

Women in the Bible



Bible Notes
January – March 2011

50p

January 1st

Womankind

Genesis 1 vv 26-31

When you're casting the Sunday School Bible play, one of the problems is that there always seem to be far more parts for boys than girls. The Bible does come from a world in which the masculine is much more visible than the feminine. So I thought that this quarter we might try to look at things more from the women's point of view.

Right at the beginning of the Bible here we note that men and women are equally created in the image of God and equally given charge of His creation. Now the very essence of our humanity is that we are made in the image of God. We shall see important differences between men and women and their rôle in God's purposes, but essentially men and women are the same in their relationship to God and that is what really matters. Men and women are created in the image of God on the same terms and we are also redeemed on the same terms – faith in Christ Who died on the Cross. So St Paul says, *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.* (Galatians 3 v28).

January 2nd

Shared Responsibility

Genesis 1 vv 26-31

As recently as 1873, when Jules Verne published the book, it seemed incredible that a human being could go round the world in eighty days. Now we can circumnavigate the globe in 24 hrs. Technological advances particularly since C19 have enabled the human race to subdue the earth and even to reach out into space. We can produce enough food to feed billions of people. We've conquered diseases which used to wipe out whole populations. We enjoy an abundance, an excess even, of consumer goods. We have made ourselves safe and comfortable. We have also learnt to destroy the world with nuclear weapons. Even our conventional armaments technologies have a capacity for mass slaughter unanticipated when Wellington met Napoleon at Waterloo. We fear that our wonderful industrial processes will devour our planet by using up its resources and polluting its atmosphere. Humanity is so powerful and it is astonishing that biblical texts written hundreds of years before Christ foresee our dominance, its blessings and its dangers. It is clear too from Genesis that this is a responsibility which men and women share.

January 3rd

Matrimonial Communion Genesis 2 vv 18-25

Genesis 2 tells the creation story in a different way in order to make complementary points. I don't think either Genesis 1 or Genesis 2 is primarily concerned about the history, geography or science of the way the world began. They are complementary accounts of God and of His relationship with the Created Order, and of humanity and of our standing in relation to God, to one another, and to the rest of God's Creation.

It is not good that the man should be alone. Human beings are made in the image of God. God is love. Love needs someone to love. Love needs someone to be loved by. God Himself is a Trinity of persons in a unity of love. We enjoy Holy Communion with God if we love Him. We enjoy holy fellowship with our fellow beings if we love one another as Christ loves us.

The woman is not a *spare rib* in the biblical account, in the way that some feminists scornfully suggest that she is portrayed as. She is *bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh*. Adam and Eve, husband and wife, are two individuals, but they belong together. They belong to one another. Holy Matrimony is of the essence of what is to be human. It is a gift of God in creation.

January 4th

Marriage for Women and Men Genesis 2 vv 18-25

The traditional biblical view of marriage is picked up in the marriage services of the Church, the modern version as well as the 1662 Prayer Book. In marriage the two become one. It is God Who joins together and no man ought to put asunder. Adultery is a betrayal akin to apostasy. (To sleep with anyone other than your husband or wife is like a Christian worshipping an idol.) People getting married promise unconditional love. They will love *for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health*. All their worldly wealth is shared and, one has to admit, in a traditional marriage controlled by the husband. Husband and wife are responsible for one another and jointly and unconditionally responsible for their children, for other family members, and for the place of their family in the church and the wider

community. They share hospitality. They share responsibility for taxes. They are liable for one another's debts.

However many people regard this as an impossible ideal. They would say that it is unreasonable to continue to love and to be responsible for somebody who is himself or herself unfaithful, violent, selfish or grossly irresponsible. Some people would consider it unreasonable to stick by someone who developed a chronic illness (especially a mental illness) or who was convicted of a major crime.

More people still apparently believe that traditional marriage is not so much an ideal as a prison. Why restrict the joy of sex to the marriage bed? Is it right for an educated woman (or man I suppose) to give up her financial independence and her right to self-determination?

We have not, as a society, made up our minds for or against traditional marriage. We tax couples as individuals, but we pay benefits to couples. The DWP treats people living together as though they were married, but an unmarried couple who have lived together for many years have far fewer rights than those married for only a few months in the event of separation or death.

I think we still have a picture of traditional marriage as both a norm and an ideal, but we are not prepared to treat cohabitation, civil partnerships, one night stands or multiplicities of step relationships as any less valid. There is a lack of logic here which sometimes has odd consequences!

January 5th

Forbidden Fruit

Genesis 3 vv 1-6

Eve often gets the blame for the Fall. Adam and Eve have everything they could want or need in the Garden, including the gift of freedom. To be free means to be free to make the wrong choices, even to rebel against God. The Wisdom of God is that human freedom is such a good thing that freedom outweighs all the pain it brings. Eve and Adam are both free and they both make the wrong choice, yet this wrong choice will ultimately lead the human race to Heaven, much better even than Eden. Adam and Eve are both at fault, but God uses their Fall for good.

January 6th

Naked in the Garden

Genesis 3 v7

Only human beings wear clothes from choice and it seems to me that we are among the ugliest of animals. Most creatures have attractive fur, feathers or scales, whereas we just have skin which shows up all our flabbiness and itself develops wrinkles, spots and blemishes. The naked human form is often extremely unattractive aesthetically. It does, however, have the power of sexual attraction and that is a tremendous power and, like all kinds of power, may be used for great harm as well as great good. I suppose this is why, once they lose their innocence, Adam and Eve feel the need to dress. Yet clothes are often used to make us more attractive. They give us confidence. They are signals of our place in society, the rôles we fulfil, whose side we are on, which social groups we belong to. Clothes may be smart or casual. They may express our individuality. They may be uniform. They may indicate our poverty or wealth. They may show us up as followers of fashion or indifferent to the opinions of other people. Nakedness may denote a raw power which needs to be covered up, but the way we dress turns out to be pretty powerful too. The way we dress, then, like everything else about us, has to be considered in the light of our relationship to God.

