

The Gospel According to St Matthew



Bible Notes October – December 2017

50p

It's only four years since we last looked at Matthew, but, in my experience, there is always something new to find in the Bible, even when we are looking at very familiar passages. There are new insights, things we've never thought of before and sometimes a renewed spiritual awareness of the significance of truths that we have perhaps had for years in our heads, but maybe not in our hearts.

Matthew starts with the genealogy of Jesus, which might be discouraging for some readers, but he is setting Jesus in His human context. He is the son of Abraham, whose very name means father of many nations. Abraham is the father of the Jews (through Isaac) and the Arabs (through Ishmael), but, much more significantly, Abraham is the father of all those who have faith in God through Jesus Christ. Luke traces the genealogy of Jesus to Adam. Jesus, the Word, becomes flesh for the salvation of the whole of humanity. We come to God through faith in Him.

David is the archetypal King of Israel. He is the anointed one, the Messiah (in Hebrew), the Christ (in Greek). Metaphorically, the OT calls the King of Israel the Son of God. Jesus is literally the Son of God. The Spirit of God comes on the King of Israel when he is anointed in order that he may have the grace to fulfil his royal calling. The Holy Spirit comes to Jesus at His Baptism. Christian people are baptised into the Body of Christ. We are a royal priesthood. The Holy Spirit comes on us in order that we might have the grace to fulfil our Christian calling.

There are four women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus: Tamar, Rachab, Bathsheba and Mary. The first three achieved despite colourful pasts. Some people might have said they were bad women. Some people would say that they were the victims of men who did not respect women. Mary herself was suspected even by her husband to be. Yet she was the mother of the Son of God. Her child is Emmanuel – God with us – and Joshua (Jesus) – the Lord is our salvation. God can use us despite what other people might think of us or even what we think of ourselves.

October 2nd

Matthew 2 vv 1-15

Setting Jesus in His human context again, the other bible story in which a tyrannical king murders all the boy babies is in Exodus, when Pharaoh orders the Hebrews to kill their new born sons in order to prevent this immigrant population from multiplying in the land of Egypt. Moses is wonderfully delivered and grows up to deliver his people from slavery – though at the cost of the death of the Egyptian first born sons. Now Jesus is delivered from Herod by being taken to Egypt and Herod has his soldiers murder the innocents. So Jesus represents Israel. *Out of Egypt I have called my son.* He represents all the people of God. Indeed, He dies in our place so that we might live. Jesus also fulfils the Law. He does what Moses does only on an infinitely grander scale. He delivers, not just the Hebrews, but the whole human race, from slavery to sin and death. He teaches us the Law of God by what He says, by example and, above all by fulfilling God's perfect law of love in His own person. He leads us not to Canaan but to an eternity in the Presence of God. As well as being the new Moses, Who fulfils the Law, He fulfils the prophecies of the Messiah, the One like David born in Bethlehem. The gifts of the wise men bear witness that He is the King, God and God's priest, and the One *who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world.*

October 3rd

Matthew 2 vv 16-23

The children of Israel suffered as slaves in Egypt. Jesus shared their suffering. God hears the prayers of the afflicted. He delivers them from their affliction. The afflictors (if that is a word) face the Judgment of God. That was true in Moses' time and it is always true. The words of Jeremiah referred to here originated at the time when the Babylonians were besieging Jerusalem and laying waste to the surrounding towns and villages such as Bethlehem, where the tomb of Rachel, Israel's (i.e. Jacob's) second wife is located. This was centuries after Moses and centuries before Jesus was born, but the point is that God is always the same. He is a just God and a Saviour. The terrible things which happen in the world today grieve Him. He still hears the prayers of the oppressed. The wicked are under judgment. The righteous will be vindicated.

October 4th

Matthew 3 vv 1-12

I must admit that I am sometimes jealous of John the Baptist. Thousands went out to hear him and many of them were baptised in response to his preaching. We have the same Gospel to preach and yet we think we are doing well if we get fifty people to listen and most of them are likely to be the already converted. I

know that people can be very critical of my preaching, but I don't entirely blame myself. Many churches, like ours, have small and diminishing congregations. At least some of them must have good preachers. There is an indifference, even a mild antipathy, towards religion in this country. I wonder why. People don't seem to know their need of God. Here are a few reasons which occur to me.

- Most people are quite comfortable in their lives and don't see the need to pray for anything. They've forgotten from Whom all the good things we enjoy come. So they aren't thankful for their food or their health or their families and don't, therefore, feel accountable to God.
- People turn to science and technology to meet their material needs. They forget that God is the author of scientific laws and that it is He Who gives their skills to doctors, engineers, etc.
- People fill their lives with activity. They never pause to confront the essential emptiness of a life based on materialism. With 24/7 activity they never consider the meaning of *Be still and know that I am God*.
- Some Christians portray a God Who doesn't intervene in the world, Who can therefore appear to be an irrelevance, or at least a luxury we might take up when we've done all the important things such as earned our wage packet, cleaned the house, been to the gym and watched our favourite box sets. God, then, isn't a priority.
- Even some Christians have domesticated God, turning Him into a Santa Claus figure Who will always give us what we want but not make any demands on us. God is, for some people, what a cynic said about grandparents. You don't have to see them to know that they will always give you money if you ask for it.
- Admittedly, some people are put off God by the shocking behaviour of those who claim to be religious.

October 5th

Matthew 3 vv 13-17

There's been a lot of talk lately about fake news and false facts. Social media have been blamed for spreading untrue stories which credulous people then believe. Fake news and false facts have been blamed for election results in which voters have allegedly been deceived and some politicians are suspected of continuing to purvey fake news and false facts in order to maintain their position once elected. I'm not sure that there is anything new about all this. I was brought up with the warning not to believe everything you read in the papers and politicians have never enjoyed much of a reputation for honesty. What are new now, I suppose, are the rapidity with which stories can spread on the internet and the fact that we haven't yet learnt the healthy scepticism in dealing with it with which we approach village gossip or the tabloid press. Moreover, there is the phenomenon of post-modernism. People don't believe that there is such a thing as absolute truth. It's all relative and a matter of opinion.

But what about Jesus? The Son of God (Who is the fount and origin of everything which exists) becomes one of us. If that is fake news or a false fact, it's an outrageous con and we shouldn't pay it any attention whatsoever. But if it is true, it is the fact that matters more than any other fact. It changes everything. It demands our unqualified acceptance.

October 6th

Matthew 4 vv 1-11

When we are tempted to sin, we know that Jesus was tempted too. Sin is our failure to love – to love God with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves. We are all sinners. We are all tempted. Jesus is tempted as we are, but he is without sin. That is one reason why John the Baptist was reluctant to baptise Him. For everybody else, Baptism was a sign of repentance. For Jesus, it was a sign of solidarity. He is baptised in solidarity with us. We are baptised in solidarity with Him. Jesus is love personified. He is, therefore, tempted as we are and yet without sin – perfect God and perfect man. So, Jesus is with us in all our temptations and therefore understands from His own personal experience what we are going through. So we can pray in Him and with Him and through Him in whatever trial or trouble we face.

October 7th

Matthew 4 vv 12-25

John the Baptist's message was to tell people to repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Jesus has the same message. His coming to proclaim this message fulfils Old Testament prophecy. It is God's eternal plan for His Creation – that it should be redeemed in Christ. The signs of the Kingdom are the miracles – healing, cleansing, raising the dead, casting out devils - Christ's victory over sin, the world and the devil. He enrolls the apostles to work with Him in this task, to proclaim the Kingdom of God. The preaching is the

Word of God. God's Word effects what it proclaims. Preaching the Word brings in the Kingdom. If we are Christians, we are part of the apostolic Church and we share in the calling of Simon, Andrew, James and John to proclaim the Word of God. Are we as willing as they to forsake all and follow Him?

Collect for S James' Day: Grant, O merciful God, that as thine holy Apostle Saint James, leaving his father and all that he had, without delay was obedient unto the calling of thy Son Jesus Christ, and followed him; so we, forsaking all worldly and carnal affections, may be evermore ready to follow thy holy commandments; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

October 8th (Trinity 17)

Matthew 5 vv 1-12

In Thessalonica (Acts 17), the opponents of S Paul and his fellow missionaries describe Christians as people who have turned the world upside down. Today's reading (the Beatitudes) begins the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew chapters 5-7 form what I think is the best concentration of the teaching of Jesus. As we read through it, we shall see how Jesus shows us that what is required of us is to be far better than conventionally good. Everybody know right from wrong. We all know about fairness and justice. To be fair and just is required of us, but much more. Human beings were made in the image of God. Jesus, the Son of God, is the archetypal human being. We are called to be like Him, to be like God. Yes, that means that we should be fair and just, but it also means much more than that – mercy, unconditional generosity, faithfulness to the faithless, self-sacrifice, even in the service of the undeserving. It's a lot to ask. It's taking up the cross, but it is also the only road to eternal life. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? Matt 16²⁵

October 9th

Matthew 5 vv 13-16

To whom was Jesus speaking these words? At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, it says that His disciples came to him. A disciple is a student or pupil, someone who is there to learn from a teacher. At the end of the Sermon, it says that the people were astonished, the crowds. Am I being fanciful in imagining Jesus talking to a fairly small number, which grew into a great crowd as people came and joined them to listen? Maybe, some of them would have heard what Jesus had to say, put their faith in Him and become His disciples. I expect it was a gathering of *all sorts and conditions of men* (and women and children). Going by the rest of the Gospel, men of them would have been untutored, poor people. Some of them might well have been despised as *sinner*s. Very likely, the people who thought of themselves as religious didn't accept what Jesus had to say. They didn't know their need for Him. His teaching turned their world upside down. So let's say that these words of Jesus were addressed to *all sorts and conditions of men* (and women and children), who listened to the Gospel and became disciples. In that case, aren't they addressed to us? That being the case, we are the salt of the earth, etc.. Some thought.

