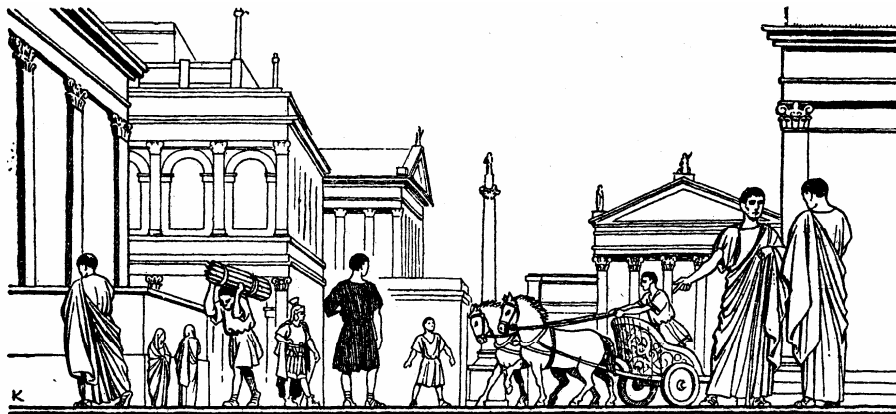


# The Epistle to the Romans



Street in a Roman City

## Bible Notes October-December 2018

50p

October 1<sup>st</sup>

Romans 1 vv 1-8

Dr David Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached for many years during and after the war at Westminster Chapel, attracting crowds of thousands to hear quite long sermons which thoroughly analysed the meaning of the Bible. One of his favourite themes was Romans. An interesting fact is that he abandoned his final course on the epistle when he reached 14<sup>17</sup> because he didn't feel he knew enough about *joy in the Holy Ghost*. Who does? Who can until we get to heaven.

Did the crowds flock to Lloyd-Jones because he was a great preacher? Was it because people were desperately seeking God in those dark days of war and its aftermath? Was it that people brought up in a nominally Christian country, as the UK then was, had a better idea than people have today where to seek for the help we all need? Was it his subject matter? In the Scriptures we find the words of eternal life? Was it a movement of the Holy Spirit which swept the nation? This was also the time of the Billy Graham campaigns and the rise of centres of evangelical faith such as All Souls, Langham Place, the BBC church.

Paul was called to be a great preacher in his day. He met both success and opposition, persecution even. For the people who heard the Gospel and believed, Jesus was the Way, the Truth & the Life. They were filled with the joy of the Holy Ghost. Their lives were transformed. They were themselves a witness to the world of the truth of God.

October 2<sup>nd</sup>

Romans 1 vv 9-16

So, the Church depends on prayers for one another. It is all of God. We can only achieve what God wants us to achieve in fellowship with Him. In fellowship with God, we are in fellowship with one another. Like Paul, we might have to change our plans. It's God's work not ours. Like Paul, we might will to do good things, but God's plan might be even better. So Paul didn't get to Rome as soon as he hoped or in the manner he might have chosen, but he did get there. Great man that he was, Paul was still in debt to all the people who assisted him with their prayers and other support. We all depend on one another in the Church. Paul was neither afraid nor ashamed to be known to be a Christian, to share the faith. We have in him our example.

October 3<sup>rd</sup>

Romans 1 vv 17-24

There really isn't any excuse. This wonderful universe in which we dwell itself bears witness to the greatness of God. We should never have fallen for the temptation to worship anything less than God – not false gods, not images of God, not natural phenomena, not other people, not ourselves, not anything we have made, not money, not power, not even saints or angels. There is no excuse for worshipping anything other than God.

We all have consciences. We really do know deep down inside us most of the time the difference between right and wrong. We are made in the image of God, the image of love. There really is no excuse for choosing the wrong. When you're not sure what to do, ask yourself what is the most loving thing to do. Ask God. You won't always get it right, but you'll be looking in the right place for answers.

Yet we fail to worship the one true God, to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and therefore, we choose the wrong path. We don't love our neighbours as ourselves and we don't behave as though we did.

Sin is a vicious circle which we cannot break out of. Judgment is certain. The God of love cares too much to be indifferent to the suffering sin brings to the world. He cannot turn a blind eye to our iniquity. Paul gives an appetiser of the remedy in vv 16&17, but we're not there yet.

October 4<sup>th</sup>

Romans 1 vv 25-32

This is where we get into difficulties. We can all see the truth that sin is a vicious circle. Turning our backs on God and His righteousness, inevitably we turn to evil. Paul gives examples of the evils we turn to. On his list are what appear to be homosexuality and transgender. There are different possible ways of understanding vv 26&27.

1. The traditional view would be that homosexuality and transgender are bad in themselves. They become prevalent in societies which have lost sight of God. You could argue that human beings are incomplete without a relationship with God.

If we don't have such a relationship, we may seek to fill the void with other relationships which are themselves wrong and ultimately destructive of ourselves and of one another.

2. Another view is that Paul is not condemning caring relationships between same sex couples or people who, for whatever reason, don't feel the same gender as their body. Rather, Paul is condemning the wickedness of the Roman court in which slaves or children or vulnerable women were forced to behave unnaturally in order to satisfy the perverted desires of the powerful.
3. You could say that times have changed and with them the interpretation of values. Traditional marriage customs try to ensure that we procreate enough children to maintain our numbers in the face of high death rates and that both parents are available to care for children. You could say that with over-population now being more of a problem than any shortage of human beings, sex can be more about relationships than procreation, and that society now takes a lot of the responsibilities that families used to bear alone – like health care & education.
4. Some people would say that Paul is not here laying down for all time and for every culture how we should live, but making a theological point that we cannot live rightly without God.

What we think about these issues will be informed by our love for God and for our fellow human beings.

October 5<sup>th</sup>

Romans 2 vv 1-8

Jesus warns us against judging others. We shall be judged by the same measure as we judge other people. There might be all kinds of reasons why we feel superior. We might not be at all attracted to the things other people do wrong. Maybe we've had a better upbringing than they have. Perhaps we have an easier life. We may not recognise our own sins as sins at all. After all, we're respectable people. How can what we do be sinful? But any failure to love is sin.

October 6<sup>th</sup>

Romans 2 vv 9-16

Paul was a Jew. He was well educated in the Scriptures. In fact he was brought up a Pharisee. Good Jewish families instructed their children in the knowledge of God, of everything that He has done for His people and to walk in the way of His commandments. They would have heard the same message in the synagogue and experienced the support of belonging to a worshipping community. On occasion, if they could, they would have taken part in the worship of the Temple in Jerusalem – itself modelled on the vision of heaven which God showed to Moses. So, the Jews had a lot to be thankful for. So have we if we have been brought up in the faith – much more so as Christians who know Jesus in Whom the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily. If we receive these wonderful privileges thankfully as a blessing, our lives are a blessing to the world. Freely we have received; we give freely. Alternatively, however, we may think of ourselves as better than other people, as deservedly privileged with the knowledge of God and look down on others who we think don't belong. If so, we have lost the plot. It is by grace that we are saved and grace is exactly what it says it is. It is God's free gift to us. If people who haven't had all our advantages live as God wants them to live (living lives of love) that pleases God. If those of us who have heard the Gospel are unloving in our daily lives, that is displeasing to God. He wants people who live by His perfect law of love, not people who make a pious show of talking about it.

October 7<sup>th</sup> (Trinity 19, Harvest Festival, Dedication Festival) Romans 2 vv 17-23

So it isn't knowing about God. It isn't knowing the commandments. It's knowing God and acting on our knowledge of Him, which is in itself a gift of the Holy Spirit.

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 8<sup>th</sup>

Romans 2 vv 24-29

Circumcision is normally performed on Jewish boy babies when they are eight days old. It is a sign and seal that they are members of the people of God as constituted in the Old Testament. After the Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Christian Church was led to an understanding that circumcision is not necessary for Christians. Our initiation rite is Baptism. In the early days, most of the candidates for Baptism would have been adults – converts from the Jewish or pagan religions. Baptism is a sign and seal that we are members of the people of God as constituted in the New Testament. All the baptised are members of the Body of Christ. Christian parents very quickly wanted their children included and it became the custom to baptise babies. What St Paul here says of circumcision must also be true, however, of Baptism. As members of the people of God we are called to act like members of the people of God. The rite becomes meaningless if we are not Christians inwardly with baptised hearts (not just baptised skin) living in the Spirit.

October 9<sup>th</sup>

Romans 3 vv 1-8

So what's the point of having a good religious upbringing? Well, it prepares you for the truth of the Gospel. If you don't live up to what your parents or church community or whatever hoped for you, if you don't respond to what God has done for you, that doesn't mean that God isn't faithful. You're the one who isn't faithful and you have less excuse than someone who never had your chances. God does remain faithful, however. Our case therefore can never be hopeless.

Some people might distort this to say that if God's faithfulness is most evident in forgiving our faithlessness, we might as well be bad so that He can manifest His goodness in forgiving us. It should be obvious what nonsense that would be. God wants us to be good because the world is a so much better place when we are.

October 10<sup>th</sup>

Romans 3 vv 9-18

From v10, Paul is quoting psalm 14. That is one of the two psalms which start with the words, *The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.* The New Testament understands Jesus in the light of the Old Testament. It makes no sense to read the one without the other.

What does the fool really think? Is he an atheist who literally believes that God doesn't exist? Or is he one of those people who just think that God makes no difference. God doesn't intervene in human affairs, he might think. He doesn't judge. He doesn't punish. He doesn't hear our prayers.