January 7th

Walking in the Garden

Genesis 3 v8

We love gardens. Some of us enjoy gardening, but I think all of us enjoy relaxing in gardens. A garden is a harmony, human beings working with nature to produce something beautiful. A garden is aesthetically pleasing irrespective of whether it produces anything utilitarian like food or flowers for the commercial market. It is a lovely thought that the Voice of God walks in the garden in the cool of the day. But what does it say about rebellious humanity that we hide from Him?

January 8th

Unmasked

Genesis 3 vv 9-13

We hide. God seeks us out. *Where art thou?* We are ashamed because we know we have done wrong. The man blames the woman and the woman blames the snake, but all three are implicated. They have all played their parts. They have all done wrong and the only escape is through the mercy of God.

January 9th

Eve and Mary

Genesis 3 vv 14 & 15

The snake, of course, stands for the devil. The devil's punishment for tempting humanity to rebel against God is symbolised by the snake crawling on the ground, hated and feared by human beings to the extent that many people (the woman's seed) kill snakes at every opportunity. This is the way things are, but not necessarily the way they ought to be. Snakes are very beautiful creatures, quite marvellous if you study them. They have their own place in the ecosystem, the fabric of life, God's created order. Snakes ought not to be killed willy-nilly out of prejudice. In Isaiah's vision of God's Kingdom, the *sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den*. (The cockatrice here is a viper.)

The spiritual significance of this story is that the descendant of Eve Who ultimately destroys the serpent and his power is of course the Son of Mary.

January 10th

Eve's Descendants

Genesis 3 v16

I recently read a depressing description of a rundown housing estate in modern Britain. Teenage girls were leaning on the railings, while their offspring played unheeded in the dirt. Scantily clad and raucous, these girls hoped to attract the attention of the boys larking about on the grass nearby. If they were successful, no doubt there would be more half-neglected babies alternately to cuddle and to swear at the following year. As a society, we worry about the "underclass" and their children, boys in criminal gangs and girls with babies they are far too immature to look after. Poor parenting, poor housing, sink estate housing, underperforming schools, poverty, etc are all blamed. So are the police, Social Services, teachers and politicians. Some of this blame is no doubt justified, but the underlying problem is lack of aspiration. Many of the boys and girls living on these estates can't imagine anything better for themselves. They don't see themselves as earning a living in a good job or being happily married. They don't have enough self respect. Because they don't have self respect they can't respect others. They seek only to gratify their immediate desires because they have no long term meaning or purpose. Their underlying need therefore is spiritual.

January 11th

Mother of All Living

Genesis 3 vv 17-21

Adam is going to have to work for a living. That may be no bad thing. It builds character as well as muscle to have to struggle for your existence, to struggle and to overcome obstacles. God creates and human beings made in His image are creative. There is satisfaction in making something. Achieving something worthwhile makes you feel worthwhile. But Adam will have to live with risk. He will get very tired and maybe sore. There will be times when he can't earn enough to live on. There will be occasions when he could lose everything through a stupid mistake or by accident. There will be decisions to take, new ideas to try or to reject. Life will have its problems and its triumphs. In the right spirit, life will definitely be worth living. Life, however, will also end. We will return to the dust from which we came.

But Adam is not alone. He and Eve are one flesh. We have one another to share our earthly pilgrimage. We are all in this together and the bonds of love support and sustain us. We have husbands, wives, families, friends, the fellowship of the Church, all the human relationships God intended us to have insofar as we cooperate with Him. And, sinner though he is, Adam has not been abandoned by God. God is still Emmanuel, God with us, God with humanity.

January 12th

Welcome to My World

Genesis 3 vv 22-24

This is the world we have to live in. We can't get back into the Garden. Neither can we get access to the Tree of Life. Adam (signifying humanity) is cast out of the Garden. Adam and Eve still have one another. God is looking after them. We are the people who were made in God's image. We are made of the dust of the ground just like the animals and we shall return to the dust when our life on earth is over. God, however, breathed into us the breath of life. He gave us one another and He gave us charge of the rest of His creation. We have enormous potential both for good and evil. Which it is depends on our continued choice to walk with God or to reject His love.

January 13th

A Mother's Love

Genesis 4 vv 1-8

Sibling rivalry is not uncommon. Children (especially boys) are always fighting, much to their parents' disquiet, but in most families they still love one another. What must it be like for mothers whose children quarrel to the extent that Cain and Abel fell out? My guess is that Eve would still have loved Cain, but how should she treat him after what he did to Abel? In modern times would a mother in similar circumstances report her son to the authorities? What if she lived in a country where murderers faced the death penalty? True love is very costly. It means loving people who don't deserve our love. It means loving people who spurn our love. It is the love a mother has for a child. It is the love couples promise at a wedding, though it seems that the "innocent" party to a divorce is nowadays generally regarded as released from that promise to love unconditionally by the misconduct of the "guilty" party. God says, *Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.* (Isaiah 49 v5).

January 14th

Cain's Wife

Genesis 4 vv 9-18

When vicars go into pubs, it is not unusual for some drunk to come up with the old chestnut, if Adam and Eve's family were the only people on earth at the time, where did Cain find a wife? But, as I keep saying, these chapters of Genesis are not concerned with the boring literal facts of history, science and geography. Whatever the historical detail, these stories convey essential truths about the nature of God, our human nature, and the essential nature of the Universe which God has created.