October 10th

Matthew 5 vv 17-26

Christians who discard the Old Testament make a great mistake. Jesus doesn't destroy God's revelation of Himself in the Law and the Prophets. He fulfils it. We all know what justice means and fairness. We resent it when we aren't fairly treated. We know that we ought to treat people fairly and justly. We know that murder, adultery and perjury are wrong and I hope that most readers of these notes aren't guilty of any of them, although, even if you are, there is always a way back through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. You can always start again with a clean sheet, no matter what mess you have made of your life. That doesn't mean that murder, adultery and perjury don't matter and that God overlooks them. It means that Jesus has paid the price for all our sins on the Cross and we can be forgiven through faith in Him. This goes further, however. Not only are we not to murder, we are not to have murderous thoughts. We are to love our brothers and sisters, even the ones who don't deserve our love, because God does. Vv 23&24 are pause for thought before we come to Holy Communion.

October 11th

Matthew 5 vv 27-32

Just as we shouldn't nurse anger against anybody, neither should we have lustful thoughts about them. Of course it is right to desire your husband or wife and to court the one you intend to marry, but it is wrong to desire someone whom you are not free to marry. Divorce is a problem. In the marriage service, we promise unconditional love. We promise to love that person whatever happens. When we marry, God makes the two one. For many years, I worked on the principle that the marriage service means exactly what it says and that, therefore, people ought not to get divorced and, if they did, they ought not to marry again. *Till death do*

us part, not, till divorce do us part. And yet, human beings are fallible so long as we are on this earth, including Christians. Some people do find themselves (for all sorts of reasons) unable to keep their marriage vows. What then? A life of celibacy, maybe raising children alone? Or should they have another chance? Christianity is about making new beginnings. Surely, divorce isn't the unforgivable sin. If we applied the rule to its logical, but absurd, conclusion, you could murder your wife and marry your mistress, whereas, if you divorced your wife, you would have to remain celibate. So, I do now conduct weddings for people who have been divorced, believing that they are right to seek God's blessing on a new beginning. I'm still not entirely sure that I'm right, however! Has a relaxed attitude to divorce and remarriage so undermined marriage that people give up too easily when things get tough? What about unconditional love?

October 12th

Matthew 5 vv 33-48

I court, we're expected to swear on the bible. You hear people swear on all sorts of things (their mothers' lives, for example) in order to get us to believe them. None of that should be necessary, Jesus says. We should be honest and speak the truth anyway. And the rest of the chapter really does turn the world upside down. How can it be fair to let the bully hit you again, give people what you don't expect them to pay back, and treat well people who treat you badly? But God does and, if we're His children, so should we. Treating people with love when they don't deserve it sometimes makes them better people. Sometimes it doesn't, but it always makes us better people.

October 13th

Matthew 6 vv 1-6

I used to attend the functions of a charity which wasn't specifically Christian. I couldn't help noticing how they made a big fuss in public about what people had given to the charity or the work they had done for the cause. It is right to show our appreciation of other people and the good things that they do. On the other hand, we wouldn't want to think that we only did good things in order to impress others or for the status that a reputation for generosity and philanthropy might give us in the community. We should also beware of lauding Lady Bountiful who could give ten thousand pounds without noticing it over Jo Bloggs who really scrimped and saved so that he could give one hundred pounds. We are much more modest in the Church, rightly so, though sometimes we perhaps don't show that we value people enough. Unlike some American congregations, we're coy about saying what we put in the plate each week. I hope that is because we don't want to boast, not because we're ashamed of how little it is!

October 14th

Matthew 6 vv 7-34

Do we live by faith? Do we believe that God will look after us? I'm not suggesting that we don't need to work for a living or save to make proper provision for the future, but, do we in the end trust God? Are we prepared to take the risk of not working on the Sabbath Day in the faith that we can (normally) do all that we have to do on the other six days? Are we prepared to take the risk of putting less effort into school or work in the belief that God might have more important things, more fulfilling things for us to do? Can we accept that food and clothing are our servants, not our masters? Do we eat to live or live to eat? Do we wear clothes that are warm and comfortable (and nice-looking) to make us feel good or do we worry about what we look like and still feel bad about the way we dress? What are our priorities? God or Mammon? We can't serve both. Do we trust God for our material needs? Or do we think we shall only have time for God when we've looked after ourselves first?

He only is the maker of all things near and far;
He paints the wayside flower, He lights the evening star;
The winds and waves obey him, By him the birds are fed;
Much more to us, his children, He gives our daily bread.

October 15th (Trinity18)

Matthew 7 vv 1-5

Who should judge us? Do you want to be judged by other people? If not, on the principle of *do as ye would be done by*, don't judge them. It's not our place to judge God's other servants. S Paul tells us *Examine yourselves* (II Corinthians 13⁵) *whether ye be in the faith*. That makes sense. If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? In other words, do you live a Christian life, a Christ-like life? I'm sure, like me, that you fall short. Thankfully, the only Judge Who really matters is God. 1 John 3:19-21 ¹⁹ And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him. ²⁰ For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. ²¹ Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God.

We depend entirely on God's mercy and so does everybody else and it is not our place to judge or condemn them.

October 16th

Matthew 7 vv 6-20

Sometimes it is pointless trying to show people the right way. They just won't learn and they turn on you. Pray for them. We know how to care for the people we love. Can't we trust God? Romans 8³² *He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?* You can easily work out what it means to treat other people with love. How would you like them to treat you? Lots of people take the wrong word. The teaching of Jesus is counterintuitive. He turns our world upside down. We don't do good deeds in order to earn merit. God loves us and sets us free from sin. It is God's unconditional love for us which makes us good people. Only good people consistently do good things. We can recognise good people by their goodness. Bad people we hope to win by being conduits of God's unconditional love. It isn't saying that you are a Christian which is important. It is being a Christian.

And, you know, writing all these wonderful things makes me realise how far short I fall. How far short do you fall? We depend entirely on God's mercy.

October 17th

Matthew 7 vv 24-29

So you are advising a young person on how to get on in life. Do you tell him or her that the poor are blessed, that material goods are relatively unimportant, that we should turn the other cheek, lend to those who are quite likely to default, tell the truth even when a lie would be to our advantage, put God before Mammon? Or do we tell them to act with common sense? Worldly wisdom or the teaching of Jesus? Which would be a foundation on which to build a life?

October 18th (S Luke)

Matthew 8 vv 1-17

Luke was a doctor. He was a companion of S Paul and a significant figure in proclaiming the Good News of Jesus to the world. Traditionally, Luke has been believed to be the author of the Gospel which bears his name and the Book of Acts.

Healing is an important part of the ministry of Jesus. The healing miracles are signs of the Kingdom of God. While there is not a simple relationship between sin and sickness, illness is an aspect of evil. The Church has always shared the ministry of Jesus in caring for the sick and, where possible, curing them. There are miracles in the world today, but, most often, caring for the sick is simply a matter of loving consideration – keeping company with them, treating them kindly, washing, feeding, and the administration of appropriate medical treatment. Healing may be of body, mind or spirit. When our time on earth is over, the final healing is death when we go to be with out Lord for ever.

There is also healing of relationships – relationships between people and between churches and between tribes or nations. There is the healing of our relationship with God, from which all other healings follow. Health is closely related to wholeness. We are whole when we are at peace with God, with other people and with ourselves.

Almighty God, who calledst Luke the Physician, whose praise is in the Gospel, to be an Evangelist, and Physician of the soul: May it please thee that, by the wholesome medicines of the doctrine delivered by him, all the diseases of our souls may be healed; through the merits of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

October 19th

Matthew 8 vv 18-27

You either follow Jesus or you don't. The scribe spoke out bravely, but didn't think what he was committing himself to. The other man prevaricated. I'll follow You, Jesus, when I've got nothing else on. The disciples did follow Jesus into the ship. The ship is a symbol of the Church – going right back to Noah's Ark. We are saved, safe, as members of Christ's Church. There are, however, storms and it might sometimes feel like Jesus isn't around for us. He is with us, however. He is in the boat with us. He is more powerful than all the forces of chaos. If we follow Jesus unreservedly, we shall have fellowship with Him and the rest of the people of God. He doesn't promise that there won't be storms, but He does promise that

He will never leave us or forsake us. Romans 8³¹ *What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?* The following is a prayer from the BCP Baptism service: ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who of thy great mercy didst save Noah and his family in the ark from perishing by water; and also didst safely lead the children of Israel thy people through the Red Sea, figuring thereby thy holy Baptism; and by the Baptism of thy well-beloved Son Jesus Christ, in the river Jordan, didst sanctify Water to the mystical washing away of sin: We beseech thee, for thine infinite mercies, that thou wilt mercifully look upon this Child; wash him and sanctify him with the Holy Ghost; that he, being delivered from thy wrath, may be received into the ark of Christ's Church; and being stedfast in faith, joyful through hope, and rooted in charity, may so pass the waves of this troublesome world, that finally he may come to the land of everlasting life, there to reign with thee world without end, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

October 20th

Matthew 8 vv 28-34

The demons recognise Jesus and they know His power. Faith isn't believing that there is a God or that Jesus was a remarkable man. Faith isn't believing that the miracles happened or that there will be a Last Judgment. Faith isn't fear of hell. Faith is believing in God. It is knowing Jesus. It is loving God. Faith transforms us so that we are no longer conformed to the ways of this world but transformed into the likeness of the Son of God - stedfast in faith, joyful through hope, and rooted in charity.

October 21st

Matthew 9 vv 1-13

The story of the man sick of the palsy establishes that Jesus has power on earth to forgive sins. He heals our relationship with God. In Him our relationships with one another are healed. *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.* He makes us whole. Nobody, not even Matthew the tax-collector, is outside the scope of His love. Given that we Christians are in Christ and Christ in us, nobody ought to be outside the scope of our love. Matthew responds to the love of Jesus by following Him and Matthew is then enrolled in the mission to share the love of Jesus with the whole world – in his case starting with his fellow publicans and sinners.