Either way, the fool is lost. He falls into the sins which Paul and the psalm list. He is a menace to others and a menace to himself. This is entirely Paul's argument from Romans. Humanity turns its back upon God. Humanity falls into sin, which destroys both the sinners and their victims. Humanity comes under judgment, condemnation even. Humanity's situation is hopeless.

Because we should note carefully that what the psalmist says about the fool Paul realises is true of the whole of humanity. Not one of us is righteous, no, not one. If we think we are, our standards are not high enough. The standard is Jesus.

October 11<sup>th</sup>

Romans 3 v19

I once attended a lecture in a London church given by the then Attorney General. He spoke lucidly and passionately about the rule of law and its importance in protecting all of us from the consequences of injustice. Behind him, as in so many churches, there were two boards inscribed with the Ten Commandments. We may have been taught these commandments as children. We should have been! I read them sometimes as part of the service of Holy Communion (required in 1662, optional in Common Worship). At least we Christians, like the Jews before us, know what the law is. But it's not knowing what God commands that counts, it's acting on His commandments that matters. We have less excuse than those who don't have our advantages and no reason for complacency.

October 12<sup>th</sup>

Romans 3 v20

Knowing God's commandments doesn't in itself make you good. In fact, if we measure ourselves against what God requires of, we realise how far short we fall. The standard is Jesus. He only loved God unreservedly. He alone loved His neighbour as Himself. To know God's law is not only to know right from wrong; it is to know that we are all sinners.

October 13<sup>th</sup>

Romans 3 vv 21&22

I once got quite cross with a TV programme on biblical archaeology. It demonstrated that ancient Israel was full of shrines to false gods and images of the one true God and that many shocking things went on in the various cults. That's all true enough. What annoyed me was that the commentator claimed that this was entirely different from the picture in the Bible, which is of pure worship of the LORD conducted only in the Temple at Jerusalem and in accordance with the rules set out in Scripture. Either this commentator hadn't read the Bible or he didn't understand! The whole tenure of the OT is that people don't obey the Law of God. They worship false gods and graven images. They have shrines all over the countryside where the cult is very far from pure. They oppress the poor. They cheat in business. There is violence on their streets. They are just like everyone else. Jew and gentile live in rebellion against God and the consequences are disastrous.

October 14<sup>th</sup> (Trinity 20)

Romans 3 vv 23&24

*For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God* must be one of the best known verses in the Bible. Think about it. This means you. And it means me. It means the whole of humanity. But, if we only have faith, *we* (everybody who accepts God's free gift *are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*

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 15<sup>th</sup>

Romans 3 vv 25&26

I'm writing these notes on a day of steady, continuous rain after weeks of hot dry weather. The temperature is much more tolerable. The atmosphere is fresher. The grass is greener already. There are several transformations like this in Romans and this is one of them. The prospect for humanity without the mercy of God is death, just like a lawn which remains unwatered for ever. Paul has established that *all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God*. Our situation would be absolutely hopeless, were it not for the mercy of God. But God's mercy is infinite.

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.

He shall come down like  
showers  
Upon the fruitful earth;  
And love, joy, hope, like  
flowers,  
Spring in His path to birth:  
Before Him on the  
mountains  
Shall peace, the herald, go;  
And righteousness, in  
fountains,  
From hill to valley flow.

Kings shall fall down before  
Him,  
And gold and incense  
bring;  
All nations shall adore Him,  
His praise all people sing;

For He shall have dominion  
O'er river, sea, and shore,  
Far as the eagle's pinion,  
Or dove's light wing can  
soar.

To Him shall prayer  
unceasing  
And daily vows ascend;  
His kingdom still increasing,  
A kingdom without end.  
The mountain dew shall  
nourish  
A seed in weakness sown,  
Whose fruit shall spread and  
flourish,  
And shake like Lebanon.

O'er every foe victorious  
He on His throne shall rest,  
From age to age more  
glorious,  
All-blessing and all-blest.  
The tide of time shall never  
His covenant remove;  
His Name shall stand  
forever,  
His changeless Name of  
Love.

October 16<sup>th</sup>

Romans 3 vv 24-31

So what justifies is God. It is not that we are good people. None of us is good enough. It is not that we are Jews or Gentiles. What justifies us is that Jesus died for us, for every one of us, on the cross. His sacrifice of Himself is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world. It follows that we can't boast of our status as Christians or Jews or as good people. Everything that we have, all that we are, is the gift of God. Only God is worthy of praise. It's the same for everyone, whoever you are; you are entirely dependent on God. You have no cause to boast because you aren't anything but what He made you. You have no need to fear, because His grace is sufficient for you. Never mind what anybody else thinks. Never mind what you think of yourself. You are a child of God because God has made you for Himself.

Grace doesn't nullify the Law. The Law is love. The Law is established by grace. The Law is good. The Law is upheld by justice and, all the more so, by mercy. Ponder this wonderful Communion hymn.

Once, only once, and once for  
all,  
his precious life he gave;  
before the cross in faith we fall,  
and own it strong to save.  
  
"One offering, single and  
complete,"  
with lips and hearts we say;  
but what he never can repeat  
he shows forth day by day.

For as the priest of Aaron's line  
within the holiest stood,  
and sprinkled all the mercy  
shrine  
with sacrificial blood;

So he, who once atonement  
wrought,  
our Priest of endless power,  
presents himself for those he

bought  
in that dark noontide hour.

His manhood pleads where now  
it lives  
on heaven's eternal throne,  
and where in mystic rite he  
gives  
its presence to his own.

And so we show thy death, O  
Lord,  
till thou again appear,  
and feel, when we approach thy  
board,  
we have an altar here.

All glory to the Father be,  
all glory to the Son,  
all glory, Holy Ghost, to thee,  
while endless ages run.

October 17<sup>th</sup>

Romans 4 vv 1-5

Abraham was surely a good man. God told Abraham to leave Haran and to go and live in the land of Canaan. By this time, Abraham was an old man, quite prosperous and probably comfortable where he was. There must have been a reason why God chose him. Abraham obeyed God. Abraham, we might reason, must have been a good man. But, if we think like that, we're missing the point of the story. *Abraham believed God and it was counted unto him for righteousness.* It doesn't say anything about why God chose him. God is sovereign. He can call whom He pleases. It is a matter of God's love, not what human beings deserve. What makes all the difference in Abraham's life is that he believed God. If Abraham had earned the right to live in Canaan and to father a people, that would have been his due, his wages. He would have deserved the credit. But that's not how it works. God called Abraham just because He loved him. Abraham's response was to believe, to have faith. It was by God's grace that Abraham received God's promises. They were not his reward for being good. They were God's free gift to him. God only is to be praised. So it is for the children of Israel. So it is for us – God's gift, not our desert. God called Israel out of Egypt not for their desert, though He led them through the desert to Canaan!

October 18<sup>th</sup> (S Luke)

Romans 4 vv 6-8

This is a quotation from Psalm 32. Sin is a disease. It alienates us from God and our fellow human beings, indeed from the whole of creation. We are not at ease with ourselves when we are so diseased. The disease of sin is both incurable and faithful – except for the mercy of God.

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 19<sup>th</sup>

Romans 4 vv 9-12

In the ancient world, people normally read out loud. It's worth doing sometimes (though perhaps not in the library) because it forces you to pay close attention to the sense of the passage. Try reading this passage out loud.

The point is that Abraham believed God (*and it was counted unto him as righteousness*) long before he was circumcised. Long before he fulfilled this particular representative of the law's demands, Abraham had faith. He did not belong to the covenant of circumcision when he came to faith. So, argues Paul, the blessedness of faith is independent of circumcision or any other of the Law's demands. That being the case, what really matters, whether or not you are circumcised, Jew or Gentile, what really matters is that you have faith. Abraham is the father of all who have faith, not only those who are circumcised. In fact, you could say that those who are circumcised but don't have faith are not Abraham's children (and they have also rejected the fatherhood of God).

October 20<sup>th</sup>

Romans 4 vv 13-16

Eternal life would be what we deserved if only we were good enough. However, only Jesus is that good. When we examine ourselves against the Law of God, we recognise that we are sinners, deserving only condemnation. It isn't too much of a stretch to say that Jesus, Who is the power and wisdom of God, the Word of God made flesh, is the incarnation of the Law. His life and death fulfil the Law. Jesus is perfect love. Paradoxically, He fulfils the Law of love by taking on Himself all the sin of creation. He becomes sin for us. He destroys the power of sin by sacrificing Himself on the cross for us. We know what sin is because we know what the Law says. We know what sin is because we know Jesus. We know that sin has been defeated because we know Jesus. Eternal life is not something we can earn. It is not something we have to earn. It is the gift of God through Jesus Christ. What is required of us is faith and that too is the gift of God.

October 21<sup>st</sup> Trinity 21)

Romans 4 vv 17-25

On the one hand, Abraham had many reasons to doubt. He was an old man. Surely, it was too late to make a new beginning. He and his wife were childless. How could he become the father of many nations? What was the point of hoping now for a child, still less a completely fresh start in life with unbelievable promises at its end? Yet, on the other hand, this is the God Who creates everything that is. This is the God Who gives life to all that lives. Why wouldn't anyone put his faith and hope in Him? Why wouldn't anyone love God? So *Abraham believes God and it is accounted unto him for righteousness*. And, says Paul, it is the same for us. Jesus was delivered for our offences and raised again for our justification.

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.

October 22<sup>nd</sup>

Romans 5 v 1&2

After all these years of reading the Bible and, in my case, reading it aloud in church and preaching on it and teaching it and hearing other people's sermons on it (mostly in the King James Version in my case), passages like this just resonate. I know them nearly by heart. They move me. *Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*. We use this verse to introduce the Peace at Communion during Lent. What more could we desire than peace with God.