The woman who became Cain's wife married a murderer. Some women write to men in prison and seemingly fall in love and marry them when they come out or even while they are still inside. Wives who keep their marriage vows remain faithful to their husbands even when they commit serious crimes. The love of a good woman may be a bad man's best hope of redemption. There is a suspicion, however, that some women are fascinated and attracted by evil. It is certainly a big risk to marry or to remain married to a bad man, but sometimes it is right to take risks for Christian love.

January 15th

The Wives of Noah and his Sons Genesis 6 vv 9-22

We're not even told the names of these women, but I wonder where they stood in relation to the building of the Ark? Years ago (but not that long ago!) I knew a woman who went without a washing machine because her husband wanted to spend all the household budget on a boat. Plenty of women have to put up with their husbands' time consuming and expensive hobbies. Of much greater significance, many men's careers depend on the fact that their wives are working equally hard but quietly behind the scenes. Noah and his sons had an extremely important job to do and their wives could hardly object to the time and expense involved even if they did sometimes feel resentful and rejected. They would also have had to put up with the mockery of the neighbours who thought that building the Ark was a waste of time because they didn't believe there was going to be a flood anyway. I think of many long-suffering wives of clergy, missionaries, etc. Often in the background, their husbands would have achieved far less without them.

Nowadays, we are much less likely to be content with the notion that wives are confined to a supporting rôle. Since C19, women have been missionaries and social reformers. Most churches now have women preachers and quite a lot have women ministers. It is not taken for granted in many households that only the husband will have a career or that the husband's career is necessarily more important than the wife's. I knew a couple where both were ordained. He was a vicar and she was an academic theologian. He surrendered his vicarage and moved to the university city where she was offered a prestigious post. Traditionally, we thought of husband and wife as one flesh and of the husband as having "headship" in the household. That is the biblical view. Nowadays, we emphasise the equality of both parties in a marriage and their essential independence. Do you think it is possible for the two to become one flesh without some sacrifice of independence on both their parts? And is it possible to become one flesh without some notion of headship to direct the whole enterprise of family life within the wider community?

January 16th

The Women of Babel

Genesis 11 vv 1-9

The human race gets above itself. It loses its sense of proportion. It thinks it can build a tower which will reach up to heaven and disaster ensues. I guess we take it for granted that it was the men of Babel who did this. This is what the illustration in my children's Bible portrays!

We are now in a financial crisis resulting from people overreaching themselves. Investors lost their sense of proportion. They appeared to think that they could generate wealth out of nothing. Disaster ensued. Harriet Harman MP, who was then in the cabinet, suggested that, had one of the leading firms been Lehman Sisters instead of Lehman Brothers, things might have been done differently and perhaps more wisely. The implication surely was that men and women bring different qualities in any situation. I suspect she is right, but my conclusion would be very different from hers. I think Ms Harman believes that all positions should be equally open to men and women, but mine is that, if men and women are different, there are some rôles better suited to men and some better suited to women – which is also what the Bible implies.

Do you think the women of Babel tried to moderate the actions of their men folk or did they egg them on?

January 17th

Sarai and Milcah

Genesis 11 vv 27-32

At last we're told the names of the wives. These were important women in the history of their tribes, the people who were to become the people of God. They were to be the mothers of dynasties. It would appear that Milcah married her uncle. This would have safeguarded her father's inheritance within the family and ensured her protection in a land where her people were resident aliens. Sarai was barren which would present a huge problem as she was to become the mother of a people who would be more numerous than the stars in the heavens. Sarai might not have been as famous as Abram and Milcah did not have a town named after her like her father Haran, but none of what those great men were remembered for would have been possible without these women. St Paul and the RC Church speak of the virtue of the single life in allowing us to offer single-minded service to God. But marriage too is a vocation and couples and families can have their place in God's plans.

January 18th

A Strange Tale

Genesis 12 vv 10-20

We're supposed to be looking at these stories from the woman's point of view. So how do you think Sarai felt about all this? Forced to be taken into Pharaoh's house whether she liked it or not, effectively disowned by her husband. But would both of them have been killed if Abram had faced up to Pharaoh, acknowledged his wife and refused to let her go? As the physically weaker sex, women often suffer the worst abuse when there is war, oppression or anarchy. Pray for women in war zones and for women living in countries ruled by tyrants.

January 19th

You Can't Take It with You

Genesis 15 vv 1-21

Sarai isn't directly mentioned in this story. Her barrenness, however, is the key to the whole chapter. God has promised Abram an inheritance, but there is no heir. Most people love children. Parents want to pass on to their children what they have achieved. Judging by the desperate measures infertile couples are prepared to take even today, for some people an inability to have children is a tremendous burden. When people hit their midlife crisis, it tends to occur to them that *you can't take it with you* and they start to wonder what is the point of what they have built up, especially if they have no-one to leave it to. I get the impression that women take it more to heart that they cannot have children and that men are sometimes more likely to blame their wives than themselves if there is no heir. God's plan for Abram and Sarai was that they would have a miracle child. Usually, there is no miracle in these cases. We may pray for so-far childless couples that they may have children. Can we trust God that He still has a plan for their lives if this never happens? I hope we can, because He does.

January 20th

Surrogacy

Genesis 16 vv 1-3

Sarai couldn't have a child. So she suggested using Hagar as a surrogate mother. Nowadays science would allow a surrogate mother to conceive without sex, but Abram and Hagar had to produce a child in the old-fashioned way. The physical relationship between a man and woman is about procreation, but it is also about their intense personal relationship. A man knows his wife. The two become one. An infertile couple may still have a very wonderful marriage in their love for each other.

