the whole of creation except for that rebellious portion of the creation which stubbornly rejects His Love. We are caught between the times and there is a conflict between good and evil. There is hateful opposition to the Gospel and some of it comes from people who once seemed to know the truth. In all the trials and uncertainties, however, we can be sure of one thing. We can be sure of the love of God. We know it in our hearts. We have the witness of the Scriptures and of the Church. We are sealed with God's Holy Spirit. For now we walk through the darkness of this world by the light of eternity. At the end of time, we shall dwell in pure light and life and love. That is the Gospel message, the message by which we live, the message we are commissioned to share with the whole of Creation.