It is my belief that much of the dissatisfaction we read about in the world today is because people don't have peace with God. They worry about their looks, their exam results, their status on social media, what people think of them, being bullied, money, human relationships, sickness and death. We're told that people, including young people, who you would think have everything going for them, are unhappy, dissatisfied and depressed. Now I'm not saying that the things I listed above aren't important. But if they had peace with God, they would have the resources to deal with them.

October 23<sup>rd</sup>

Romans 5 vv 3-5

One of the big puzzles in life is why there is suffering in a world created by God Who is both infinitely good and infinitely powerful. At any rate, why do bad things happen to good people? There are various answers – none of them entirely satisfactory, none of them complete, but here are some of them.

1. We get what we deserve and people suffer because they are sinners. But it certainly isn't as simple as that. Very often, quite good people suffer and apparently bad people seem to live charmed lives.
2. We're all sinners. So none of us has the right to complain. But if we confess our sins and receive forgiveness, surely we don't still to deserve to be punished even in this life.
3. Human beings have been given freedom. Much of the pain in the world is caused by our abuse of that freedom. But not all of it. Accidents and natural disasters are nobody's fault. And why do animals suffer?
4. Because God respects the freedom of the universe, He doesn't intervene. If you drop a brick it always falls in accordance with the Law of Gravity even if it falls on an innocent baby. But, if God, doesn't intervene in this world's affairs, what's the point of prayer or thanksgiving – two basics of our relationship with God.
5. It will all be sorted out in the world to come when the good (the forgiven) go to Heaven and the unrepentant go to Hell. But *God desireth not the death of a sinner*.
6. There is no such thing as evil. It's all an illusion. But evil feels very real when it happens to you.
7. God doesn't intervene to prevent evil, but He did come into the world in the person of Jesus Christ. He feels our pain.
8. God is infinitely greater than we are. He knows what He is doing. We just can't understand why things have to be the way they are.
9. What Paul says here. Tribulation develops character, especially for those who believe as they experience the power of God in their sufferings.

October 24<sup>th</sup>

Romans 5 vv 6-10

There is a great deal we don't understand. But we do know this much. God loves us so much that Christ died for us. He didn't do that because we were good. He didn't do that because we loved Him. He died for us the ungodly, *while we were yet sinners*. The only reason we are no longer sinners is that Christ died for us and washed our sins away in His Blood. Given that God loves us that much, the God Who made everything that is, the God Who gives life to all that live, then we have nothing to be afraid of. Given that God loves everybody else that much too, how can we fail to love one another? And yet we do.

October 25<sup>th</sup>

Romans 5 vv 11-16

Cast your mind back to the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were told that, if they ate of the fruit of the tree which was in the midst of the garden, they would surely die. They ate it. They were cast out of the garden. God told them that they would return to the dust from whence they came. *The wages of sin is death*. It was only very much later, when God gave the Law to Moses on Mt Sinai, that God's commandments and the consequences of disobeying them were spelt out. But humanity was in rebellion from the very beginning against the source of all life. And everybody died eventually. This is cause and effect. It is plain justice. However, God has done something far more wonderful in Jesus Christ than what happened in Adam. The Immortal dies, taking the consequences of all the sin of the world on Himself, so that mortal men may have eternal life through the forgiveness of their sins.

And can it be that I should gain  
an interest in the Saviour's  
blood?

Died he for me, who caused his  
pain? For me, who him to death  
pursued?

Amazing love! How can it be  
that thou, my God, shouldst die  
for me?

'Tis mystery all: the Immortal  
dies! Who can explore his  
strange design?

In vain the first-born seraph

tries to sound the depths of  
love divine.  
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,  
let angel minds enquire no  
more.

He left his Father's throne  
above — so free, so infinite his  
grace —  
emptied himself of all but love,  
and bled for Adam's helpless  
race.

'Tis mercy all, immense and

free; for, O my God, it found  
out me!

Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
fast bound in sin and nature's  
night; thine eye diffused a  
quickenning ray;  
I woke, the dungeon flamed  
with light; my chains fell off,  
my heart was free,

I rose, went forth, and followed  
thee.

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

October 26<sup>th</sup>

Romans 15 vv 17-21

Another hymn comes to mind. Adam represents ordinary humanity. As the children of Adam, human beings are rebels against the God of love — with all that follows from that. We are, in a sense, all in Adam. Christ is the second Adam. He is a new beginning. He is without sin. Washed clean in Christ, we are born again. We are freed of sin. We make a fresh start. We are recipients of God's gift of eternal life.

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

O loving wisdom of our God! When  
all was sin and shame,  
a second Adam to the fight and to  
the rescue came.

O generous love! that he, who  
smote in Man for man the foe,  
the double agony in Man for man  
should undergo;

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

And in the garden secretly, and on  
the cross on high,  
should teach his brethren, and  
inspire to suffer and to die.

And now you help me. When most of us were growing up, England was nominally a Christian country and most people claimed to belong to the Church which believes in original sin, that all human beings are naturally sinful, but, by and large, we trusted one another. Now people no longer believe in original sin, insisting instead that we are naturally good, and yet we lock everything up, we make our schools and hospitals as secure as prisons and CCTV is everywhere. We trust no-one anymore. Why is that?



ALSO October 26<sup>th</sup>

Romans 6 vv 1&2

So what difference does it make that we are Christians? People often say to me in times of trouble or grief that they can't imagine how people without faith manage. I agree. If there were no meaning, if this life were all we get, if there were nobody to hear our prayers, there would be no ultimate hope. Hopeless, we should be lost.

What about the way we behave, however? Do we behave better because we are Christians than we should otherwise? It is difficult to tell. It is not our place to judge other people. It's not easy to assess ourselves. We don't know what kind of people we might have been, had we not come to know the Lord. But if we don't aspire to be better than ordinary when we know that ordinary isn't good enough, then something is wrong with the way we try to live our lives.

October 27<sup>th</sup>

Romans 6 vv 3-7

The day of your Baptism is the most important day of your life. It's a pity most of us don't remember that day because we're usually too young to remember it! It is, however, the day we become Christians, the day we become members of the Church, the day we become heirs of eternal life, the day we make a new beginning, distinct from the world, the flesh and the devil. Our ordinary human humanity (the flesh, the old Adam) is crucified with Christ. It follows that we participate in His Resurrection. We are the Easter people, people of love and joy and peace and all the other fruits of the Spirit. We ought to be better than ordinary, better than the old Adam, the flesh, the things of this world.

October 28<sup>th</sup> (S Simon & S Jude)

Romans 6 vv 8-11

This new life in which we share as Christians is based firmly on the life of Jesus and is a shared enterprise with the whole people of God in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the Lord & Giver of Life.

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 29<sup>th</sup>

Romans 6 vv 12-14

A writer in the *Times* had a new fire door fitted. The cost of over £1,000 made his eyes water, but, "at least", he said to the builder, "it would be safer than the old door it replaced." "No," said the builder. "The old door was safer, but the regulations required you to have this one because it has a kite mark." Being under the law, seeing that the boxes are ticked. This is what I have to, whether or not it makes sense. When I've ticked all the boxes, I've done my duty. I'm entitled to my reward and I don't have to do anything else because I'm under the law. Under grace, we aren't worried about punishment. We don't obey the rules because we are afraid of being punished for not doing so. We do our very best, not because we expect any reward, but simply because we love Jesus.

October 30<sup>th</sup>

Romans 6 vv 15-23

Jesus said that no man can serve two masters. Everybody, however, serves one Master. We serve God or we serve sin. Most people choose to serve sin. The human race is subject to original sin. To serve sin, however, is to be a slave. It doesn't bring you happiness. *The wages of sin is death*. People don't see that because they are blinded by the god of this world – Satan, false gods, a false image of the one true God, wealth, power, etc.. None of them bring joy. All of them worshipped instead of God lead to death. Christ sets us free from all that, to serve God Whose service is perfect freedom. Only in Him are we truly joyful. His gift to us is eternal life. So the collect for peace I say every day.

O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom: Defend us thy humble servants in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in thy defence, may not fear the power of any adversaries; through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

October 31<sup>st</sup>

Romans 7 vv 1-4

Hallowe'en is apt to think about death and darkness and evil. Paul's analogy here is with a woman whose husband dies. His death sets her free to marry again. If the first husband was a tyrant, his death might be said to set her free. She can marry again a man who really loves her. The letter of the law kills whereas the Spirit gives life. We are dead to sin. Christ has died on the cross and now lives forever. These deaths set us free from the tyranny of sin, the world and the devil, so that we can be married to Christ the husband Who loves us eternally.

November 1<sup>st</sup> (All Saints)

Romans 7 vv 5-14

The law isn't sin, but the law reveals sin. It sets out on tablets of stone the difference between right and wrong. It may be the occasion of sin, leading to pride if we think we have fulfilled the law's demands, or despair if it makes us feel hopelessly inadequate. It can even suggest sins we hadn't thought of. But freedom from sin isn't freedom to sin. Freedom from sin is freedom to live in accordance with God's Will, which is the only way we can be truly happy.

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 2<sup>nd</sup> (All Souls)

Romans 7 v15

Do you make new year's resolutions? I don't think I've done that since I was a child. They only get broken. What about promises to God? Maybe in Lent you examine yourself, take note of what is wrong in your life and resolve to do better? Or sometimes, in the light of a wonderful experience of worship or a new understanding of what faith means, we seek to deepen our Christian commitment. Whenever we confess our sins, whether as part of what we do as a Church or individually, the implication is that we will do better. And yet, like Paul, we find ourselves doing what we resolved not to do and failing to do what we promised ourselves (and God?) that we would do. The two traps are that we give up seeking to be better people, on the one hand, and become complacent with what we are, or, on the other hand, that we despair. Both these traps are to be avoided by God's grace. Jesus said, *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.* So don't accept anything less. He also said, *Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.* So never despair. Ponder the absolution at Morning & Evening Prayer.