January 21st

Domestic Strife

Genesis 16 vv 4-16

People can be really hateful to one another, especially within the same household. Jealousy is a terrible thing. You see stories similar to these every day on the TV soaps and they are believable because they reflect real life. Girls fighting over a man, boys fighting over a woman. One rubbing somebody else's nose in what the one has got and the other hasn't. Our tremendous and overwhelming love for babies, but finding the huge burden of childcare intolerable in a basically selfish society. The Bible gives us a framework. We know how we should feel. We know how we should treat other people. I can't help feeling that many of the terrible things which go on in families are a result of our losing our faith as a nation and our confidence in biblical values.

I heard a social worker recently on the radio saying that there are for more child protection cases than there used to be because of the prevalence of alcohol and other drugs in our society. I couldn't help wondering whether some of the blame for this should be laid on those who have refused to accept that there are moral values, refused to condemn any kind of behaviour, refused to attempt to inculcate faith and left people with a moral vacuum in which relationships are devalued, self is the only god and alcohol is a necessary anaesthetic to conceal the pain of a meaningless existence.

January 22nd

A Laughing Matter

Genesis 18 vv 1-15

Abram is now called Abraham and Sarai Sarah. Their names have been changed to mark a new and more wonderful stage in their relationship with God. Again we think about the woman's part in this. Abraham has these three important visitors and Sarah is told to prepare dinner for them. This is quite an undertaking. In those days, you couldn't send out for a pizza or microwave something you'd taken out of the freezer. Sarah wasn't then invited to join the discussion, but they were talking about something which concerned her greatly. In old age, she would at last have a son. Overhearing this, she laughs to herself. It just can't be true. Then she gets a telling off for laughing. Sarah not only seems to be playing second fiddle, but she's not allowed to have her own opinions. Without Sarah, however, the promise could not have been fulfilled. You can be vitally important without being prominent.

January 23rd

Lot's Daughters

Genesis 19 vv 1-11

Lot is a resident alien in Sodom. To that extent he is not trusted and, being not trusted, is vulnerable. Thus Jews were forced to live in ghettos. Communities are edgy when travellers or gypsies camp near them. Immigrants tend to live together in the same area, both because they choose to live with their own kind and because the host community is often unwelcoming. Foreigners and even refugees are interned in time of war. We depend on other people and therefore on our ability to trust them. But we are not always sure whom we can trust. Sometimes we are right in our judgments and sometimes we are wrong. We may be less generous in our judgments of others if we ourselves feel threatened – e.g. in time of war. We know we ought to be generous in our judgments, but generous people put themselves at risk. Ought we to trust God to look after us if we do the right thing? Even when other people tell us that what we think is right is actually foolish and gullible? (I think it would be better to be generous and to be let down than always to protect ourselves by being permanently suspicious. We'd live happier lives and so would the people around us!) The people of Sodom didn't trust Lot the foreigner who lived in their city. They didn't like it when he had important-looking visitors they didn't recognise. They wanted to find out who they were and to humiliate them. *That we may know them* in v5 is probably deliberately ambiguous. The awful thing is that Lot tries to buy off the men of Sodom by sacrificing his daughters to them. Again the women come off worst in what is an appalling situation. Right and wrong have to be enforced by Law, both national laws and international laws and Law has to be underpinned by ethics and moral philosophy, which, in turn, depend on faith.

January 24th

Lot's Wife

Genesis 19 vv 12-26

Jesus said, *Remember Lot's wife*. (Luke 17 v32). Some people are never ready. They won't let go. They can't look forward. They can only look back. People outside the Church won't give up what they think are the securities of this world in order to commit to God. People in the Church won't surrender the safeties of the past to embrace the adventure of God's future. The future might look daunting, but clinging to a doomed past means dying with it.

January 25th

Cast out the bondwoman with her son. Genesis 21 vv 1-21

Another cat fight between Hagar and Sarah leads to a great deal of suffering for the family and ultimately for the world. Jews claim descent from Isaac and Arabs claim descent from Ishmael. Both sides are capable of using this story as an excuse for their current conflict. (More positively, other people, Jews and Arabs, look at their common descent from Abraham as a possible basis for brotherhood.)

St Paul takes up this story in Galatians 4 and uses it to explain how salvation is through God's grace rather than our efforts to be good. Remarkably he quotes Sarah's harsh words *Cast out the bondwoman with her son* as Scripture. Paul's point is that those who try to earn their salvation by works of the Law (Torah) are like slaves, the bondwoman Hagar's descendants. They have no freedom. They work hard. They will never inherit. Those who accept God's grace through faith, however, are the adopted children of God. They are free. They bear the yoke of Christ Whose yoke is easy. They are heirs of God and coheirs with Christ. They are free descendants of the free and lawful wife Sarah.¹ The true heirs of Abraham (= father of many nations) are those who share Abraham's faith, whatever race they belong to. Here is the true potential for human brotherhood through faith in God in Jesus Christ.

January 26th

Honouring the Dead

Genesis 23 vv 1-20

It seems that human beings have taken care about the way they dispose of their dead since Stone Age Times. A dead body is not just so much rubbish to be disposed of. It signifies the person and all they have meant to us. Primitive burial customs seem to suggest that early human beings believed in some sort of life after death, the continued presence of the deceased. The only bit of the land of Canaan Abraham ever actually owned was Sarah's grave, which would also become his final resting place. It says something about the importance of family.

¹ Ironically for Paul, it is the Jews, the bloodline descendants of Isaac, who are in bondage to the Law, sin & death. For Paul, the free heirs of God are those Jews and Gentiles (including Arabs, Ishmael's bloodline descendants) who accept Christ through faith, rather than trying to justify themselves in terms of the Law God gave Moses on Mt Sinai.