O Almighty God, who by thy blessed Son didst call Matthew from the receipt of custom to be an Apostle and Evangelist: Grant us grace to forsake all covetous desires and inordinate love of riches, and to follow the same thy Son Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

October 22nd (Trinity 19)

Matthew 9 vv 14-17

So what comes into your mind when you think of tradition? Are traditionalists stuck in the past and unable to come to terms with the present, let alone prepare for the future? Or is tradition a precious gift from past ages to be received with gratitude and nurtured. (The word tradition actually comes from the Latin verb *to give*.) Is tradition a dead thing, liable to kill everything it comes in contact with? Or is tradition something living, which nourishes the present and adapts to meet the future? Actually, tradition means both. Abused, tradition is dead and threatens to kill the present and future. Used properly, tradition is the foundation on which we build. Jesus makes absolutely clear here the need for a new beginning. We must be born again. We must be crucified with Christ. *Behold I make all things new.* Yet He fulfils rather than destroys what has gone before. In the light of Christ we see that all that has gone before is preparation for Him and we build on the OT and everything which God has given us in the story of His Church and in our own personal lives as we seek to know Jesus and to serve Him in the world.

O God, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee; Mercifully grant, that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

October 23rd

Matthew 9 vv 18-38

More healings and casting out demons. This is Who Jesus is. He is the Son of Man. He is the Son of God. He proclaims the Kingdom of God by what He says, by what He does and, above all by Who He is. It ought to be the same for us – He in us and we in. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh and we are entrusted with His Word. The Word of God effects what it proclaims – the coming of God's Kingdom. He not only heals the sick; He raises the dead. The woman who comes to Him in faith is not merely cured of her issue of blood; she is made whole. There is so much to be done, so much need in the world. People are like sheep without a shepherd. You can say that again! Just look at the world around you. There is such a need for people to work with Jesus to proclaim the Word. Pray that God will send people into the world and ask yourself whether you might be one answer to your own prayer?

October 24th

Matthew 10 vv 1-15

Of the hundreds, possibly thousands, of disciples (students of Jesus), our Lord chooses twelve to send (apostles = sent). They are commissioned with the same task as God the Father gave Him – to proclaim the Kingdom of God with signs of the Holy Spirit working in the world. At this stage, they are not to go to the Gentiles. The Gospel must be first preached to the Jews – the people chosen to be entrusted with the oracles of God, the Law & the Prophets, which prepare the way for Jesus and are fulfilled by Him. Jesus Himself mainly preaches to the Jews and it is only after the Ascension and the sending of the Holy spirit at Pentecost that the mission to the Gentiles really begins in earnest. The apostles are not to worry about provisions but to rely on God and the people to whom He sends them to look after them. In what respect is our commission like the commission of the apostles in this story? We are clearly committed to completing the task of Jesus to proclaim the Kingdom of God to all creation. We know that that calling includes proclaiming the Good News to people of races and tongues – including our own neighbours, maybe starting with them! Miracles do happen today but it seems that we cannot expect hundreds of miracles any more. We can, however, treat the poor and the sick with love. I don't think that we are expected to make no provision for our mission, but we can be confident that the Lord will provide for us to do His work.

October 25th

Matthew 10 vv 16-28

There is a story about a C19 Archbishop of Canterbury on holiday in his diocese. He goes to the village church where he is staying and hears the most appalling sermon. The vicar explains that he has taken a vow to give up preparing his sermons and to rely wholly on the way the Spirit moves him on the day. The Archbishop dispenses him of this vow. Jesus isn't saying that the Holy Spirit isn't at work in our time of study and preparation for our Christian work. The bible, our training, our fellowship with other Christians, our experience of life, our rational minds as well as our emotions, are all gifts from God which we are duty bound to use for His glory and for the performance of His work in the world. What Jesus is telling His disciples and apostles (you and me) is not to be fearful. The Lord will provide. The Lord does look after us, even if our calling is martyrdom.

Grant to us, Lord, we beseech thee, the spirit to think and do always such things as be rightful; that we, who cannot do any thing that is good without thee, may by thee be enabled to live according to thy will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

October 26th

Matthew 10 vv 29-42

God cares about sparrows. That's important for two reasons. One is that, knowing that God loves all His Creation, it is clearly our responsibility to treat everything God has made with respect. The other reason is that God is intimately involved with everything. Not a sparrow falls to the ground outside of God's providence. So God is intimately involved with the whole of our lives. There is not a religious compartment – personal prayer, holy thoughts, church services and activities, maybe our life as a Christian family – and another world – work, school, sport, socialising – which is outside the love of God. Being a Christian is whole-heartedly loving God. Faithfulness to God may well cause division. You can't serve God and mammon. You are either for Jesus or against Him. The world will treat Christian people as it treated Jesus. This may present us with some very hard choices. Nevertheless, whatever sacrifice we may be called upon to make for Jesus is worth it. The gift of eternal life is only available in Christ. It is kinder to our unbelieving friends and relatives in the long run to maintain our integrity as Christians than it is to compromise our faith in order to please them. We are witnesses to our friends and families.

October 27th

Matthew 11 vv 1-24

Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?

The answer is in the signs that Jesus performs – healing, cleansing, raising the dead, Good News for the poor. So how would people know whether we are the ones sent by Jesus? How would people know that we are Christians? Those who don't want to know complain that John is too much of an ascetic and that Jesus enjoys partying too much. Those who don't want to know will always find a reason not to listen. I have grave doubts that the way to get people into Church is to find exactly the form of service, the style of music, the time of meeting which suits them. If they don't want to know, they won't come whatever we do. If they are open, however, if they are sincerely seeking, they won't be put off by trivia. What we have to do is to proclaim the Gospel authentically. We may make it easier for people to hear by attending to practical details

like time of day and disabled access as well as the language, music, ritual, etc. that we use, but what we really have to do to proclaim the Gospel authentically is to be Christ-like people in a Christ-like Church. It is love which will draw in the genuine seekers after Truth. Those who don't want to know may turn out to be the swine before whom we are warned not to cast our pearls lest they turn and rend us. If we preach the Gospel authentically, we may or may not attract large numbers of people, but we shall have done our duty. There is joy in heaven over just one sinner who repents and that might be your mission or mine – to convert just that one.

October 28th (S Simon & S Jude)

Matthew 11 vv 25-30

As many of you know, I chose the last three verses of this passage at my Institution and Induction as Rector of this parish. They are what Jesus offers us. Having received what Jesus gives to us, our calling is to offer the same to the world which He so loved. It is all of God. It's not something human beings can uncover by their own smartness or effort. It is all the gift of God. *Freely, ye have received; freely give.*

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

October 29th (Trinity 20)

Matthew 12 vv 1-13

I am disappointed when people ask me to arrange "private" christenings outside the main service, just for their family and friends. The reasons given are usually along the lines of the service being too early and the difficulty of getting the children ready. Yet families get up much earlier for work and school. When they go on holiday, they manage to get to the airport at the crack of dawn. Early Sunday morning, you see people out in large numbers at boot fairs, running and cycling. It's really a question of what people want to do. So why don't they want to come to church? If we believe in God, God is the most significant in our lives. Jesus commanded us to celebrate Holy Communion. He promised to be present where two or three are gathered together in His Name. So why the reluctance? In the past, as in our readings, the problem was that people turned the Sabbath into a burden, instead of what God intended it to be – a time for refreshment. Nowadays, the problem is that we ignore the Sabbath and thereby deprive ourselves of the blessings of hearing the Word, sharing in Holy Communion and enjoying fellowship with Christian people.

O Almighty and most merciful God, of thy bountiful goodness keep us, we beseech thee, from all things that may hurt us; that we, being ready both in body and soul, may cheerfully accomplish those things that thou wouldest have done; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

October 30th

Matthew 12 vv 14-21

A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory.

I usually give in in the end if people persist in asking for a "private" christening, though I won't let them use that word. Baptism is a public profession of faith which transforms your life. If you won't acknowledge Jesus before human beings, you can't expect Him to acknowledge you before the holy angels. To be baptised is to become a Christian. If you are a Christian, you live the Christian life. On the other hand, I don't want to break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax by appearing to reject anyone who comes to the Church. It may not be their fault that they were never taught any better. I do worry, however, about the risk of encouraging complacency.

October 31st

Matthew 12 vv 22-37

Hallowe'en seems a good time to think about a passage about the conflict between good and evil. The message is straightforward enough. Good always ultimately triumphs over evil, but whose side are you on. If you are a Christian, a follower of Jesus, it follows that you will be a good person just as a good tree bears good fruit. There is no halfway house. You either belong to Christ or you don't and, if you do belong to Christ, you go all the way with Him.

November 1st (All Saints)

Matthew 12 vv 38-50

God has not left Himself without witness. Just look around you and you will see plenty of evidence that God is and that Jesus is His Son and that the Holy Spirit is at work in the world. For those whose hearts are hardened against Jesus, however, no sign will ever be enough. On the other hand, even the notoriously

wicked will find peace if they come to Him in faith. I take vv 43-45 to mean that you can't play at repentance. If you turn to Christ, you turn to Him utterly. If you appear to become a Christian and then turn your back on Jesus, you may finish up worse than you were before. We can all wobble. Even Mary and His family wobbled. Nevertheless: *Whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.*

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

November 2nd (All Souls)

Matthew 13 vv 1-30

I've been wondering what to say about Harvest. Different crops come in at different times. So when can we say that all is safely gathered in? The final harvest is, of course, death. How did we grow? What fruit did we produce while we were on earth? There is a judgment. Where shall we stand on that great day? It will all depend on our relationship with Jesus.

For the Lord our God shall come, and shall take His harvest home;
From His field shall in that day all offenses purge away,
Giving angels charge at last in the fire the tares to cast;
But the fruitful ears to store in His garner evermore.
Even so, Lord, quickly come, bring Thy final harvest home;
Gather Thou Thy people in, free from sorrow, free from sin,
There, forever purified, in Thy garner to abide;
Come, with all Thine angels come, raise the glorious harvest home.

November 3rd

Matthew 13 vv 31-58

The future for the Church often looks unpromising. There are few of us. Our resources are limited. We are bound to the way of life described in the Sermon on the Mount, the very opposite of the way of life which the world believes will lead to success. This has been the case time after time in Church history. And yet, we're like a seed buried in the ground or a measure of yeast mixed in with a lot of flour. In the power of God, we flourish and transform. To be part of this movement is more important than anything else in our lives. We draw on all the resources God has given us – things new and old. We follow the authoritative teaching of Jesus. People respond to us as they responded to Him and yet the Church grows.

City of God, how broad and far
outspread thy walls sublime!
The true thy chartered freemen are
of every age and clime.

How grandly hath thine empire grown
of freedom, love and truth!