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness, and live; and hath given power, and commandment, to his Ministers, to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins: He pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent, and unfeignedly believe his holy Gospel.

Wherefore let us beseech him to grant us true repentance, and his Holy Spirit, that those things may please him, which we do at this present; and that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure, and holy; so that at the last we may come to his eternal joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

November 3<sup>rd</sup>

Romans 7 vv 16-23

Bible scholars debate endlessly whether Paul is describing his experiences now as a Christian or how he felt before he came to know Jesus. I think he means the way he feels as a Christian, but let's look at the other possibility first. Before he met Jesus on the Damascus Road, Paul was a highly-educated Pharisee. He knew God's Law. He knew all the Scriptures which we know as the Old Testament. He felt so strongly that he persecuted the followers of Jesus Who seemed to be a threat to what Paul understood as God's revelation to Moses. Maybe he persecuted Christians because he really was sure they were wrong. Maybe he persecuted us because he was afraid we might be right. Anyway, he knew how high the standard is. It is engraved by God on tablets of stone and he knew that he fell well short. So he lived with feelings of failure and guilt. When, at last, he came to know Jesus, he realised how his sins could be forgiven and that he didn't have to succeed in his own strength because Jesus has done everything necessary for us. Christ doesn't destroy the Law revealed by God to Moses on Mt Sinai. He fulfils it. So, by becoming a Christian, Paul is set free. The other possibility is that Paul is speaking of his experience as a Christian. It's my experience and it's probably yours too. We have been born again. We are crucified with Him. We dwell in the Holy Spirit and He dwells in us. Yet the flesh (our ordinary human nature) lusts against the spirit. There is still this tension within us between good and evil, the Christlike and the ordinary, a tension which will only be resolved when we are in heaven when we shall see Him face to face and be made like Him.

O God, who, through the preaching of the blessed Apostle Saint Paul, hast caused the light of the Gospel to shine throughout the world: Grant, we beseech thee, that we, having his wonderful conversion in remembrance, may shew forth our thankfulness unto thee for the same, by following the holy doctrine which he taught; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

November 4<sup>th</sup> (Trinity 23)

Romans 7 vv 24&25

In several places, Paul speaks of longing for the end. There is our death when we shall be with the Lord. We shall see Him as He is. We shall be made like Him. We shall be in receipt of blessings which we cannot even to begin to imagine here on earth. We shall see again our loved ones who have died in the Lord. There is the end of time when Christ shall come again to judge the quick and the dead. There will be new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Christians have nothing to fear in death. I'm not eager to die. I love the life with which God has blessed me on earth. In fact I cannot understand why I should be so richly blessed. It's even possible that I might still be useful here and now. But what is to come is infinitely better and certainly nothing to fear. 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 5<sup>th</sup>

Romans 8 v1

We live in a very judgmental society. School children are always being tested and examined (checking on their teachers as well as on them). If anyone says anything "inappropriate", millions of people go on online to condemn them and demand an apology. Pictures of you posted on social media have to be immaculate. You want people to think that you are having the perfect life. The internet ensures that nothing is forgotten. All this being judged is extremely stressful for some people. And yet, in the end, the only judgment that matters is God's judgment of our lives. If we are right with Him, it doesn't matter what anybody else thinks.

Just as I am, without one plea,  
but that thy blood was shed for me,  
and that thou bidst me come to thee,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, and waiting not  
to rid my soul of one dark blot,  
to thee whose blood can cleanse each  
spot,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, though tossed about  
with many a conflict, many a doubt,  
fightings and fears within, without,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind;  
sight, riches, healing of the mind,  
yea, all I need in thee to find,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, thou wilt receive,  
wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;  
because thy promise I believe,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, thy love unknown  
hath broken every barrier down;  
now, to be thine, yea thine alone,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

November 6<sup>th</sup>

Romans 8 vv 2&3

I wasn't sure which passage of Scripture to study this quarter and then I came to Romans 8 in my own daily bible readings in church at Morning Prayer. Romans is such a wonderful epistle & I think that Romans 8 is one of the top four chapters in the bible. How can we be right with God? God makes us right with God through Jesus Christ. All we need to do is to believe. Once we are right with God, nothing else really matters.

November 7<sup>th</sup>

Romans 8 v4

The righteousness of the law is fulfilled. Jesus has borne our sins on the cross. Sin is dealt with by the death of Jesus. There is no guilt, no condemnation. We are born again through faith in Him. We are set free to live righteous lives by His grace.

November 8<sup>th</sup>

Romans 8 vv 5-8

We're back to what Jesus said about the impossibility of serving two masters. You are either a Christian or you are not. You either walk in the spirit or the flesh. You follow the narrow way which leads to life or the broad route that leads to destruction. Nobody is perfect in this life (except Jesus), but what is your true goal in life? Is it to follow Jesus? Or do the things of this world come first?

November 9<sup>th</sup>

Romans 8 vv 9-11

If you are a Christian, the Spirit of God dwells in you. Elsewhere, we are warned not to quench the Spirit. The Spirit is to the Christian what the wind is to a sailing ship. The Spirit is the power by which we move and He sets the direction. You can't sail a yacht against the wind. If you don't take account of the wind, when you set the course, you could capsize or hit the rocks. You have to work with the wind in order to reach the harbour.

We have to be very careful of the danger of promoting a less than whole-hearted version of the faith in order to make it easy for people or to avoid persecution or just to keep up our numbers. The only way to be fulfilled as a human being is to yield your life to God in Christ. If we preach anything less, we're short-changing people.

November 10<sup>th</sup>

In a way, it was easier at the beginning. When the children of God first proclaimed in your town, you either believed or you didn't. If you didn't believe, you might well face the situation of contempt and persecution of those who were not converted, including your family and friends, as well as possibly your employer and the authorities. If you did believe and share in the Eucharist come what may, you were free to forsake life and possessions. Christ was your life and there was no earthly dependence on His Church. Once Christianity had become established, it was no longer so easy to compromise – to try to live both by the flesh and by God, spirit. You could live a worldly life and then like religion when you felt like it. I think this is what Paul means by *His virginity for the sake of the Gospel* is but denying the power thereof and it is dangerous. It isn't an illusion. Christians are denying themselves to be protected from suffering which is the message of the Gospel. We are not to be commissioned to preach to those who don't even know the glory that shall be revealed.

November 11<sup>th</sup> (Trinity 24 Remembrance Sunday) Romans 8 vv 14&15

November 13<sup>th</sup> (because of the way that Easter works out) Roman Sunday 19-23  
Then shall be the new heaven and the new earth which which sight for us is dwell that is inside the human same while and leading by Christ. That whole in the generations fulfillment through the Christ is sufficiently holy to be acceptable to the three holy God but the three holy God redeems all things of Christ. Everything has its purpose killing and being killed on the same field. We should be the carpenter for Nazareth in Galilee. God has given a human being in order to be an oil of creation to himself. We are special and yet we know that we don't have to fear. By Christ's grace, we are the children of God. God is always more powerful.

November 14<sup>th</sup>

Romans 8 vv 24&25  
O Lord, we see that Christ has won the victory over the forces of evil, that all things in the beginning are good, less how may all be delivered from the bonds of those things, the Resurrection to eternal life. We have committed: Grant this, O heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake, our blessed Lord and Saviour. Amen.



November 15<sup>th</sup>

Romans 8 vv 26&27

It can all be very daunting. Here we are one of billions of people on this planet and this planet is only a which we can know about? Moreover, our problems are very real in this world, in our day to day existence, what we face as individuals, what we face as churches and nations, what we face as the whole human race. We may well feel overwhelmed. And yet we have the Spirit of God, the Creator of Heaven and earth, the Redeemer of all that is. The almighty Spirit dwells in us. When we don't even know what to pray for, the Spirit of God prays to God on our behalf. God is the answer to our prayers and God prays with us and for us. We are never helpless or hopeless because *God is our hope and strength: a very present help in trouble.*

November 16<sup>th</sup>

Romans 8 v28

This verse is quite often misunderstood to suggest that everything will go well for you in this life if you are a Christian. You'll never get sick. Your business will prosper. Your children will never get into trouble. Having read what Paul has already said about suffering, he can hardly mean that. What he does mean is that God is looking after us. His grace is sufficient for us whatever happens.

Ye holy angels bright,  
who wait at God's right hand,  
or through the realms of light  
fly at your Lord's command,  
assist our song,  
for else the theme  
too high doth seem  
for mortal tongue.

Ye saints, who toil below,  
adore your heavenly King,  
and onward as ye go  
some joyful anthem sing;  
take what he gives  
and praise him still,  
through good or ill,  
who ever lives!

Ye blessed souls at rest,  
who ran this earthly race  
and now, from sin released,  
behold your Saviour's face,  
his praises sound,  
as in his sight  
with sweet delight  
ye do abound.

My soul, bear thou thy part,  
triumph in God above:  
and with a well-tuned heart  
sing thou the songs of love!  
Let all thy days  
till life shall end,  
whate'er he send,  
be filled with praise!

November 17<sup>th</sup>

Romans 8 vv 29&30

This is where it gets difficult with a difficulty which we shall also confront in the next chapter. It's wonderful to know that God has chosen us. It's amazing that He has chosen us to be conformed to the image of His Son. He chose us before the world began and so ordered our lives that we should come to know Him. It doesn't depend at all on us. Everything entirely depends on Him. Faith is His gift to us. We don't deserve His grace. We didn't work for it. We didn't earn it. God is sovereign. We cannot help ourselves, but God supplies all the help we need.