January 27th

Rebekah

Genesis 24 vv 1-28

This is an arranged marriage that turns into a love story. It can happen! Family ties are very important and it matters whom Isaac marries. A lot of parents are rightly concerned about their children's relationships and marriage plans. They want them to be happy. They believe that they can recognise dangers which their less experienced offspring can't see. Love is blind, they say! Parents may believe that their offspring have a responsibility to the family and even to the wider community when they choose a mate. The royal family is the obvious example. Some parents (like maybe Abraham) may feel the need to push their children in the direction of marriage because they believe that there ought to be grandchildren and they want to ensure the succession. Parents may well want or even try to steer their sons and daughters in the choice of a partner.

On the other hand, marriage is intensely personal. The man and the woman must choose freely to marry. They must want to marry. There has to be love. Just how much advice, pushing or outright direction on the part of parents is consistent with respecting the freedom of the children to choose?

January 27th

Rebekah's Hopes

Genesis 24 vv 29-54

It's hard to imagine how people must have felt about things in a world so different from ours. Most young people today seem to hope to meet someone they can love. Even nowadays when people are so casual about sex, most people are apparently looking for a real relationship – which includes commitment. Not many young people in modern Britain (except perhaps among the ethnic and religious minorities) would expect their families to find them a mate – although informally friends and families do try to bring people together. Rebekah may have been hoping that her family would find her a husband and hoping that he would be someone she could love. But young people in every age and culture do naturally long for someone with whom to share their lives. Customs differ between cultures. I'm glad young people today have far more freedom than they did in ancient Canaan. But we must be careful that freedom isn't taken as a licence to treat serious matters casually or carelessly and to exploit other peoples' need to love.

January 28th

Rebekah's Choice

Genesis 24 vv 55-67

Although this is an arranged marriage, it is clear throughout the chapter that it can only go ahead if the woman agrees. Forced marriage is always wrong – whether it is a “shotgun wedding” forced on a young couple by an angry father or one of these marriages we read about where girls are compelled by their families to marry men chosen by their parents. There could have been no marriage if Rebekah had not agreed. Actually, it appears that she is excited and eager – as every bride ought to be approaching her wedding.

It appears that it is love at first sight. I always like the way the marriage happens without fuss. Isaac took Rebekah into his mother's tent and *she became his wife*. What you really need in a wedding is a free commitment to lifelong unconditional love by both parties and God's blessing. Taking one another's hands and a wedding ring are ancient and important symbols of this. Registers and certificate ensure that the marriage is legally recognised by the whole community. Everything else is optional extras!

January 29th

Sons of Sarah and Hagar

Genesis 25 vv 5-18

Isaac was the son of the promise and he would inherit. God had not, however, forgotten Ishmael and we see how Ishmael's descendants multiplied and prospered. The half brothers come together for their father's funeral. Families do come together for funerals. It ought to be a time to reflect on the preciousness of life and the value of family unity. Funerals are also a time when we recall the brevity of life and how we shall have to give account for ourselves on the Day of Judgment. Too many families have fallen out with one another. Relationships can be especially tense between half relatives and step relatives. These things ought not to be so if we remember that we live in the context of the love of God. The Jews who claim descent from Isaac and the Arabs who claim descent from Ishmael still honour Abraham's tomb at Hebron, but it has been the site of terrible atrocities committed by extremist Jews and Arabs. If only Abraham's family could learn to live in peace today. If only the human family could discover its brotherhood under the fatherhood of God.

January 30th

Different but Equal

Genesis 25 vv 19-28

At first, the newly married couple can't have children. They pray and God gives them twins. The two boys are very different and the sibling rivalry commences in the womb. When they begin to grow up, Isaac favours Esau and Rebekah favours Jacob. To be honest, I think I'd favour Esau too, but, in the end, he is the one who throws it all away and Jacob is the one who walks with God and is given the name Israel, the ancestor of the people of God.

I can't help feeling, however, that Isaac and Rebekah made a big mistake in each having a favourite. We owe our children unconditional love, the same as God's love for us. The boys were very different, but maybe they wouldn't have quarrelled so badly if their parents had treated them equally. As it is, Rebekah's love for Jacob will lead her to cheat her other son and poison her relationship with her husband. There are lessons to learn from these biblical tales.

January 31st

Remember Your First Love

Genesis 27 vv 1-17

When you remember how the young Rebekah fell in love with Isaac at first sight, it seems very sad that she is now conspiring with Jacob to cheat him. The marriage services promises life long love for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. Real love is for ever. It isn't changeable. True love loves no matter what. Obviously life changes. Ardour cools. Couples get used to one another. Problems come up. Maybe temptations, too. I think some people are hooked on romance, the excitement of new relationships and find it hard to stay married to the same partner who may seem increasingly boring as the years go by. But true love is much more than the joy of a fresh relationship. True love is unchanging even though people change and circumstances change.

People's love for God too can grow cold. Maybe their conversion was a very exciting experience. Maybe religion was one of the enthusiasms of their youth. Maybe faith helped them when they were going through some sort of a crisis. But the enthusiasm wanes. Church becomes boring. There are many temptations and distractions. Love for God grows cold.

February 1st

The Weaker Sex

Genesis 29 vv 1-14

After tricking him out of his blessing, Jacob has to get away from his brother Esau, who has threatened to kill him. Rebekah persuades Isaac to send Jacob back to Haran, where her brother Laban still lives, in order to find a wife.

He comes to a well at midday and Laban's daughter Rachel arrives with the sheep to give them water. Water is short in Canaan and she has probably come at midday to avoid clashes with other shepherds who would be watering the sheep in the morning or evening. The well is sealed with a heavy stone. Rachel can't fight the other shepherds and she can't move the stone. Women are the weaker sex physically and that means, in Christian terms, that they are entitled to greater respect and care. Their physical weakness is not to be exploited by men. St Peter says (I Peter 3v7) *Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life: that your prayers be not hindered.* This is in the context that the man is head of the house (which is the biblical context), but note that a Christian couple are God's heirs together.