One holy Church, one army strong;
one steadfast, high intent;
one working band, one harvest song,
one King omnipotent.

How gleam thy watch fires through the night
with never fainting ray!
How rise thy towers, serene and bright,
to meet the dawning day!

How purely hath thy speech come down
from man's primeval youth!

In vain the surge's angry shock,
in vain the drifting sands;
unharm'd upon the eternal Rock
the eternal City stands.

November 4th

Matthew 14 vv 1-12

Almighty God, by whose providence thy servant John Baptist was wonderfully born, and sent to prepare the way of thy Son our Saviour, by preaching of repentance: Make us so to follow his doctrine and holy life, that we may truly repent according to his preaching; and after his example constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

November 5th (Trinity 21)

Matthew 14 vv 13-21

Jesus had compassion on them. This is the basis of ministry – compassion, love. It is caring about people. This is why we want to share the Gospel with them. It is why we want to be of assistance to them whatever their needs. People followed Jesus. They experienced His love. If we want people to come to our churches and join them, it is necessary that they experience the love of Jesus in our fellowship. That they will do if we are Christ-like people. A tall order, you might think. But we have His grace to transform us. We are nourished by the Bread of Life in Holy Communion. We are what we eat.

November 6th

Matthew 14 vv 22-36

As we saw a couple of weeks ago, the ship is a metaphor for the Church. We are all in the same boat. The dark deep symbolises the formless chaos, the nothingness, out of which God created everything. Noah's Flood occurred because humanity did not follow the Maker's instructions. Primal chaos returned. God led His people through the waters of the Red Sea and the River Jordan. He sets the ocean its limits. Power over the sea is of the very nature of God – which shows us Who Jesus is in these miracles. Jesus became human so that we should be made divine. We are called to be like Him. Given that Jesus could walk on the water, so ought Peter have been able to, if he had had that much faith. When Peter's faith failed, Jesus saved him. We are called to be ready to follow Jesus anywhere and, by faith, we can. He is always on hand to save us when we fail. Thank God.

November 7th

Matthew 15 vv 1-20

Religious rituals may feed our faith. We sing hymns and psalms. We pray. We may adopt particular postures when we pray. We may wash our hands, make the sign of the cross, fast, feast, perform many different actions as an expression of our faith. They are not, however, valuable in themselves. We've all heard of psalm-singing hypocrites. We may fool ourselves that we are good people just because we perform the rituals. We may dare to despise people who don't perform the same rituals as us. The test is, is what we do of love? Does it build other people up or does it put them down? Is it genuinely an expression of our love for God or is something which boosts our own ego?

November 8th

Matthew 15 vv 21-39

The story of the Canaanite woman has always puzzled readers. Why doesn't Jesus heal her daughter straightaway? Why does He seem to refer to her and her daughter as dogs? Did the woman outsmart Jesus? Did she teach Him something? I read it as Jesus not healing the girl at first because He was helping the woman to a greater depth of faith. I think that the remark about children and dogs was a gentle teasing designed to get the woman and the disciples to understand that Gentiles, people of other races, people who are not of our own people, are not dogs to be despised, but children of the same heavenly Father as we are. I don't think that the woman outsmarted Jesus or that she taught Him something, though it suits the "politically correct" agenda to suggest that a woman from an ethnic minority put right the Son of God. If I believed that Jesus' teaching were susceptible to correction, I'd have to believe that He could be wrong and that would undermine my entire dependence on offering my life to Him.

November 9th

Matthew 16 vv 1-12

Do you remember the TV comedy series *Please Sir*? In one episode, Hedges, the harassed, but conscientious and committed teacher of a class of challenging teenagers, discovers that they can quite easily work out the odds at the bookies even though they appear unable to do fractions in class. Of course, they weren't interested in school maths, whereas they were interested in horse racing. It is very often the case that what we fail to master is what we are not very interested in anyway. As we saw earlier, there are plenty of indications in the world about God and Jesus and what human life is really about. Too many people just don't care or are actively hostile to anything which challenges their complacency. They pay more attention to the weather forecast than to the Bible – even supposedly religious people. It may be that the two feeding miracles reveal the truth that the Bread of Life is on offer both to Jews and Gentiles in Christ (twelve tribes of Israel, seven Gentile nations, represented by the numbers of baskets left over, possibly). *Ask and ye shall receive. Seek and ye shall find.* The Bread of Life is freely given to all those who ask in faith but the wilfully blind exclude themselves from the Messianic banquet.

November 10th

Matthew 16 vv 13-20

"Thou art the Christ, O Lord,
The Son of God, most high!"
Forever be adored,

That Name in earth and sky.
In which, tho' mortal strength may fail,
The saints of God at last prevail!

Why did the Church come up with the puzzling doctrine of the Trinity? We know that there is only one God. So why confuse people by talking about the Trinity. Because we worship Jesus. To worship anybody or anything other than God would be to break the first two commandments. So, given that our worship of Jesus is good and right, Jesus is God. God the Father revealed this truth to Peter and God reveals this truth to you and me. It is right that we worship Jesus. Let's do so in spirit and in truth.

Grant, we beseech thee, merciful Lord, to thy faithful people pardon and peace; that they may be cleansed from all their sins, and serve thee with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

November 11th

Matthew 16 vv 21-28

Today commemorates the Armistice which ended the fighting in the First World War. When I was curate at Orpington, I knew a very, dear, gentle, Christian man, who ought never to have been called upon to fight. He still suffered nightmares from the trenches more than sixty years after it was all over. It was quite common at the time of the war to draw parallels between the suffering of the men who made the supreme sacrifice with the sufferings and death of Christ. In some ways, that it is difficult. Many of those men, I guess, were no angels, unlike Jesus Who is perfect love. They were fighting a war and Jesus is the Prince of Peace. On the other hand, Jesus was with them, as He was with the Germans. He loves all of humanity, good and bad alike. Many of those fighting on both sides were Christians. They believed that they were fighting in a just cause. Those who were Christians knew that Jesus Himself was in the Valley of the Shadow of Death and had gone to prepare a place for us. When watching the news or war films, I often find myself saying the penultimate couplet of the Lesser Litany. I think the final couplet is perhaps saying the same thing only more broadly and in different words.

Give peace in our time, O Lord. Because there is none other that fighteth for us, but only thou, O God.
O God, make clean our hearts within us. And take not thy Holy Spirit from us.

November 12th (Trinity 22)

Matthew 17 vv 1-13

Hear ye Him.

We're rather whizzing through St Matthew's Gospel this time. In some of these studies, we analyse short passages or even single verses. In others, we take a broader view of much longer sections. Both are desirable. There is treasure in individual words. There is also the need for perspective. I've heard it recommended that we should have whole letters of St Paul read to us in one go, as they were probably first read to the churches they were written to. Alec McGowan attracted huge audiences night after night in a long run when he recited to them the whole of St Mark's Gospel in one sitting. God tells us to hear Jesus. To hear is to learn from Him. To hear is to obey Him.

Lord, we beseech thee to keep thy household the Church in continual godliness; that through thy protection it may be free from all adversities, and devoutly given to serve thee in good works, to the glory of thy name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

November 13th

Matthew 17 vv 14-23

Lunatic is a fairly direct translation of Matthew's Greek. The father thought that the boy was moonstruck and the phases of the moon have often been thought to have some bearing on our mental health. I don't think that there is any evidence that this is in fact true. From the boy's symptoms, we would probably diagnose epilepsy. The story we have here blames a demon for his troubles. Superstitions about mental illness have led to useless treatments, cruel treatments and the general mistreatment of the mentally ill. Epilepsy is in any case a brain disorder, not a mental illness. Simply to assume that any illness must be the result of demon possession is dangerous. Practitioners may make dramatic and violent attempts to exorcise the demon. Sufferers may be blamed on the supposed grounds that they are possessed because they are wicked. Yet, in this particular case, Jesus cures the boy by exorcising the unclean spirit. So what's going on and how do we respond? Love must be the key. Whatever may be wrong with a person, we must treat that person with respect. We need to be very hesitant about treating against the patient's will or causing obvious pain or distress. We can certainly pray in every case, but, in those extremely rare cases in which exorcism might conceivably be appropriate, we must take the person to a sensible, mainstream church minister, who will deal the problem without histrionics.

November 14th

Matthew 17 vv 24-27

And now for a bit of light relief. This story makes me smile. Paying tax isn't an issue. Christians are happy to pay as a civic duty, but it's not a big issue. Paying taxes doesn't make us slaves of the state. In the end, money isn't all that important to us, only a means to an end. Give them what they ask for and, in a democracy, use your vote to try to see that it is wisely spent.

November 15th

Matthew 18 vv 1-14

The abuse of children used not to be much talked about. Nowadays, it seems to have become something of an obsession. It is an extremely serious matter and it is a fair assumption that it has always gone on. How to prevent it without getting to the point of all of us treating one another with suspicion and so wrapping up children in cotton wool that they never experience freedom and never learn to take responsibility for

themselves and for others, that they never become self-reliant. I sometimes wonder whether Jesus had child abuse in mind when He spoke about the extreme peril of harming any of these little ones. We're to be like children in faith. God has a special care for children. It rejoices the heart of God that a lost child whom He has searched for returns. But is there joy in heaven over a paedophile who repents? I think we have to say that there is with all that entails for our own attitudes.

November 16th

Matthew 18 vv 15-35

The Church is supposed to be one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth, but the Church is made up of human beings. We are redeemed human beings, but we shall not be perfect until we see Him face to face and know as we are known. So Christians do behave badly sometimes, including sometimes towards one another and towards the Church to which they belong. So there has to be discipline. The Church has to have mechanisms by which wrongs can be righted and relationships healed. The aim is always to restore a state of grace - to bring the wrong-doer to repentance, to forgive and to be forgiven, as far as possible to put right what has been done wrong. If in the end, however, a person won't be reconciled, it is better that he leave than that he damages the Church. We seek Christ's guidance and remember that we owe Him infinitely more than anyone can owe us.