But then why doesn't He choose everyone? If we are chosen irrespective of our merits, why would God discriminate between people? If we are predestined to be Christians and other people are not, what happened to freedom of choice? If God is sovereign, it seems that it is inevitable that some are saved and some are not and that there is nothing any of us can do about it and that seems unjust, yet God is just!

I don't know if this helps. There used to be two scientific theories about what light is. One theory was that light is a stream of very tiny particles. The other that light is a wave. The problem is that, in some ways, light behaves like a stream of particles and in other ways it behaves like a wave. It isn't a wave like a wave of the sea or a sound wave. It's not a stream of particles like water molecules passing through a pipe. It's more than either and combines both. Got it? I'm not sure that I have! However, it suggests an analogy with our relationship with God. One view is that human beings are free to choose and must take responsibility for their choices. The other is that God determines everything. Can I suggest that the truth is more than either theory but combines both? So it makes sense to talk both about the sovereignty of God and our freedom to make choices for which we are responsible, but that it is beyond our understanding how both these things are true?

November 18<sup>th</sup> (Trinity 25)

Romans 8 vv 31-39

Because Easter was early this year, the Prayer Book runs out of provision for Sundays after Trinity but has a surplus of Sundays after Epiphany. So we use the collect, epistle & gospel for Epiphany 5 today.

This wonderful passage from Romans really just needs our contemplation. Considering how much God loves us and Who He is, we can be absolutely certain that all will be well for us.

O Lord, we beseech thee to keep thy Church and household continually in thy true religion; that they who do lean only upon the hope of thy heavenly grace may evermore be defended by thy mighty power; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

November 19<sup>th</sup>

Romans 9 vv 1-3

I'm writing these notes when accusations of anti-Semitism in the Labour Party have been very much in the news. Over many centuries, the Jews have suffered persecution. If you read the Book of Esther, you will see that this goes back long before Jesus came. The Jews were different – which always makes people uncomfortable. Moreover they set themselves (God set them) a higher standard than obtained in the world around them. Christians, in some societies, have suffered in the same way – different and living to a higher standard, not belonging to this world. Disgracefully, however, for hundreds of years, Christians have been at the forefront in persecuting Jews. It was not meant to be like that. Jesus fulfils the Law and the Prophets. He, the apostles and all the first believers were Jews, including Paul. We should feel for the Jewish people as Paul feels for them here – love and respect.

November 20<sup>th</sup>

Romans 9 vv 4-9

How can it be that the people who received the Law & the Prophets, all the blessings in the Old Testament, don't believe what God is now doing in Jesus? Jesus was one of them! Paul points out that only one of Abraham's two sons was heir to the promise – Isaac. Ishmael was born after the flesh when Abraham slept with Sarah's maid Hagar. Isaac was born of the promise to Sarah who had been barren. So, from the beginning, there was a difference between the children of the promise & the children of the flesh, even among the sons of Abraham.

November 21<sup>st</sup>

Romans 9 vv 10-13

This gets harder. There is another division between the chosen and the one not chosen. Isaac's wife had twins – Esau & Jacob, Esau being the first to come out of the womb. Jacob would be named Israel and was the ancestor of the OT people of God. Esau was rejected before he was even born. Paul's point is that God is sovereign. He chooses for reasons which we cannot understand and ought not to enquire about. Jacob wasn't chosen because he was a better person than Esau. In many ways, I'm sure I for one would have liked Esau better. But it's not works. It's by grace through faith. It was God's sovereign right to choose Jacob, whatever we might think.

November 22<sup>nd</sup>

Romans 9 vv 14-18

The Paul gives us an even more difficult example. The key event in the history of the Jews is their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. This is the act of God. Everything which happens in the Exodus is directed by God. It wasn't that the Israelites were lucky or smarter than the Egyptians. It wasn't that in Moses they had found a good leader. It wasn't that the Egyptians were weak, foolish or unlucky. God directed the Exodus and thereby constituted Israel as a holy nation and kingdom of priests. The Exodus is essential to the OT as the Crucifixion is to the NT. The Crucifixion, even more than the Exodus, is God's eternal plan. It was inevitable because it was the Will of God. Judas and Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate had to play the parts they played because it was God's plan for the redemption of Creation. Pharaoh had to play his part, the part God had ordained for him, in God's plan for the redemption of Israel.

If God were not directing events, things might have turned out very differently. Satan might have won. We might not have been saved. We might all be bound for hell. If God were not in control, there would be no point in intercessory prayer and little reason to give thanks.

Yet, surely it is unjust if Judas and Pharaoh and Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate are blamed for what they did if they had no choice. Clearly, they were free to choose, yet their choices were foreordained. I can only refer to the notes for 17<sup>th</sup> November for me to make some sense of this.

November 23<sup>rd</sup>

Romans 9 vv 19-23

Ultimately, as Paul says, it's beyond our understanding. We are made of earth or clay. The clay can't argue with the potter. Though the Potter did breathe the breath of life into our clay and made us living souls. So we do question, even though we have to acknowledge that the answers are often beyond us. Let me share the Church of England's official position on this subject – not that it helps much!

17<sup>th</sup> Article of Religion.

XVII. Of Predestination and Election

Predestination to Life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he hath constantly decreed by his counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour.

Wherefore, they which be endued with so excellent a benefit of God be called according to God's purpose by his Spirit working in due season: they through Grace obey the calling: they be justified freely: they be made sons of God by adoption: they be made like the image of his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ: they walk religiously in good works, and at length, by God's mercy, they attain to everlasting felicity.

As the godly consideration of Predestination, and our Election in Christ, is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh, and their earthly members, and drawing up their mind to high and heavenly things, as well because it doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal Salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, as because it doth fervently kindle their love towards God: So, for curious and carnal persons, lacking the Spirit of Christ, to have continually before their eyes the sentence of God's Predestination, is a most dangerous downfall, whereby the Devil doth thrust them either into desperation, or into wretchedness of most unclean living, no less perilous than desperation.

Furthermore, we must receive God's promises in such wise, as they be generally set forth to us in holy Scripture: and, in our doings, that Will of God is to be followed, which we have expressly declared unto us in the Word of God.

November 24<sup>th</sup>

Romans 9 vv 33

Paul considers a variety of OT texts. The OT is full of warnings that, as Israel has rejected God by worshipping false gods and by failing to uphold justice and mercy in its dealings with human beings, it is on the path to destruction. God will not abandon His people. Only a remnant, however, shall be saved. In God's mercy, however, those who had not been God's people will become God's people. In v25 Paul applies this to the Gentiles. They will become God's people. Originally, in Hosea, it meant that the Israelites, who had ceased to be God's people because of their turning their backs on Him, would be restored to God by God's unfailing love. Jew and Gentiles alike, however, can only be saved through faith, not by works of the Law. 9<sup>33</sup> quotes Isaiah 28<sup>16</sup>. You fall over Jesus if you try to justify yourself by your own good works. If you come to Him in faith, however, He is the headstone in the corner, the One on Whom your eternal life depends.

November 25<sup>th</sup> (Last Sunday after Trinity)

Romans 10 vv 1-8

Today's collect is one of the best known – if only because the first couple of words are supposed to remind people to make their Christmas puddings.

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.

Good works are fruit. Fruit grows naturally on healthy trees. The trees aren't healthy because they are fruitful. They bear fruit because they are healthy. We are not saved by our good works. We perform good works because we are saved.

November 26<sup>th</sup>

Romans 10 vv 9-11

Some evangelical churches put a lot of stress on the need to confess Christ aloud. I would never say that anything is necessary to salvation except faith. However, we are promised that we shall not be ashamed if we put our faith in Him. God won't let us down. In a way it is letting Him down if we don't confess that we are Christians. We ought not to be ashamed of Him or fearful of what other people think. Part of being a Christian is bearing witness of Jesus to the world.

November 27<sup>th</sup>

Romans 10 vv 12&13

So, the way to God is through faith in Jesus Christ whether you are a Jew or a Gentile. What might it mean though that God has given this faith to some, but not all? I think Mgr Roderick Strange's thoughts in the *Times* for 11<sup>th</sup> August are helpful here. He's commenting on what happened after the Feeding of the Five Thousand when Jesus explained that He is the Bread of Life. "Two crucial questions have emerged for us. First, what gives us life? Whatever our religious belief or lack of it, that question is vital. What inspires us? Does it last? Secondly, if the bread of life which is faith in Christ and so vital, is a free gift that some receive, but others don't, or even care about, what are the implications? Such people, however, are not to be cast aside. Instead, those who have received this gift must recognise that they have received it not only for themselves, but as a gift to be embraced faithfully because they hold it in trust for others."

November 28<sup>th</sup>

Romans 10 vv 14-16

If the world is even to have the chance to know Jesus, it is necessary that the Word is proclaimed. How can people come to faith if they never hear? Part of our Christian calling is to pray for the preaching of the Word. There are two ways in which human beings may be involved in this task. The way every Christian lives ought to be an act of witness to our faith. The way we behave should reflect the love of Christ. We should take the opportunities we have to speak about Him. We have a responsibility to talk about Jesus to those who are close to us. There is also the particular calling of missionaries, evangelists, clergy, etc. We should pray for vocations to these ministries and support these ministers with our prayers our giving and in any other ways we can.

November 29<sup>th</sup>

Romans 10 vv 17-21

Verse 18 is a quotation from Psalm 19<sup>4</sup>. There it means that all the wonders of the world, specifically the sun, moon and stars, proclaim the glory of God. It's like Romans 1. If we were to lift up our eyes to the heavens and consider properly, we should see the truth. Paul is also talking about preachers of the OT & the NT. So often, their words are rejected. Paul's hope is that the success of the Gentile mission will convert the Jews.