February 2nd

Leah

Genesis 29 vv 15-20

Rachel was the beautiful one. Leah is described as having tender eyes. That might mean that she had lovely eyes, but more likely it means that she had poor eyesight. Anyway, Rachel was the good-looking one. We put so much emphasis on looks, don't we? I'm astonished by the range of cosmetics advertised on TV. Some of them cost a fortune. And the time people spend on making themselves look beautiful! So how did Leah feel, the one who wasn't beautiful? It appears to have been a reproach in their culture if the younger daughter found a husband first. You'd expect me to say that it is character rather than appearance that matters. That's what God says! We're really told enough about these two girls to judge their characters. But, given that we know that character is what matters, why do we worry so much about appearance, trying to make ourselves look beautiful and getting depressed if we think we've failed? St Peter also says that a woman's adorning ought not to be her hair, jewellery or clothes, but her spirit.

February 3rd

More Trickery

Genesis 29 vv 21-30

Jacob was the great twister, cheating Esau out of his birthright and blessing. He met another twister in his Uncle Laban. What were Laban's motives? To spare his older daughter the shame of remaining unmarried when her sister had a husband? To avoid having to provide for her himself for the rest of her life? How would Leah have felt about being foisted on Jacob? Was she pushed into it? Or might it have been what she wanted? And what would Rachel have thought, cheated, at least at first, of the husband who genuinely loved her? These women appear to be pawns in the games played by their father and husband, but they are also vital to the continuance of the story. There will be no people of Israel if Israel (also known as Jacob) doesn't marry.

Our story works out under the Providence of God even when human beings act from mixed motives or even wrong motives, but it all works out far more happily if we cooperate with Him and act to the best of our ability from the right motives.

February 4th

Justice for Leah?

Genesis 29 vv 31-35

It would appear that Jacob despised Leah. You can understand his anger at being tricked into marrying her! That did not, however, justify his ill treatment of her. It was probably her father's fault rather than Leah's and, in any case, it is foolish and wrong to allow resentment at what has happened in the path to poison the present and future. Leah was Jacob's wife and she was entitled to be treated with respect even if he did not love her. God comforted Leah (and punished Rachel?) by giving Leah children and Rachel none. As a mere man, I realise I am on dangerous territory here. I cannot empathise with a woman's longing for a child nor pass judgment from personal experience on those women who put career before motherhood. A survey published on the morning I'm writing this suggests that modern fathers feel deprived if they are not as involved in housework and childcare as the babies' mothers. Personally, I find this hard to believe – though we have to accept that people are all different and not all men and not all women feel the same. I do believe, however, that there is some very special about being a mother, which is different from being a father and different from a woman pursuing some other career or vocation.

February 5th

Enforced Surrogacy?

Genesis 30 vv 1-13

Like Sarah, the barren Rachel tries to give her husband children by telling him to sleep with her maid. Then Leah follows suit! What we are not told is how Bilhah and Zilpah felt about this. Did they have any choice in the matter? Were they honoured to sleep with the master of the house? If they were not in a position to marry, maybe this was their only chance to have a man and to have children. It appears that their children were treated as the children of their mistresses, but I don't suppose they were taken away from. They probably had to look after them, like it or not.

We value our personal freedom very highly, freedom to choose the life we want – career, partner, whether or not to have children, but many people in history and many people in the world today don't have much choice. Perhaps they are too poor. Maybe they live under oppressive regimes. Like Bilhah and Zilpah, their lives may be controlled by their employers. Although it is not generally realised, there is still actually slavery in the world today.

If we are honest, we ourselves probably have to acknowledge that our freedoms are very limited. We had a limited choice of people we could conceivably marry. We had a limited range of career options. Once married and in a particular job, it pretty much followed where we would be living, what schools our children would go to, what leisure opportunities we might have. If we think freedom depends on doing just as we like, choosing from a vast range of possibilities, very few people live like that and it sounds a pretty shallow life anyway when you come to think about it. True freedom is something inside yourself. It depends on the kind of person you are, your character. Your character depends on your relationship with God, Whose service is perfect freedom.

February 6th

Discord Between the Sisters Genesis 30 vv 14-21

This strange story is based on the belief that Rachel's infertility might be cured by these mandrakes which Reuben has found. It would appear that Rachel has persuaded Jacob no longer to sleep with Leah, but she agrees that Leah can have him for a night in exchange for these

mandrakes. Not a happy household. Jealousy is a terrible thing. Rachel was perhaps not pleased with the bargain. Leah gave Jacob two more sons and a daughter and Rachel remained barren.

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife. A church somewhere up north is hiring a theatre in which to give a series of lectures on the Ten Commandments. It is frightening how they seem to have been forgotten, not only in the world at large, but also in the church. Covetousness eats you up. It poisons your relationships with other people. It may tempt you to theft, adultery, lying or even murder. St Paul seems to say that covetousness is the root of breaking the whole Torah – God's perfect Law of love (Romans 7 v7). He equates covetousness with idolatry Colossians 3 v5). It ought to make us think!

February 7th An Addition to the Family Genesis 30 vv 22-24
At last Rachel conceives. Jacob already has ten sons, but Joseph (the name comes from the Hebrew verb *to add*) will be treated as special. He is the youngest and the son of the favourite wife. Such favouritism will lead him to be spoilt. It will lead to family disharmony and a great deal of pain for Joseph. Joseph will, however, prove to be a wise man after all. He will learn from his pain and God will be able to use him to save the whole family in years to come. The story works out under the Providence of God even when human beings act from mixed motives or even wrong motives, but it all works out far more happily if we cooperate with Him and act to the best of our ability from the right motives.