November 17th

Matthew 19 vv 1-15

What we believe about marriage is that it is a life-long, exclusive relationship between a man and a woman, that its principal purposes are the procreation and nurture of children, the proper direction of the attraction we feel towards one another, and a promise to look after one another no matter what happens. There are many challenges to this traditional Christian view. Is it necessary to wait for marriage, so long as we are careful? Might couples properly decide to marry but that they would rather not have children? Do children really need two parents, given that we live in a welfare state? Is it better to end an unhappy marriage than to carry on to the bitter end, till death us do part? Why shouldn't people marry other people of the same sex if they are in love for *the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other*? If they do, why shouldn't they adopt children or perhaps conceive children artificially, now that these things are possible? What do you think? Jesus says that Moses allowed divorce because of our human weakness, although divorce was never meant to be OK. Could that be true of all these other deviations from the traditional norm? Are they OK as concessions to our *hardness of heart*? Or are they not mere concessions, but a new norm, in which we should rejoice, in a world in which safe, effective contraception, low rates of infant mortality, the safety net of the welfare state and gender equality reduce traditional marriage to the status of just one option among many? Or shall we finally undermine our social cohesion, lose our sense of family and our sense of what it means to be human if we replace traditional marriage with an *anything goes* approach to relationships? Is what Jesus says in vv 4-6 an immutable principle relevant to all cultures at all times in human history? Or is it teaching only for a world very different from our own? Or can we maintain the principle but allow exceptions as Moses did? How many exceptions can we allow without making the principle meaningless?

November 18th

Matthew 19 vv 16-30

I'm writing these notes on 18th August. The first of the morning psalms on 18th month is Psalm 90. It is one of my favourites and is sometimes used at funerals. It reminds of our complete dependence on our omnipotent and absolutely dependable. It reminds us off our mortality, our frailty and our need. It is the psalm which points out: *the days of our age are threescore years and ten*. It also says: *So teach us to number our days: that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom*. Today's reading from Matthew raises the same issues. What really matters in life? To what should we be devoting ourselves? Here is a hymn based on this psalm (including verses we don't normally sing)..

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.

Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting Thou art God,
To endless years the same.

Under the shadow of Thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
And our defence is sure.

Thy Word commands our flesh to dust,
"Return, ye sons of men":
All nations rose from earth at first,
And turn to earth again.

A thousand ages in Thy sight
Are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.

The busy tribes of flesh and blood,
With all their lives and cares,
Are carried downwards by the flood,
And lost in foll'wing years.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;

They fly, forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the op'ning day.

Like flow'ry fields the nations stand
Pleased with the morning light;
The flow'rs beneath the mower's hand
Lie with'ring ere 'tis night.

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our guard while troubles last,
And our eternal home.

November 19th (Trinity 23)

Matthew 20 vv 1-16

This is another one of those difficult teachings of Jesus. Do we ignore it? Do we dare to disagree with it? Do we try to maintain that it was relevant for C1 Palestine but not for us today in a much more complex society? The basic message is that God is free to act as He pleases. God's nature is to be merciful. Forgiveness, therefore, is not only possible at the eleventh hour, but leads to rejoicing in heaven. We don't get what we deserve from God. We get loving-kindness and mercy.

November 20th

Matthew 20 vv 17-28

The ancient Greeks thought that anyone who would desire power would surely be someone who couldn't be trusted to exercise power. Power brings with it so many temptations to bully and exploit other people and to think of yourself more highly than you ought. People with power will have to account to God for the way they exercise it. Yet we need social order. Judges 21²⁵ speaks of a time when *In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes*. It seems to have been a pretty dangerous time to live. So we have to entrust people with authority to make and enforce laws. We have to have appropriate mechanisms for choosing them. In a democracy, we all have some part in the choice of our leaders – though, I must admit, I am finding it increasingly hard to exercise that choice as I grow progressively more disillusioned. We have to support our leaders, even sometimes when we think they are wrong. Otherwise, we'd have anarchy. People like police officers and judges need to be supported with appropriate training. Jesus is the model for human leadership – the archetypal King, One Who sacrifices Himself for His people.

November 21st

Matthew 20 vv 29-34

I'm feeling a little bit guilty because I've lapsed back into 1662 for much of my personal devotions and in the material I have been using in these notes, when most of our congregation usually follow Common Worship with all its resources. For many years, we were able to hold a daily Communion, which was an important part of my own spiritual nutrition. It upheld me in times of great pressure. It didn't seem to matter so much then that I found less nourishment in the modern Morning and Evening Prayer and the readings that go with them than I had when I was younger in 1662. When the daily Eucharist, was no longer possible, I began to feel slowly starved of spiritual food. So, gradually, I reverted to the more substantial fare offered by the 1662 liturgy and its offer of psalms and bible readings. Naturally, I'm afraid this has overflowed into my public ministry, but, like the blind men in this story, we need to see; we need to see Jesus in order to follow Him. What are your resources of spiritual nourishment? Do you take full advantage of them? The blind men knew their need of what the Son of David has to offer. Do you?

November 22nd

Matthew 21 vv 1-11

Kings rode horses into battle. They rode mules or donkeys when they came in peace. Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is the Prince of Peace. His coming fulfils prophecy. Prophecy is the Word of God. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. This is God's eternal plan for the redemption of the whole of creation. Our response: worship & joy.

Hail to the Lord's Anointed,
great David's greater Son!
Hail in the time appointed,
his reign on earth begun!

He comes to break oppression,
to set the captive free;
to take away transgression,
and rule in equity.

November 22nd

Matthew 21 vv 12-16

This is reference back to Psalm 8. That psalm is awestruck by the greatness of God and what He has made, amazed by His condescension in loving us and putting us in charge of His universe. The vision of the psalm for humanity and for divinity is fulfilled in Jesus, as is discussed at length in the Epistle to the Hebrews. This little aside here points out the role even of children in God's purposes. *Even of children?* Is that the correct phrase on my part? Sure, it would be better just to say: *the role of children in God's purposes*. We all have a role, young & old.

O God, our refuge and strength, who art the author of all godliness: Be ready, we beseech thee, to hear the devout prayers of thy Church; and grant that those things which we ask faithfully we may obtain effectually; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

November 23rd

Matthew 21 vv17-22

If I had this power, I needn't worry about tree preservation orders! Only I don't think that this is what Jesus means when He says that God will give us what we ask for in prayer. We pray in Christ and God does indeed hear our prayers. But, if we pray in Christ, we have to think what Christ would pray for. This cursing of the fig tree is an exception, for reasons which we probably don't understand. Going back to when He was tempted in the wilderness, He didn't turn stones into bread or test God by throwing Himself off the Temple. How would Jesus pray? If our prayers are to be joined with His, we have to ask that question. The Lord's Prayer would be a good start.

November 24th

Matthew 21 vv 23-46

The chief priests and the elders don't want to follow Jesus. So they quibble. *By what authority?* Jesus doesn't answer them. What answer could He give that they would accept? He fulfils the Scripture in which they claim to find the words of life. He performs the signs of the Kingdom. The poor gladly hear Him. There's none so blind as those who don't to see. That's what you and I are up against when we try to share our faith with other people. I'm always amused by their evasive "politicians'" answer when asked what they think about John the Baptist. Anyway, the remaining two parables teach that, when those who might have been expected to welcome Jesus and obey His commandments reject Him, the Kingdom is thrown open to us publicans and sinners.

November 25th

Matthew 22 vv 1-14

In my previous parish, once a month we had Mattins instead of Holy Communion. (So we did at St Michael's when I first came here.) Much as I value Mattins, I could never accept it as a service instead of Holy Communion. Jesus said, *Do this in remembrance of me*, and it is plainly our duty to do what He told us. I also think that 1662 Mattins (Tudor translations of ancient texts sung to Victorian musical settings) would be off-putting to a lot of people who have no experience of these things. I couldn't, however, persuade my congregation of this. So one Sunday, having delivered an invitation to every dwelling-place on the estate, I put on a celebration of Holy Communion in addition to Mattins. The result was a larger congregation, including some new people, and we agreed that we would have Communion every Sunday in future, though the new people didn't stay. At about that time, we had this Gospel reading and it seemed to me very appropriate. Among other things, Holy Communion prefigures the Messianic Banquet, sitting down at table to feast in the Presence of God and His Christ. As well as being a memorial of His Passion, Holy Communion is a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven. It just won't do to be too busy or to have too much else on on Sundays. I don't really think it does to prefer some other form of service with a lower level of commitment. Jesus called us all to take up cross and follow Him. There's no second class membership of the Church. You're a Christian or you're not.

November 26th (Trinity 25)

Matthew 22 vv 15-46

We always have the material for Trinity 25 on the Sunday before Advent in 1662 or celebrate Christ the King in Common Worship. The new Christian year is about to begin with the season of Advent. We are preparing for the coming of the Messiah. Are we ready? In yesterday's reading, the Kingdom was opened up to all and sundry, but the guy with no wedding garment was thrown out. Our relationship with God is without price, but it is not without value. God is not mocked. The Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees, the lawyers, continue to quibble. Should we pay tax to Caesar? Use your common sense. How can there be life after death? Read the Bible. Which is the greatest commandment? If we know the answer to that, why don't we act upon it? Anyway, if you think about what you claim to believe, Jesus must be the Son of God and everything else follows from that fact.

Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

November 27th

Matthew 23 vv 1-33

We're used to the notion that religion can be perverted. There are Islamist terrorist attacks. There was the Inquisition. John Lennon's song resonates with a lot of people: *Imagine there's no heaven, It's easy if you try, No hell below us, Above us only sky, Imagine all the people Living for today... Aha-ah...* So many of the problems in the world are caused by the abuse of religion. Like Lennon, some people think that we would be better off without it. But, if there were no God, what meaning would life have? You'd be born, be educated, work, acquire stuff, form relationships, lose it all again when you died. If this were all there is to life, there doesn't seem to be any reason for living a good life except the fear of punishment if get caught in wrong-doing. It is faith in God which makes sense of our lives, but we have continually to measure ourselves and our beliefs in the light of Jesus. Jesus is the human face of God. He is the standard to which people of faith are called. Not too, that ministers of religion and theologians don't stand between you and God. Every believer has direct access to the Father in Jesus. Ministers are fellow travellers in the Way of the Cross. We support one another. Ministers are not a privileged caste mediating God to His people.