November 30<sup>th</sup> (S Andrew).

Romans 11 vv 1-5

S Andrew is often thought of as the first missionary. Like all the other apostles and Jesus Himself, Andrew was a Jew. When he first met Jesus, he brought his brother Simon (later Peter), and it was Andrew who mediated when some Greeks asked to see Jesus. All the first Christians were Jews. So God hasn't written off the Jews and we have no right to write off the Jews or to feel superior to them. Many Jews are Christians and those who are not are still loved by God as all people are and therefore we too ought to love them.

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 1<sup>st</sup>

Romans 11 vv 6-10

Yesterday's reading refers to the occasion when the prophet Elijah was thoroughly fed up with his lot and told God that he was the only faithful man left in Israel. God gave him of vision of Himself on Mt Horeb, commissioned Elijah to complete the work God had given him and revealed to him that there were in fact, 7,000 faithful Israelites. So Elijah was not alone after all. In the same way, Paul says, whatever Gentile Christians might think, there are many faithful Jewish Christians in the world today – Christians on the same terms as Gentiles. Jew and Gentile alike are saved by grace through faith, not by the Law or by good works. This is all in God's foreknowledge and purpose, as everything must be if God be God.

December 2<sup>nd</sup> (Advent Sunday)

Romans 11 vv 12-15

Advent looks forward to the coming of Jesus. It is a time of preparation for Christmas, when we celebrate His first coming, born a baby in Bethlehem. More especially, it looks forward to His Second Coming to judge both the quick and the dead. God's eternal plan is for the redemption of the cosmos in Christ. As human beings, we are with Him or we are against Him. As we've seen, this is both a matter of our



choices for which we are responsible and His providence which assigns us our place in His purposes. That's true of Jews and Gentiles. 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 3<sup>rd</sup> Romans 11 v16  
When you read the Book of Acts, typically Paul begins his preaching in each place he visits in the synagogue. Some of the Jews believe, along with those Gentiles who attend synagogue services seeking what they feel that the Jews have. The unbelieving Jews then cast Paul and the believers out and they preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. So the unbelief of many of the Jews stimulates the mission to the Gentiles. Paul's hope and prayer is that all the Jews will come to the knowledge of the truth in Christ and that this will bring in the Kingdom of God. When you offer the firstfruits of the harvest to God, you consecrate the whole crop. You are thanking God for His good gifts. You are trusting Him for what is yet to come. You are sharing the gifts you have received with those in need. Israel was a holy people, consecrated to God by the Old Covenant or Testament. The Old Testament with the Jews is the ground of our consecration as Christians.

December 4<sup>th</sup> Romans 11 vv 17-22  
Typically, wild fruit trees produce fruit which isn't entirely to our taste – like crab apples. Plant breeders have produced much better varieties for eating and cooking, but these are often not as vigorous as the wild varieties. Someone, millennia ago, discovered that you can graft the cultivated variety into a wild root stock and get the flavour of the cultivated plant and vigour of the wild plant. Paul's argument is that we Christians have been grafted into the stock of Israel. So we would be foolish to despise Israel and the Jewish people or to think that we could do without the Old Testament and its teaching.

December 5<sup>th</sup> Romans 11 vv 23 & 24  
Reading this carefully, you will see that Paul is very bold with his analogy. To him, we Gentiles are the wild plant. We didn't have the discipline of the Law or the teaching of the Prophets. The cultivated plant is Israel, tended and cared for by God. Where the branches of Israel have ceased to bear fruit to God, they have been cut out, and we wild branches have been grafted in. This appears to be the opposite of what a gardener would do, but God can do anything in His infinite sovereignty. It would be natural for the Jews to be grafted back in to God's tree if they came to faith and they would then bear fruit for Him. Equally, if we Gentiles stray from our faith (eg by despising the Jews) and bear no fruit, we might well be cut out of God's tree. See also John 15.

December 6<sup>th</sup> (S Nicholas) Romans 11 vv 25-27  
*There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob.* This is not a direct quotation from the OT, but it sums up much of its message. God does not abandon His people. A Saviour will come. S Nicholas is Santa Claus. He is remembered for his faithfulness to Christ manifest in generosity especially to the poor. We are thinking about the coming of Jesus, the Deliverer, in Advent and at Christmas. Our salvation is in Him. We are members of His Body by grace through faith, whether Jew or Gentile or whatever we are. The fulfilment of God's purpose is the redemption of all things. There is mystery in what that means – specifically whether even at the end some exclude themselves by their unbelief, the ultimate human freedom being to reject Him to the end, but it is all summed up in the love of God, which passes yours and my understanding, like His peace.

December 7<sup>th</sup> Romans 11 vv 28-36  
When Paul is writing, the Jews were often active in opposing and persecuting the Church. They could be perceived by Christians as enemies. But Paul reminds his readers that the Jews are beloved of God. People of all races are beloved by God, but the Jews had been privileged to receive God's revelation of Himself in the OT and in Jesus. God does not abandon His people. That anyone at all is saved is a wonder, but God can do anything. Who will be saved is in His Hands.

## December 8<sup>th</sup>

Romans 12 v1

To be honest, I find Romans 9-11 quite hard. So I'm glad to reach another of my favourite chapters in the Bible, Romans 12. V1 is taken up in the prayer that we say after Communion. Jews and pagans sacrificed animals (as well as offering some other things like bread, incense, the fruits of harvest, etc.). Some pagans perpetrated human sacrifice. Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world and fulfilled the whole sacrificial system as laid out in the OT. In Christ, as members of His Body, we Christians are called to offer our lives back as a sacrifice to God in Him. In HC, we proclaim Christ's Sacrifice of Himself on the Cross. We plead His death alone for our sins. We offer our sacrifice of praise & thanksgiving. It is appropriate at this point to make explicit our pledge to devote our whole lives to Him. This is one occasion when I think the BCP version of the prayer brings out true meaning much better than the shortened version in *Common Worship* which we usually use. BCP is nearer what Paul said! O Lord and heavenly Father, we thy humble servants entirely desire thy fatherly goodness mercifully to accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving; most humbly beseeching thee to grant, that by the merits and death of thy Son Jesus Christ, and through faith in his blood, we and all thy whole Church may obtain remission of our sins, and all other benefits of his passion. And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice unto thee; humbly beseeching thee, that all we, who are partakers of this holy Communion, may be fulfilled with thy grace and heavenly benediction. And although we be unworthy, through our manifold sins, to offer unto thee any sacrifice, yet we beseech thee to accept this our bounden duty and service; not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offences, through Jesus Christ our Lord; by whom, and with whom, in the unity of the Holy Ghost, all honour and glory be unto thee, O Father Almighty, world without end. **Amen.**

I like the way we humbly beseech God to accept our duty and service. Christians sometimes act and speak as if God were lucky that we could sometimes spare Him a bit of our time.

## December 9<sup>th</sup> (Advent 2)

Romans 12 v2

Advent 2 was traditionally kept as Bible Sunday. It's been moved to a little bit earlier in the year in *Common Worship*, I think in order to give more space in Advent to St John the Baptist and his message, telling us to Prepare the Way of the Lord. But it fits in with these notes because the Bible is one of the principal means of grace God has given us so that we may learn His Will and be progressively less conformed to the ways of the world and more transformed into the likeness of Christ. 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 10<sup>th</sup>

Romans 12 vv 3-8

This is very like what Paul writes in I Corinthians 12. The Church is Christ's Body. For everything we depend on the indwelling Holy Spirit. We are different because we have different functions in the Body. We shouldn't think of ourselves as better or worse than other people in the Church. By the grace of God, we are what we are. When Peter asked Jesus what John would do, Christ's reply to Peter was, *You follow me!*

## December 11<sup>th</sup>

Romans 12 v 9

*Let love be without dissimulation.*

We may pretend love. We may behave as if we loved one someone. I suppose that's better than behaving as if we were indifferent to them or actually hated them. It's better to do the right thing for the wrong reasons than to do the wrong thing. However, we shall not be whole people if we don't act with integrity. Health of body and mind go with wholeness of spirit. We cannot be at peace with our selves unless we love without dissimulation. In any case, if our love is hypocritical, the mask is bound to slip some time.

We can go through the motions of worship, better presumably than not worshipping at all, but what God desires is that people worship Him in spirit and in truth. In the same way, our love for one another has to be in spirit and in truth. It has to be genuine.

## December 12<sup>th</sup>

Romans 12 vv 9-21

The remaining verses of the chapter give some examples of what it means to love without dissimulation – i.e. to be like Jesus.

Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost,  
taught by thee we covet most,  
of thy gifts at Pentecost,  
holy heavenly, love.

Faith will vanish into sight;  
hope be emptied in delight;  
love in heaven will shine more  
bight;  
therefore give us love.

Love is kind and suffers long,  
love is meek and thinks no  
wrong,  
love than death itself more  
strong;  
therefore, give us love.

Faith and hope and love we see,  
joining hand in hand agree,  
but the greatest of the three,  
and the best, is love.

Prophecy will fade away,  
melting in the light of day;  
love will ever with us stay;  
therefore, give us love.

From the overshadowing  
of thy gold and silver wing  
shed on us, who to thee sing,  
holy, heavenly love.