February 8th Tactics Genesis 31 vv 25-35
After marrying Leah and Rachel and working fourteen years for them, Jacob continued to work for Laban as a shepherd. His wages were fixed at a proportion of the flock and he became richer and richer at Laban's expense. Laban's sons became very resentful and Jacob decided to take his chances back in Canaan. In those still superstitious times, Laban's household "gods" were important and Rachel wanted to keep them for herself. Note how she used her feminine weakness to outsmart Laban and Jacob. Men don't have things all their own way.

February 9th

Dinah

Genesis 34 vv 1-31

We hear a lot about the sons of Israel and very little about his daughter. This reflects the patriarchal society in which they lived, but I guess we are ourselves quite squeamish about reading stories like this in church and telling them to our community. Dinah perhaps wanted a bit of independence, as young women quite rightly do. She left the security of her father's tents and went out with some other girls. So might your teenage daughters have wanted to go out with people outside your church and outside the circle of your family and friends. It's not clear to me how far Dinah consented to sleeping with Shechem, but being "defiled" by an unsuitable boy is what every family dreads for their daughters. There is the complication that Shechem is of a different race and religion. Jacob seems to be prepared to make the best of a bad job. If Shechem's people will be circumcised (i.e. join the Israelites and accept the God of Israel), Jacob will bless their marriage. Dinah's hot-headed brothers are, however, not having it. They think that their sister has been taken advantage of and maybe they don't want their tribe merging with that of the people of Hamor. They perpetrate a massacre, ethnic cleansing quite literally. Jacob worries about the political and military consequences of making enemies of the people they have to live among. For Simeon and Levi, it is a matter of family honour.

If this story were recast as a drama on BBC or ITV, I guess Dinah's right to independence would be taken for granted. [There is currently a story line in *Coronation Street* in which two sixteen year olds are regularly sleeping together. The girl's father, who doesn't like it, is being portrayed as the bad guy.] The writer would have to make a decision as to whether to portray Shechem as a rapist, or as a sophisticated princeling who took advantage of an innocent girl, or as Dinah's equal, a young man she fell in love with of her own volition. Jacob would certainly be made to look bad for wanting his son-in-law to join his church. Simeon and Levi would be cast as repulsive villains, which I think they are in the biblical version too.

The culture of Canaan 1,000 years before Christ seems a world away from the culture of contemporary Britain, but that does not mean that the Bible does not have something to teach us here. Marriage is not

actually a matter only for the couple. Marriage is very important to the wider family and to the community in general. We are not isolated individuals, independent of any obligation to anyone other than ourselves and the people we choose to love. When a man leaves his parents to cleave to his wife, that ought not to mean that he no longer honours them. Marriage and faith are the two most important factors in our lives. If they are pulling us in opposite directions, there is going to be trouble. We do have a responsibility for other members of our families, including daughters and younger sisters as vulnerable, but that responsibility has to be balanced with respect for their autonomy. To be free and to be interdependent is quite a balancing act, but we cannot live in families, communities or churches, unless we try.

February 10th

Rebekah's Nurse

Genesis 35 vv 1-8

This is the first time we come across the name of Deborah. She must have cared for Jacob's mother Rebekah when she was a child and she has remained with the family all these years and through all these vicissitudes. We are not told what she meant to them, but they obviously held her in affection. Some people's names are well known to everyone. They lead and they get the public praise or blame for what happens in communities, churches and nations, but it is the millions of faithful ordinary people, whose names hardly anyone knows, who really keep everything going. God knows who they are.

February 11th

Rachel's Tomb

Genesis 35 vv 16-20

So Rachel died in childbirth. So many women have. It is one of the bitter ironies of the human condition that the beginning of life is so dangerous for the child and the mother. We ought to be very thankful for modern medicine. She called the child "son of sorrow" because she was dying, but Jacob renamed him "son of the south" – a much better name with which to go through life. Rachel's tomb is near Bethlehem. Needless to say it is still fought over. Her grave being near Bethlehem, the prophecy about *Rachel weeping for her children* (Jeremiah 31 v15) obviously fits Herod's massacre of the innocents when Jesus is born there (Matthew 2 v18).

February 12th

Potiphar's Wife

Genesis 39 vv 7-23

Joseph was the spoilt favourite and succeeded in annoying his brothers to the point where they sold him to be a slave in Egypt. He was bought by Potiphar and, by diligence and intelligence, soon rose to prominence. Things were looking up for Joseph until his master's wife fell for him. He spurned her advances. She claimed that he had done what she wanted him to do but he had refused and Joseph was off to prison.

I can think of at least one similar case in the present when a married man I know rejected a girl's advances and then she claimed that he had molested her. The Potiphar's wife gambit tends to work because we assume that men are less to be trusted in sexual matters than women. Like any abuse of power, however, women are wrong to use this tactic to get back at men who have disappointed them. It unfairly hurts the men, their families and the wider community and undermines the credibility of women who really have been raped.

February 13th

The Hebrew Midwives

Exodus 1 vv 7-22

Pharaoh was frightened by the rapid growth of the Hebrew population. So he decreed the death of the boy babies. Admittedly, boys are more likely to grow up to be soldiers, but, if he really wanted to control the population, it would have been better to kill the girls – like the Chinese did not so very long ago. In theory, one man could father children with several women, whereas a woman can only have so many children, no matter how many husbands she has. [This is one reason why I doubt the wisdom of C21 Britain in putting female soldiers in the front line and, indeed, in sending women into other situations of danger.] Probably Pharaoh killed the boys because boys were more valued in ancient cultures than girls. But girls or boys, this form of population control is an atrocity.

Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, become heroes of the faith because they deceive Pharaoh and save the boy babies. Biblical commentators are uncomfortable with the deception, but these women are rightly commended – just as Shindler (of List fame) was commended millennia later for saving Jews from the Nazis and we

would commend anyone today who protected innocent life from tyranny.