November 28th

Matthew 23 vv 34-39

God sends His messengers to the ends of the earth. Such is the hardness of human hearts that people, even supposedly religious people, even religious leaders, refuse to hear the message and turn on God's spokesmen. The message is a message of peace. The consequence of rejecting the message, therefore, is destruction.

November 29th

Matthew 24 vv 1-28

The Temple was an amazing building. King Herod (the one who killed the boy babies in Bethlehem) had reconstructed it on an immense and magnificent scale. The disciples were impressed. Humanity has tremendous achievements to its credit – fine buildings, artistic achievements, scientific progress, marvels of engineering, to name just a few – but none of them is for ever. Only love is eternal. Jesus prophesies that these astonishing human achievements will come to nothing. He seems to be talking about two things in this chapter. A few years after the Resurrection, the Jews rebelled against Roman rule. They fought very bravely, but were ultimately defeated, and, in 70AD, the Romans destroyed the Temple and much of the Holy City. Jesus is warning of the horrors of the Jewish War and its conclusion. He also seems to be speaking more generally about the ultimate end of the material universe. *Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.* Creation had a beginning and it has end, in both senses of the word. The world as we know it will one day cease to exist. The world we know has a purpose.

November 30th (St Andrew)

Matthew 24 vv 29-51

So we're not to be surprised by terrible things happening on earth. They are prophesied. They are the birth pangs of the new age. What is required of us is that we remain faithful and we can have faith whatever happens because God is. *But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.* Our part is to remain faithful and to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom to the world.

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

December 1st

Matthew 25 vv 1-13

Parables are not mostly analogies. They usually have one point. The point of this parable is that we must be ready. The bridegroom is a powerful metaphor for Jesus. We readily think of the Church as the Bride of Christ. In the OT, God is the husband of the people of God (and, therefore, going after other gods is committing adultery against Him). The coming Kingdom of God is described in Revelation 19 as the marriage feast of the Lamb. The Messianic Banquet is His wedding feast. *Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb.* The point of this parable is that we must be ready because the Lord comes at a time we know not. It is a good question whether we should feel ready if Jesus came today.

Would we like Him to find us living as we do? [Whether the wise virgins should have shared their oil with the foolish ones is not the point of the parable and focusing on it is a distraction from the main point. In the story, there wasn't enough oil to share anyway.]

December 2nd

Matthew 25 vv 14-30

Doesn't it seem incongruous that the Herod who rebuilt the Temple so magnificently was the same man as ordered the massacre of the Holy Innocents (and perpetrated many other cruel atrocities)? God has made us all the people we are. He has given us talents and opportunities. Originally, a talent was a large sum of money. I am sure it is the influence of this parable which gave the word its modern meaning. But we do also have material resources, including money, which are also the gift of God to us. So what do we do with them? Herod rebuilt the Temple magnificently, but he also shed innocent blood. He had great talents and opportunities which he abused. Or we might abuse our talents simply by not using them. If we are gifted by God in ways in which we could serve His Church and His world, but too lazy, too fearful, or maybe too lacking in self-confidence to use them, we may have put ourselves in the position of the third servant who was given only one talent. I sometimes wonder about that when I take the course of least resistance when perhaps I could do more if I were more energetic, more self-confident and less fearful of conflict and criticism. We shall be judged on what we have done with our lives. Unlike the hard man in the story, our judge is merciful, but that fact should not make us complacent.

December 3rd (Advent Sunday)

Matthew 25 vv 31-46

Advent is the season when we focus on the coming of Jesus. Traditionally, Christians have been invited to meditate on the four last things: death, judgment, hell and heaven. We shall all die and we shall all give account to God for our lives. There will be judgment. Following judgment, there are only two possibilities. One we attain only through faith in Jesus Christ. God doesn't desire the death of a sinner and He does everything to bring everyone of us home, up to becoming flesh and offering Himself for us on the Cross. Nevertheless, hell remains a possibility if people are determined to reject Him. He respects our free will to that extent. But, on what criteria are we judged? This parable gives us more than a clue!

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious Majesty, to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen.

December 4th

Matthew 26 vv 1-16

When I first lived in London, I sometimes used to walk through the beautiful parks (the best things London has to offer in my opinion) and reflect that, in many cases, they only exist because rich people preserved them at a time when many of the poor lived in absolute squalor. Would it have been better, I used to wonder, if they had been covered in social housing and the rich had been heavily taxed to ensure that everybody could afford at least the basic necessities of life? Life is better for the poor too, however, because of these green lungs. *Ye have the poor always with you*, and Mark adds Jesus saying, *and whensoever ye will ye may do them good*. A pretended concern for the poor is no excuse for not spending money on good things like this ointment or art or good music or open spaces or fine food and drink. It would be a drab life if all our resources were consumed providing the basic necessities so that we all lived in standard council flats and ate standard government approved rations and didn't do anything just for fun. We have the resources to provide better than that, but the good things must be available to the people at large, not just a privileged few.

December 5th

Matthew 25 vv 17-35

It's important that these events of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter take place at Passover. The story of the Exodus foreshadows the story of the Passion. What God accomplished for Israel in time and space at the Passover, He accomplishes for the entire Creation in our Lord's Death & Resurrection in time and space. What Jesus did there and then, sets us free eternally from sin and death. Participating in the Passover annually affirms who the Jews are. Participating in Holy Communion every Sunday – the day of the Lord's Resurrection – affirms who we Christians are.

The Lord is here.

His Spirit is with us.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give thanks and praise.

Almighty God, good Father to us all, your face is turned towards your world. In love you gave us Jesus your Son to rescue us from sin and death. Your Word goes out to call us home to the city where angels sing your praise. We join with them in heaven's song:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.]

Father of all, we give you thanks for every gift that comes from heaven. To the darkness Jesus came as your light. With signs of faith and words of hope he touched untouchables with love and washed the guilty clean., This is his story. **This is our song:**

Hosanna in the highest.

The crowds came out to see your Son, yet at the end they turned on him. On the night he was betrayed he came to table with his friends to celebrate the freedom of your people. This is his story. **This is our song: Hosanna in the highest.**

Jesus blessed you, Father, for the food; he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and said: This is my body, given for you all. Jesus then gave thanks for the wine; he took the cup, gave it and said: This is my blood, shed for you all for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me. This is our story. **This is our song: Hosanna in the highest.** Therefore, Father, with this bread and this cup we celebrate the cross on

which he died to set us free. Defying death he rose again and is alive with you to plead for us and all the world. This is our story.

This is our song: Hosanna in the highest.

Send your Spirit on us now that by these gifts we may feed on Christ with opened eyes and hearts on fire. May we and all who share this food offer ourselves to live for you and be welcomed at your feast in heaven where all creation worships you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit: **Blessing and honour and glory and power be yours for ever and ever. Amen.**

December 6th (St Nicholas)

Matthew 26 vv 36-46

One of the more tactless things I have done was when a group of pre-school children asked me if St Nicholas' Day was Father Christmas' birthday and I told them that it was more likely to be the day on which he died. Saints' days most often are the date on which the saint is believed to have died. Indeed, the first people to be accorded the title *saint* were nearly all martyrs, although of course all Christians are saints in the biblical sense – that is people who have faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the first martyr. The word means witness and there is no greater witness of your love than to lay down your life for the beloved. We are His beloved. If we love Him, we walk in the way of the Cross. It is quite natural that a religion based on love in its purest, most self-sacrificial form, honours martyrdom. Death would always be preferable to denying God by denying the Truth. Death, however, is not something to fear. We only attain to the fulness of life when we die. It is only then that we shall see Him as He is, that we shall know Him as we are known, that we shall be made like Him, perfect eternal love. Like Jesus, our flesh might shrink from the process of dying. The company and prayers of our friends will then be important to us, but there is nothing to fear beyond the grave if we believe in Jesus Christ our Lord & Saviour.

1 Jesus lives! thy terrors now
can, O death, no more appal us;
Jesus lives! by this we know
thou, O grave, canst not enthrall us.
Alleluia.

2 Jesus lives! henceforth is death
but the gate of life immortal:
this shall calm our trembling breath,
when we pass its gloomy portal.
Alleluia.

3 Jesus lives! for us he died;
then, alone to Jesus living,
pure in heart may we abide,

glory to our Saviour giving.

Alleluia.

4 Jesus lives! our hearts know well
naught from us his love shall sever;
life nor death nor powers of hell
tear us from his keeping ever.
Alleluia.

5 Jesus lives! to him the throne
over all the world is given:
may we go where he is gone,
rest and reign with him in heaven.
Alleluia.

December 7th

Matthew 26 vv 47-56

I've been watching that Channel 4 series *State* about a group of young British people who go to Syria to fight for Islamic State. The ideology they are taught is like a parody of the Christian faith. Like us, they are called to put God before everything. Like us, they are called to put God before family attachments. Like us, they are called to yield their lives in God's cause. Like us, they are taught that the world will end – possibly soon – and that God will take power and judge the earth. I was surprised to learn that, like us, they expect Jesus to return at the End. Yet theirs seemed to be a religion of hatred rather than love. Martyrdom for them was dying while killing others in battle. Instead of the freedom we enjoy because we are saved by God's grace in Jesus Christ, their lives were hemmed in by petty rules, enforced by cruel punishments. Instead of loving their enemies and seeking to overcome evil with good, they were taught to hate their enemies and

battle evil with even worse evil. Jesus is the authentic Word of God. Who Jesus is God is and it is our responsibility to tell the world the Good News. St Paul says of the Jews of his own day, *For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.* (Romans 10²). This would apply so much more to these young people joining IS and it is surely our responsibility to bear witness to the truth in Christ.

December 8th

Matthew 26 vv 57-68

It was C S Lewis who said that, given what Jesus had to say about Himself and what He did, He had to be bad, mad or the Son of God. We can read the Bible and make up our own minds about Him. If we believe that He is the Son of God, our lives are transformed. We live by faith. We are always hopeful. We are people of love, which is the fulfilling of the Law.

People can read the Bible and make up their own minds, but do they read the Bible? Do we do enough to teach children the bible stories? Do we pray with them and for them? Do we support organisations like the Gideons which make Bibles available or the Bible Society which translates the Bible into the languages of the world and distributes copies of the Bible wherever it can? Do encourage our friends to read the Bible, both by our sharing with them and our example?