## December 13<sup>th</sup>

Romans 13 vv 1-5

I sometimes struggle with this. When I was growing up, England was notionally a Christian country. Our laws were apparently based on the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Bible. Our Queen was crowned at a Christian Eucharist and presented with a Bible to reign by. As a child, I was taught that there was no need to be afraid of the authorities if you behaved yourself and that the police were there to protect you – especially from what I would call real crime – crimes of violence and dishonesty. Then disillusion set in. Police officers disappeared from the beat in our villages and streets. I found they didn't seem interested when I reported crime possibly in progress. They didn't do much when I was the victim of crime and that seemed to be a common experience. When Sunday trading was still against the law, local authorities like Rochester simply refused to enforce the law. Whatever you think about Sunday trading, I think you can agree that, if the law needs changing, it should be by parliament. Powerful people shouldn't be allowed simply to break it with the complicity of sympathetic councils or police turning a blind eye. At the same time, a whole new lot of regulations came in without any real moral basis. You could be in breach of the rules without actually doing anything essentially wrong, like taking your dog

on the beach or putting your rubbish out the wrong day. These petty rules and regulations, unlike important laws like the ones against robbery, were enforced with unforgiving enthusiasm. Formerly respected major companies like banks and insurance companies and train and power companies began to operate unethically, overcharging naive people who couldn't understand deliberately complex tariffs etc.. The last straw was when I discovered that the very people who are supposed to enforce the rules can get away with breaking the rules with the full support of their superiors.

So I've become a bit of a rebel and chafe a bit under the Bible's teaching at this point. I can certainly see that we ought to obey those in authority when they themselves recognise that they are answerable to God for the way they rule (as in the collect for the Queen below), but it's harder to think that way when they don't realise that and behave unlawfully and unethically. But I have to remember (and so do you) that Paul was writing these words when the world he lived in was ruled by the pagan, bloodthirsty, capricious, tyrannical, immoral Roman emperors and the worldly, corrupt Sadducees ruled under them in Judaea. An ordered society, even a tyranny, is almost always better than anarchy. God ordains order and we have to respect order, if we are the children of God. Most Christians believe that you can fight a just war, but far fewer believe that there can be a just revolution. Everyone suffers when the social order breaks down and brother fights brother. So we do have to respect authority, however unjust it may be, but, whether they know it or not, those who have power will have to answer to God for the way they exercise it and we shall have to answer to Him if we fail to give them the respect that is due to them.

ALMIGHTY God, whose kingdom is ever-lasting, and power infinite:  
Have mercy upon the whole Church; and so rule the heart of thy  
chosen servant *ELIZABETH*, our Queen and Governor, that she  
(knowing whose minister she is) may above all things seek thy honour  
and glory: and that we and all her subjects (duly considering whose  
authority she hath) may faithfully serve, honour, and humbly obey  
her, in thee, and for thee, according to thy blessed Word and  
ordinance; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with thee and the Holy  
Ghost liveth and reigneth, ever one God, world without end. **Amen.**

December 14<sup>th</sup>

Romans 13 vv 6&7

The exception to obeying authority is when it is directly opposed to God's laws. You can't forsake meeting together as Christians or sharing your faith or reading the Bible, whatever the law says. You can't betray or kill innocent people whatever the state demands. And you have to pay your taxes. Some people have wondered whether they should withhold the portion of their taxes which might be spent on what they consider to be immoral purposes, such as the construction of nuclear weapons. [This needn't be selfish. They could give the money to a hospital or a food bank instead.] It's a slippery slope, however. There might be many things which we think our taxes shouldn't be spent on. Not only might a pacifist withhold the money he thinks is being spent on arms, an environmentalist might hold back what could be spent on roads or airports, a Brexiteer might refuse the portion which goes to Brussels. You might think that subsidising arts only enjoyed by the middle & upper classes was a waste of money. The country, however, would descend into anarchy and become ungovernable if we didn't respect the government's right to govern, including to levy tax and spend it as it thought best. At least, we have parliamentary scrutiny and democratic accountability in this country and a duty to participate in the process by voting.

December 15<sup>th</sup>

Romans 13 vv 8-10

When we speak of love as the Summary of the Law, we are possibly putting things the wrong way. It suggests that there are all those other commandments and that they can be summed up in the commandments to love God and neighbour. Put all the commandments together, add them up and the sum total is love. But isn't it the other way round? Jesus said, *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* The Law and the Prophets depend on love. Love doesn't depend on the Law and the Prophets. God is love.

We might obey all the other commandments for fear of punishment or in order to make ourselves look good to ourselves or to other people. But it is love which is the rationale behind all the other commandments and the only true motivation for obeying them. I prefer the biblical expression – walking in the way of the LORD. Jesus is the Way.

December 16<sup>th</sup> (Advent 3)

Romans 13 vv 11-14

This is a real Advent passage. In fact the Advent Collect which we say on Advent Sunday and then daily till Christmas (in addition to the other Sundays' collects) quotes from it. Jesus could come at any time. This will be wonderful for us beyond our imaginings if we are Christians. Our calling is to live here on earth as citizens of Heaven and to be ready to meet Him when He comes – to live after the spirit rather than the flesh, to be transformed by the renewing of our mind. O Lord Jesu Christ, who at thy first coming didst send thy messenger to prepare thy way before thee: Grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at thy second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

December 17<sup>th</sup>

Romans 14 vv 1-3

The point is to build one another up in the Lord, but we so easily tear one another down. Churches can be riven asunder by arguments about things that really don't matter. We sometimes can't see one another's point of view. We might suspect other people's motives or intelligence. So instead of building one another up in the Lord, we tear one another down. The issue here is whether Christians in the Roman world ought to be vegetarians because most likely the meat on sale would have been offered in sacrifice to idols. You might think that to eat meat offered to idols was to participate in pagan worship or you might think, that since other gods don't exist, it really doesn't matter as long as you thank the one true God for the food you are eating. People who worried about these things were seen as less strong in the faith than those who knew that they didn't matter. But a person confident in his or her faith ought not to undermine the faith of other weaker people in any way. Neither should those who are fussier be quick to condemn those who appear to be less scrupulous. Meat offered to idols isn't likely to be a problem in our churches, but we do know that people have different ideas about the way we should do things – the way we behave in worship, how we conduct our mission, what our buildings are for and how they should be maintained, etc.. We need to deal with these issues without undermining the fellowship or the faith of individuals.

December 18<sup>th</sup>

Romans 14 v4

That's something well worth bearing in mind. Everyone of us Christians is a servant of God. It is to Him that we are answerable. It's very tempting for us to judge other people, but we're not their judges; God is. He made them the way they are. He knows all the difficulties they may face. He knows their limitations, just as He knows ours. His judgment is both fair and merciful. We have no right to judge others. You and I are what we are by the grace of God. We can't be fair to other people because we don't fully know the circumstances of their lives. Only too often, we are not very merciful. Only God has the right to judge. Only God is able to be a just and merciful judge. Thank God that He is.

December 19<sup>th</sup>

Romans 14 vv 5&6

Are Christians bound to observe the Sabbath? If so, should we stick with the original day, Saturday, (like Seventh Day Adventists) or, with the vast majority of Christians, change it to Sunday – the day of the Lord's resurrection? Shouldn't every day of the week be consecrated to God and kept holy? Should we continue to observe the OT feasts like Passover and Tabernacles? Some Christians do. Nowhere in the Bible does it say we shouldn't anymore now that Jesus has come. Jewish Christians particularly may want to carry on with these traditions. Is it safe to eat meat which might have been offered to idols? Ought we to fast sometimes? The Church came to prescribe fasting in Lent, on Fridays, on the eve of all major festivals and sometimes on Wednesdays too? Is fasting sometimes desirable or even necessary? Good, sincere people can answer questions like these in different ways. There are good reasons both for answering "yes" and "no" to such questions. What we mustn't do is to split the Church or undermine one another's faith when we sincerely disagree.

There are some things which we have to agree on, however, like when we should meet for worship, which festivals we should all keep. We are members one of another. We are not a Church if we all go our own separate ways. This means that we do sometimes have to accept authority and go along with doing things in a way that we might not have chosen to do. We always have to accept the authority of the Bible.

We generally accept the authority of the Church which includes decisions and perspectives handed down over the centuries, decisions taken by recognised leaders on our behalf, decisions taken by councils and synods, decisions which may follow when prophets are called to challenge the status quo. This is the Church of England's official position.

XX. Of the Authority of the Church

The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith: And yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another. Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree any thing against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of Salvation.

December 20<sup>th</sup>

Romans 14 vv 7&8

These verses are very thought-provoking. Our lives don't belong to us. They belong to God. He will look after us. We can trust Him. We don't have to be afraid. On the other hand, we are not entirely free to decide how we should live. Our lives belong to God. So we must seek His grace to live our lives in accordance with His Will for us – our commitment to His Church, how we earn our living, whom we marry, if anyone, who our friends are, how we spend our leisure. Moreover, the lives of other people belong to God and they are answerable to Him (not to us) as to how they should live.

December (21<sup>st</sup>) S Thomas

Romans 14 vv 9-13

So we all have to account to God for our own lives. We're not to judge others, still less to put anything in the way of their relationship with Jesus Christ, because it is in Him, through faith in His Name, that we all have access to the Father.

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 reproved. 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 22<sup>nd</sup>

Romans 14 vv 14-23

It's not so much what you do as the spirit in which you do it. If we act in the Holy Spirit, all our actions are informed by love. So, for example,... I couldn't think of any examples which might not seem to be taking sides in some of the arguments we might have in our church community! However, the principle is clear, love. What builds people up in the faith? What tears them down? Where we sincerely disagree with other people and both sides feel unable to compromise, how can we remain in that loving relationship with them which is our Father's Will? [I'm finding lately that when I say *Our Father* to God, I'm having to reconsider my relationship with other people in the light of those blessed words.]