December 9th

Matthew 26 vv 69-75

It's only a few hours since Peter said to Jesus, *Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee.* Have we made extravagant promises to Jesus about living our lives for Him? Maybe, we've been moved by a sermon or a talk or a book we've read. Perhaps we've felt a real sense of the divine in public worship or private prayer and responded with a promise to follow Him wherever He leads. If we've been baptised or confirmed, we've given our lives to Him. And yet, like Peter, we so often fail to live up to what we've promised. That doesn't negate out hope in Christ. He is always faithful even when we are faithless. He will forgive our failures and give us the grace to start again. The danger is that either we give up because we come to believe that we are bound to fail or that we come to think that failure doesn't matter, because, after all, we're only ordinary. God loves you as you are and He has great plans for your life – whoever you are, young or old. Trust Him.

1. Thine forever, God of Love!
Hear us from Thy throne above;
Thine forever may we be
Here and in eternity!
2. Thine forever! Oh, how blest
They who find in Thee their rest!
Saviour, Guardian, heavenly Friend,
Oh, defend us to the end!
3. Thine forever, Lord of Life!
Shield us through our earthly strife.

Thou, the Life, the Truth, the Way,
Guide us to the realms of day.
4. Thine forever! Shepherd, keep
These Thy frail and trembling sheep
Safe alone beneath Thy care,
Let us all Thy goodness share.
5. Thine forever! Thou our Guide,
All our wants by Thee supplied,
All our sins by Thee forgiven;
Lead us, Lord, from earth to heaven.

December 10th (Advent 2)

Matthew 27 vv 1-18

The purchase of the potter's field with the money Judas was paid to betray Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah made centuries earlier. We know that because we read the Bible, the OT as well as the NT. So we see how God's plan for the world and for us as individuals unfolds. So we see how we ought to respond in the way we live for Him. But we deny ourselves a tremendous resource if we don't read the Bible.

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

December 11th

Matthew 27vv 19-23

When I was in Sunday School, we had a test and one of the questions was *What was Jesus' surname?* I answered *Christ*, but the answer the teacher wanted was *Bar-Joseph*. She allowed my answer. I thought at the time she was just being kind and felt slightly guilty about it, which is why I still remember it fifty years later. On mature reflection, however, I think my answer was better than hers! *Bar-Joseph* means son of Joseph. People in Nazareth possibly did refer to Jesus as Bar-Joseph to distinguish Him from any others boys of the same name. We know, however, that Jesus was the Son of God, Whom He taught us all to call *Abba*, Father. *Bar* is Aramaic for *son of*. When a Jewish boy becomes bar mitzvah, he become a son of the

commandment. He is sufficiently mature to seek grace to live by the commandments of God. So *bar* means *son of* and *Abba* is Aramaic for *Father*. So, couldn't we call Jesus, the Son of the Father, *Barabbas*? The Son of God dies in the place of all the children of God who deserve death as the wages of sin so that everyone who comes to God by faith in Jesus Christ can be forgiven of all our sins, adopted as the children of God and receive the gift of eternal life.

December 12th

Matthew 27 vv 24-31

What an appalling way to treat Jesus. It is easy to become complacent about just what Jesus endured for you and me. Perhaps, that partially explains why our love for Him is often so lukewarm. It is, of course, an appalling way to treat any human being, even people guilty of terrible crimes (as Barabbas was). But human beings are capable of great cruelty. We are sinners. That is why Jesus endured what He did for us – so that our sins, the sins of the whole world, could be forgiven.

It is a thing most wonderful,
almost too wonderful to be,
that God's own Son should come from heaven,
and die to save a child like me.

the cruel nails and crown of thorns,
and Jesus crucified for me.

And yet I know that it is true:
he chose a poor and humble lot,
and wept and toiled and mourned and died
for love of those who loved him not.

But even could I see him die,
I could but see a little part
of that great love which, like a fire,
is always burning in his heart.

I cannot tell how he could love
a child so weak and full of sin;
his love must be most wonderful,
if he could die my love to win.

It is most wonderful to know
his love for me so free and sure;
but 'tis more wonderful to see
my love for him so faint and poor.

I sometimes think about the cross,
and shut my eyes, and try to see

And yet I want to love thee, Lord;
O light the flame within my heart,
and I will love thee more and more,
until I see thee as thou art.

December 13th

Matthew 27 vv 32&33

Cyrene is in Libya. So Simon is perhaps the first African we meet in the story of Jesus, although, presumably He met some Egyptians when He was taken there as an infant. Mark tells us that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus. The implication is that Simon's family was part of the Church from the very beginning. The Good News is for the whole world.

December 14th

Matthew 27 vv 34-49

In these verses, we see again how the death of Jesus is the fulfilment of prophecy – God's eternal plan for the redemption of the cosmos. We also see the cruelty of the crowds mocking a man undergoing such a horrible death. The cosmos needs redemption.

December 15th

Matthew 27 vv 50-54

God is love. Sin is our failure to love. If we loved God, we'd keep His commandments. Love is the fulfilling of the law. If we were people of love, we'd treat other people the way we'd like them to treat us. Sin alienates us from God. To know God is to have eternal life. The wages, therefore, of being alienated from God is death. God is love. In Christ, He offers Himself in love as a propitiation for the sins of the world. Therefore, the Death of Jesus overcomes death, because it opens the way for ransomed humanity to enter the Father's Presence.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost: as it was in the beginning,
is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

December 16th

Matthew 27 vv 55-66

Sometimes when I read the lesson in church, I read more or less than the portion appointed. That might be a mistake. My eyes are not that good at seeing what the book says. If I miss a bit and I realise I have, I sometimes slip it into another point in the service. So I do when other people make the same mistake. One doesn't always notice, however. Once, apparently, I missed out a rather important *not* and I haven't forgotten the reader who told us to put on immortality when he should have said immortality! Sometimes, I read a bit more deliberately just because it is so good or because the appointed passage wouldn't make sense

if you didn't know what went before or came after. Yesterday evening, I read this passage as I ought to have done and then the whole of Chapter 28 which I mistakenly thought was also appointed. I shall have to read it again tonight – maybe to the same congregation! Anyway, two thoughts about this. You can't appreciate what the Death and Burial mean if you haven't the context of the Resurrection. On the other hand, if you go straight to the Resurrection, you cannot appreciate its significance without the Death and Burial.

December 17th (Advent 3)

Matthew 28 vv 1-8

Matthew's account of the Crucifixion and Resurrection is, in a way, more dramatic than the accounts in the other three gospels. They don't mention the earthquakes or the appearance of the angel or the fact that others too rose when Jesus rose and could be seen in the Holy City. Some of us are uncomfortable with miracles. We might think that they are hard to believe in or we might think that, although we believe them, other more sceptical people might be put off. It would be a great shame if a person felt that he couldn't accept Jesus as his Saviour because he couldn't believe that the sun stood still over the Vale of Ajalon (Joshua 10). On the other hand, some people might believe in Jesus because they recognise that they are signs that God is active in the world. I don't think that miracles are common. One of God's greatest gifts to us is that the world behaves reasonably predictably. If you believe in the Resurrection at all, however, and certainly if you believe in the Incarnation, you accept that miracles are possible. Once you accept that miracles are possible, it's only a question of which alleged miracles are authentic. I wouldn't write off any of the biblical miracles.

December 18th (Adam's Birthday)

Matthew 28 vv 9&10

This isn't the birthday of the biblical Adam (so far as I know). It's the birthday of a young man I know who shares his name. It struck me as appropriate, however. Adam in Genesis stands for the whole human race. God has given us every blessing, yet we rebel against Him and suffer the consequences. Jesus stands before the Throne of God on behalf of the whole human race so that in Him our rebellion may be forgiven and so that we may be restored to paradise. A traditional font has eight sides – one for each day of creation and the eighth for the day of the new creation, Easter Sunday, when Christ is risen from the dead and we are born again, baptised in His Name, dead to sin, buried with Christ, alive in Him for ever.

Praise to the Holiest in the height,

God's presence, and His very self
And essence all-divine.

And in the depth be praise:

In all His words most wonderful;

O generous love! that He, who smote
In man for man the foe,
The double agony in man
For man should undergo.

Most sure in all His ways.

O loving wisdom of our God,
When all was sin and shame,
He, the last Adam, to the fight
And to the rescue came.

And in the garden secretly,
And on the cross on high,
Should teach His brethren, and inspire
To suffer and to die.

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

Praise to the Holiest in the height,
And in the depth be praise:
In all His words most wonderful;
Most sure in all His ways.

And that a higher gift than grace
Should flesh and blood refine,

December 19th

Matthew 28 vv 11-15

There is a book *Who Moved the Stone?* by Frank Morrison. It considers the evidence and concludes that nothing other than the Resurrection of Jesus could account for it. It has helped to confirm the faith of many Christians. There is also a much longer and more sophisticated book by Bishop Tom Wright *The Resurrection of the Son of God* which comes to the same conclusion. They both have the same flaw. If people believe that the Resurrection is impossible, no amount of evidence can convince them that Jesus rose from the dead. On the other hand, if you have an open mind, the most straightforward evidence for the Resurrection is all there in the bible story, in the growth of the Church over two millennia and in the personal experience of Christians. *He walks with me and He talks with me along life's narrow way.* Where

I suppose they can help (especially the Butler book) is in convincing seekers that it is not unreasonable to believe in the Resurrection, but my belief in the omnipotent God is enough to convince me of that. God can do anything.

December 20th

Matthew 28 vv 16-20

Years ago, I was told that I didn't make enough of the Great Commission in a study I prepared on Matthew. It is after all the culmination of the whole Gospel. It's not that I'm not saying much because it's not important. It most certainly is, but I can think of nothing to add to the text. It's all there!

December 21st (S Thomas BCP)

John 20 vv 24-31

The four Gospels tell the story of the Resurrection differently. If they were all the same, we might think that perhaps one had made it up and the others copied him, but we have different perspectives, even seeming inconsistencies, which you expect when you have more than one authentic witness. The themes are the same. Christ is risen. This is an amazing truth, but truth it is. Some indeed doubt. But we all receive life through faith in His Name. And those of us who know Him have this commission, this obligation to share our faith.

Almighty and everliving God, who for the more confirmation of the faith didst suffer thy holy Apostle Thomas to be doubtful in thy Son's resurrection: Grant us so perfectly, and without all doubt, to believe in thy Son Jesus Christ, that our faith in thy sight may never be reprov'd. Hear us, O Lord, through the same Jesus Christ, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, now and for evermore. Amen.

December 22nd

Hebrews 1 vv 1-3

It was in 597AD that S Augustine landed near Ramsgate and preached to the King of Kent and his people – many of whom were baptised in the River Stour on Christmas Day that same year. Ethelbert's queen, Bertha, was already a Christian, but most of the people Augustine preached to probably had little knowledge of Jesus. As time went on, England became nominally a Christian country until King Alfred could set the Ten Commandments at the head of our English Law. Once that became the case, all babies were normally baptised soon after birth and were expected to join in the worship of the family and of the Church. They acquired some instruction and perhaps had some personal knowledge of Jesus. The task of the preacher and teacher of the faith was no longer to tell people about Jesus of Whom they knew nothing, but to build on what they did know of Jesus in order to help them to be better Christians. Our basic pattern belongs to that notion of a nominally Christian nation. We baptise babies. We hope that they are brought up to pray, to read the Bible and to join in the life of the Church. At some stage, we give them a more intensive course of instruction to prepare them for Confirmation. Increasingly, of course, once again we are encountering people who don't know Jesus or very much about Him. So how do we prepare them for Baptism and Confirmation? There are facts that they ought to know, but, above all, they need to have a personal relationship with God in Christ. I think we can best help them to that by loving them.

December 23rd

Hebrews 1 vv 4-14

Angels feature a lot in the Christmas story. We dress children up in the Nativity play to look like angels as we imagine them. Angels are messengers to many of the protagonists in the story. Angels glorify God. They feature in many of our carols. Like most of the characters in the Christmas story, we would probably fear if we suddenly received the visitation of an angel.

And yet, glorious as angels are, Jesus is infinitely more so. And yet, infinitely glorious as Jesus is, He became a man.

December 24th (Christmas Eve)

Psalm 8

A lot of people say that their Christmas really starts when they listen to the King's College Nine Lessons and Carols service – specifically when the pure treble voice of a choir boy begins the service by singing the first verse of *Once in Royal David's City* in the darkened chapel. Christmas and the lead up to it can be very busy times. Sometimes this busyness is stressful, but it's also exciting and it's part of our build up to the holy season. Jesus is in the busyness. How often in the Gospels do we find Jesus in a crowd. He loves people. It seems that He loved parties. Jesus is in the school and office parties, the thronging crowds in the shopping malls and high streets, and the teeming pubs and clubs. Open your understanding; He is in all those places and He loves all those people. Nevertheless, He also withdrew from the crowds at times. He was alone in the natural environment. He was alone with God. We need these peaceful times too, time to be

alone, time for awe and wonder, time to experience intimacy with the divine. This Christmas, it might be when the children have finally gone to bed or the family are in all in another room (maybe while you wash up!) or perhaps if you go out into your garden for a few minutes or in church or wherever. Take some such time if you can.

December 25th (Christmas Day)

Psalm 122

But what if it's the other way round for you? What if Christmas is too quiet? The people you used to spend it with have died or moved on? You aren't strong enough to get out and about much yourself? Is there a temptation to feel sorry for yourself and to be jealous of the people you think are having a better time than you are? If you possibly can, whoever you are, whatever your family circumstances, get to Church over Christmas. What Christmas is really about is the Birth of Jesus. There is a wonderful fellowship sharing that celebration with other Christians as we meet together in His Name to do what He told us to do. If you can't get to church at Christmas, ask me to bring you Communion sometime in that eight day period from Christmas to New Year. At home, even if you can't get out, it's a day to remember Jesus' Birthday and there are services on radio and TV as well as the internet. You can be alone without being lonely. But those of us who will have busy Christmases ought not to forget those for whom it is too quiet.

December 26th (S Stephen)

Acts 7 vv 44-50

When Stephen is challenged regarding the Gospel message, he makes this speech in Acts 7, summarising how the history of the people of God (God faithful, we faithless) culminated in the coming of Christ – God's eternal plan for the redemption of the cosmos. A lot of people want to use God. They may try to dominate other people by claiming that it is God's Will that they do what they want them to do. They may try to achieve social status by appearing to be righteous. They may think that by praying they can get God to run the world the way they want. In short, they want to domesticate God. Tie God up in the Church. Use God when its helpful to you personally. Otherwise get on with your life in the world just as you please. Yet God is infinitely greater than we are. We don't control God. We can't confine God. We can't use God. It would be disastrous to try to do any of those things. True religion leads us to serve other people, not to seek to dominate them. True religion teaches us humility and service. Prayer is seeking grace to conform our Will to God's Will, not His to ours. God doesn't dwell in the temples we build. God dwells in Christ. He dwells in us – we in Him and He in us. Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life, is a threat to the man-centred religion of so many people. That's why they persecute His messengers. But the Truth sets us free. The strait and narrow way is the Way which leads to life. Life in Christ is for ever. *He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: (John 1^{11&12}).*

December 27th (S John)

Psalm 119 vv 105-112

Thy word is a lantern unto my feet: and a light unto my paths.

Jesus is the Word of God. Jesus is the Light of the world. In the light, we are not afraid. By the light, we see our way. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. We don't stumble. We come home.

Merciful Lord, we beseech thee to cast thy bright beams of light upon thy Church, that it being enlightened by the doctrine of thy blessed Apostle and Evangelist Saint John may so walk in the light of thy truth, that it may at length attain to the light of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

December 28th (Holy Innocents)

Jeremiah 31 vv 15-17

Despite the fact that it is a lovely late Summer day, that I had a good night's sleep, had a nice walk with Tommy in the woods first thing, was privileged to say Morning Prayer in Church, enjoyed a good breakfast, the sun is shining on my washing and I live in a big house with a beautiful garden, I'm in something of an irritable mood today. They claim a parcel I waited in most of yesterday for came at 6.20 pm when in fact it didn't and I'm waiting in again for it today, thinking the same thing will probably happen again and all week I've been troubled by parish politics. I'm upset not only by a decision that has been taken but by the way in which it was taken.

Today, we remember the boy babies killed by King Herod when Jesus was born. Our reading is both a prophecy of that event and an account of the sufferings of the people of Israel in C6BC when their land was

ravaged by the Babylonians. Over the last few days, I have been watching that documentary *The State* about life in the so-called caliphate of Islamic State in Syria. I ask myself what right I have to make a fuss and get worried about these minor issues when so many people have to contend with what is so much worse? It would be a start to be thankful for what I have and to pray for and (if possible) to help in other ways some of the people who are so much worse off than I am.

I'd still like to ask this question, however. When you do feel you've been treated unfairly in a comparatively minor matter what should you do? Raise it with the other party and risk a more serious quarrel? Pretend it doesn't matter? Seek grace to get over your resentment that the other party doesn't know or doesn't care how you feel? What if it's part of a pattern of insensitivity? These minor issues can harm families, friendships and Christian fellowships. I suppose the Rector ought to know what to do, but I'm afraid I don't.

O Almighty God, who out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast ordained strength, and madest infants to glorify thee by their deaths; Mortify and kill all vices in us, and so strengthen us by thy grace, that by the innocency of our lives, and constancy of our faith even unto death, we may glorify thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

December 29th

Jeremiah 31 vv 31-34

This is one of my favourite Old Testament passages and I am surprised that it is not quoted more often. It is taken up in the Epistle to the Hebrews 8^{7 et seq}, where it is made clear that, like all God's promises, these wonderful words find their fulfilment in Christ. There's a good analogy used on the Alpha Course. When you go for a long hike, carrying your provisions externally in your rucksack, they feel like a heavy burden to bear. But when you eat and drink them, when you take them internally, they refresh you and give you strength. The Ten Commandments were written on tablets of stone. As something external, the Law could be a heavy burden to bear. It could seem like a long list of almost impossible demands, the failure to obey which, would inevitably lead to punishment. The Old Testament is quite clear that the Law is based on the love of God, but it can be hard to see the wood for the trees and often God's Law was either ignored altogether, deliberately disobeyed, or abused and turned into a burden to weigh men and women down, or it was made into a pretended justification for self-righteousness and feelings of superiority. Jesus is the Word of God, Christ in us and we in Him. He gives us the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts. If we have faith in Him, as children of God, God's law of love is not a burden to be borne but it is what refreshes us and nourishes us on our journey to the Heavenly City.

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

December 30th

Romans 8 vv 1-17

S Paul spells out the truths we were celebrating yesterday. Our calling to walk after the Spirit, rather than the flesh – our basic human nature, our base human nature. The Holy Spirit is God's gift to us. In the Spirit, we have eternal life, our sins are forgiven. We are set free from bondage to sin, the world and the devil. We are adopted as the children of God. We are heirs of God's Kingdom, coheirs with Christ. Our experience of God the Holy Spirit assures us that we belong to Jesus; we are the people of God.

All this is the gift of God's grace to us. He does not, however, take away our free will. Even now, we have the choice between cooperating with the Spirit in living Spirit filled lives or falling back into living in the flesh so that we fail to grow as Christians and may even wither.

Galatians 6^{7&8}: *Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.*

December 31st (Christmas 1)

Romans 8 vv 18-39

We're on the eve of a new year. What will it bring? What do we hope for? What do we fear? For some people, the new year is a time of resolutions. For some people, they are that much closer to their wedding, or going to university or to that new job. Some people might be dreading the future or experiencing a

mixture of excitement and anxiety. As Christians, we look forward. God's Kingdom is coming, a judgment to fear if you are unrepentant, a consummation devoutly to be desired if you are a Christian. The whole Creation looks forward to its redemption on Christ. We have that sure and certain hope. The Holy Spirit Himself prays on our behalf. Our salvation is God's eternal plan for us. He is with us on our journey. Nothing can separate us from His Love. He will never let us down. He is our beginning and our end, our alpha and our omega. Happy New Year & a Blessed Eternity.

Revelation 19:6-9: And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God.