December 23<sup>rd</sup> (Advent 4)

Romans 15 vv 1-7

When we find it a trial that we can't have all our own way, it is worth remembering what Jesus gave up for us. He gave up everything for us. Three things follow.

1. We owe Him everything that we have and everything we are.
2. We cannot do less than follow His example.
3. We cannot love other people less than He does and He loves them so much that He died for them as well as for you and me.

O Lord, raise up (we pray thee) thy power, and come among us, and with great might succour us; that whereas, through our sins and wickedness, we are sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us, thy bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us; through the satisfaction of thy Son our Lord, to whom with thee and the Holy Ghost be honour and glory, world without end. Amen.

December 24<sup>th</sup> (Christmas Eve)

Romans 15 vv 8-12

Today is an exciting day. It's Christmas tomorrow. Today might well be a very busy day – last minute preparations, travelling, possibly last minute present buying or making. So it's an exciting day. As well as the last of our Advent services, we shall offer the first of our Christmas services – properly the Midnight Mass. It is exciting for all the fun we are having with family and friends, the good food and drink, the presents. Or maybe we aren't all having fun like this for all sorts of

reasons. Whatever the circumstances of our lives, however, it is exciting because Jesus is coming. He comes, born a Jew, fulfilling all the promises of the Law and the Prophets and extending them in accordance with God's eternal plan to all nations, to Gentiles and Jews, men, women and children, *of all nations, and kindreds, and peoples and tongues*.

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace : according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen : thy salvation; Which thou hast prepared : before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles : and to be the glory of thy people Israel. 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 25<sup>th</sup> Christmas Day)

Psalm 19

It's exciting just to think of the words *Christmas Day*, but why is Psalm 19 one of the psalms appointed for the Nativity of our Lord? We, just go outside and look up at the sky? What can you see? Is the sun bright in a light, blue sky? Or are you looking at the moon and the stars shining in the firmament of heaven? Maybe, as so often, at Christmas, it's grey up above. Magically, as you look up, your eyes are filling with snowflakes or rain. If it's hail, go back indoors! Anyway, Jesus is the Word of the LORD, by Whom the heavens were made. *Through Him all things were made*. He is the wisdom of God, the Logos, the Word. The Word is proclaimed to the whole of Creation. The justice of which the psalm speaks, the Justice of God, His mercy, is personified in Jesus. There is nothing more desirable than His sweetness. Today, we celebrate His birth as one of us, His birth by which we are made like Him, through faith in His Name.

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 26<sup>th</sup> (S Stephen)

Acts 6 vv 1-8

From the very beginning, there was tension between the different groups within the Church. These things ought not be so! Sorting out grievances was a distraction for the apostles from their proper work. What are bishops and rectors really for? So they chose other men, endowed with the Holy Ghost, to fulfil the different calling of sorting out the daily ministration of alms. So far, so good and so far in accordance with Romans 12 & I Corinthians 12. Use the people with the right gifts in whatever service the Church needs. Their calling was recognised in the laying on of hands with prayer and the Spirit was bestowed upon them for the work they had to do. But the Spirit cannot be constrained! There was much more that God had given Stephen the gifts for than waiting at tables. We have to be open to the possibilities of God, not try to confine Him within what we consider to be proper order. Stephen became a great preacher and did great wonders and miracles. This, as it so often does, led to opposition & persecution. Stephen became the first martyr. Even at the very end, Stephen's eyes were focused on Jesus and Stephen followed Him in forgiving His enemies as he surrendered his life to God.

Grant, O Lord, that in all our sufferings here upon earth, for the testimony of thy truth, we may steadfastly look up to heaven, and by faith behold the glory that shall be revealed; and, being filled with the Holy Ghost, may learn to love and bless our persecutors by the example of thy first Martyr Saint Stephen, who prayed for his murderers to thee, O blessed Jesus, who standest at the right hand of God to succour all those that suffer for thee, our only Mediator and Advocate. Amen.

December 27<sup>th</sup> (S John)

Isaiah 6 vv 1-13

For some time now, we've welcomed the Bulgarian Orthodox community to worship in St Michael's Church. Perhaps the best way to understand what *Orthodox* means is to think of the word as meaning *right glory*. That is a more helpful translation than the more usual *right opinion*. Worship is our encounter with the glory of God. Maybe it is John who speaks most about glory in the New Testament (you may disagree with me). He begins his gospel with the glory of Jesus one with the Father in all eternity, creating everything that is, the Light of the world. We come to see, as we read the Gospel of John, how the ultimate manifestation of Christ's glory is His self-sacrifice on the

Cross. It is John who bears witness again and again that God is love and God's people are people of love. In today's reading, Isaiah shares his vision of the glory of God, a vision which illuminates our human sinfulness and our need for forgiveness, a vision in which forgiveness is God's gift and we are commissioned to proclaim the Gospel. God warns us through Isaiah of the probable rejection of the Word (*He came to his own and his own received him not* in John) and the promise to those who, by God's grace do receive Him – that they will be the children of God.

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 28<sup>th</sup> (Holy Innocents)

Revelation 14 vv 1-5

The suffering of children is particularly troubling. In the news, as I write this, is the collapse of that road bridge in Genoa. The death toll isn't yet final, but it will number dozens. All those deaths are tragic, but the death of a little boy announced early on was most poignant. We hear of children caught up in war zones. We see pictures of hungry children in regions suffering famine. It somehow seems worse when children suffer from serious illnesses. There have been so many cases reported of child abuse. We are warned not to harm children. We are told that their angels stand in the Presence of God. What can we do? We can mind how we treat children. We can pray. We can give to children's charities and missions. Maybe, we can have some influence on governments - the way we vote, letters to MPs, through the UN or bodies such as Amnesty?

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 innocence of our lives, and constancy of our faith, even unto death, we may glorify thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

December 29<sup>th</sup>

Romans 15 vv 13-23

Paul became the great apostle to the Gentiles. Peter had been shown by God (Acts 10) previously that we Gentiles are included in God's plan of salvation. Unnamed people had taken the faith to Gentiles in places such as Antioch. Paul's companions worked with him to spread the faith. Paul is, however, the great apostle to the Gentiles. He makes two points here, however. One is that he has not built on anyone else's foundations. Paul's mission was to go to places where the Gospel had not yet been heard. Others would build on that foundation so that the Church in each place Paul preached would continue to grow and become a fount of mission itself. We still need different ministries in the Church today – some to preach the faith in new places or where the faith has been rejected or forgotten, some to take their part in building existing churches. Pray that God will raise up many ministers as they are needed and pray for ministers in their ministries.

Almighty God, the giver of all good gifts, who of thy divine providence hast appointed divers Orders in thy Church: Give thy grace, we humbly beseech thee, to all those who are to be called to any office and administration in the same; and so replenish them with the truth of thy doctrine, and endue them with innocency of life, that they may faithfully serve before thee, to the glory of thy great Name, and the benefit of thy holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

December 30<sup>th</sup> (Christmas 1)

Romans 15 vv 24-33

Romans is the only letter of Paul in the Bible written to a place which he had not yet visited. Presumably, others had laid the foundation and brought the Gospel to Rome where there was obviously now a thriving Church. Paul hoped to visit Rome on the way to Spain and to share God's blessings with the Roman Christians. He had been taking a collection from all the Gentile Churches he had founded for poor relief in Jerusalem, whither he was now travelling. In fact, he fell foul of the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem and eventually came to Rome as a prisoner. He was treated generously by the Romans and allowed to have visitors and to preach the Gospel under a sort of house arrest. Whether or not he was released and ever made it to Spain, we just don't know. Man proposes and God disposes. We do know that he died a martyr's death in Rome in the time of the emperor Nero.

December 31<sup>st</sup>

Romans 16 vv 1-27

All these people to be greeted in Rome or sending greetings with Paul. Mostly forgotten, but their names written in the Lamb's Book of Life. We can one day expect to see them in heaven. They were all different. They all had different gifts and different opportunities, but they all served the same Lord. They served the same Lord we serve.

Now I've been thinking since we did Romans 12. That was about using the gifts God has given each one of us to do the particular things He has called us to do. *By the grace of God, I am what I am.* Some people like me and some don't. Some people appreciate the things I do. Some people think I'm rubbish. I guess it's the same for most people, better at some things than others, appreciated by some people, but not by everyone. But who is anyone to judge you or me? By the grace of God we are what we are and it is to Him we answer. He's given us the gifts to do the good works He has prepared for each one of us to walk in, not to be like somebody else or to please our critics.

So, should I give up on the things I am not terribly good at in my job? Should you? Other rector's might have been brilliant at some of the things I'm useless at. I might be better than them at some other things we do. Whatever job you do, no doubt there are aspects of it which other people in the same position do better and, in other areas of the work, you're better than they are. But maybe you and I are where we are in order to make our own contributions, not to be the same as somebody else in the same job, but to do what you and I uniquely can do. So should I play to my strengths, concentrate on the things I believe I am good at and give up on the rest?

It's very tempting. No more meetings! No more paper work! No more trying to relate to people who just don't like me! Life would be so much easier. Yet these things have got to be done and some of them won't get done if I don't do them. Perhaps there are some things I should just give up on. I'm never going to run a 4 minute mile and I shall probably never write a publishable book. But I could do better on parish paper work if I tried harder. I could try harder to deal with difficult people. Conceivably, I could even become more amenable at meetings. Maybe I'm just being lazy or cowardly in thinking of giving up on what I find difficult. How to know the difference between what God really hasn't given me the gifts for, presumably because He doesn't want me to do somebody else's job, and what is just challenging, a challenge I'm supposed to overcome by His grace? Could be something for New Year's Resolutions if I ever made them? Happy New Year!