February 14th

Moses' Mother

Exodus 2 vv 1-4

Just imagine living as a Hebrew in Egypt in those days. What an order! To tell parents to kill their own children. If you read the foreign pages of the newspapers and current affairs magazines, you will know that such horrors are not confined to the past. Humanity is capable of extreme wickedness. Yet we know that it is wicked and we always have known. You only have to read the Bible to see that. Nobody doubts that Pharaoh gets what he deserves when God sends ten plagues, culminating in the death of the first born of the Egyptians, even though we might wish that the Egyptians could have received mercy rather than justice. In many parts of the world, atrocities are perpetrated today and we ought to be praying and supporting efforts to bring justice and mercy, whether through the UN, the International Court of Justice, Amnesty International, local churches, missionary societies or whatever. As well as this terrible wickedness, human beings are also capable of great love and courage. We feel for Moses' mother. We admire her courage in trying to save her child. What about all the women in the world today, whose children are hungry, conscripted into violent militias, or murdered in acts of irrational savagery? What can we do for them? What about the worldwide rôle of the Mothers' Union?

February 15th

Moses' Sister

Exodus 2 vv 5-10

We're not told the name of Moses' mother, nor that of Pharaoh's daughter. But Miriam's name is preserved and she is sufficiently important that people still revere what is supposed to be her tomb in Jordan. I think she was about twelve at the time of this story. What an amazingly brave and resourceful little girl. She certainly took care of her younger brother. Family love and our instinctive care of our little ones trumps self-preservation more often than some people might expect. If it didn't it's hard to see how the human race could have survived.

February 16th

Pharaoh's Daughter

Exodus 2 vv 5-10

She was a better person than her father! She had compassion and ran a great risk in thwarting the tyrant, but she did it at least in this one case. Every life saved is valuable. You have to start somewhere. The fact that there is so much to do is no excuse for doing nothing.

February 17th

Jethro's Daughters

Exodus 2 vv 11-22

The priest of Midian had seven daughters. Here he is called Reuel, but he is better known as Jethro. You notice his daughters had similar problems to those experienced by Laban's daughters. Water was short and the strong were not willing to share it with the weak, in this case the women. Moses' act of chivalry earns him hospitality, a job and ultimately a wife. So courtesy paid dividends even in those days. For many years Moses settled down to a life of domesticity with his wife and her family.

February 18th

Zipporah's Incomprehension Exodus 4 vv 18-26

I guess they were all content and comfortable living with Jethro till Moses took the flock to Mt Horeb (= Sinai). There God appeared to him in a burning bush and sent him back to Egypt to set the Israelites free. He took his wife Zipporah and their son and it says that God met them at the inn and would have killed Moses! The point seems to be that Moses' son Gershom was uncircumcised. (His mother was a Midianite). This meant that he was not included in the covenant. Zipporah rectified the situation but she seems to have been angry and confused. All this is very hard for us to understand. It is to do with being holy, being separated as the people of God from the profane world, but we are much more used to thinking of holiness in terms of being morally good. God is holy; God is good. Jesus is holy; Jesus is good. Christians are made holy (sanctified) through the shedding of Christ's Blood on the Cross. We repent of our sins and we are baptised in faith. We are therefore holy (separated for God from the profane world) and are called to be good Christ-like people by the power of the Holy Spirit, because we are set free from slavery to sin.

Like Zipporah, we sometimes have to accept our loved ones doing things that we cannot understand and may be repelled by for their own good reasons.

February 19th

Out of the Fray

Exodus 18 vv 1-6

It seems that Moses and Zipporah had another son and that they were sent to live with Jethro while Moses contended with Pharaoh and led the Hebrews out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. Like thousands of

wives and children, Zipporah is kept out of harm's way (and maybe out of the way) while her husband sees all the action. No doubt, however, she worried. No doubt she missed him. No doubt she would have been responsible for Gershom and Eliezer if Moses hadn't come back. It is right to support the work that organisations like the Royal British Legion and the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association do for the wives and families of servicemen.

February 20th Miriam's Rebellion Numbers 12 vv 1-16
Another story we don't hear very often because we're not comfortable with it. What's going on is that Moses' family is questioning his leadership. It might appear that they had found a good pretext in his marriage to an Ethiopian woman. Israelites were not supposed to marry foreigners for fear that marrying people of another religion would corrupt their own. However Moses was special. God had chosen him and spoke to him in a way which was closer than His relationship with any prophet. The danger was that to rebel against Moses was to rebel against God. That is why Miriam was stricken with leprosy for a week. It doesn't say why Aaron got off more lightly. Feminist cynics would say, *Because he was a man!*

Religious authority is even more difficult than political power. It is hard to argue with someone who claims to be acting on the authority of God, but people claim the authority of God for terrible things – holy wars, religious persecution, suicide bombings. God does not order these things and we can be certain that they are wrong to claim God's authority for them.

On the other hand, the Church does need leadership. The Bible teaches that God does call men to hold authority in the Church and that we should accord these men our respect. Like many things, the answer is that we evaluate peoples' leadership claims in the light of our humble, prayerful consideration of biblical teaching and the guidance the Holy Spirit gives to us as individuals and to the whole Church as the Body of Christ. As a rector, I am conscious of the need to have my authority respected as I am conscious of the need to act myself under God's authority.

February 21st

Rahab the Harlot

Joshua 2 vv 1-24

When St James was looking for examples of people who demonstrated the reality of their faith by acting on it, he chose two. One was obvious – Abraham the great hero and father of all the faithful. The other example he chose was the harlot Rahab. Again, when the Epistle to the Hebrews lists the faithful heroes of the Old Testament, Rahab features prominently. It seems strange that a woman who followed such a profession, a non-Israelite, someone who probably knew very little about the LORD, should be so important and remembered for thousands of years. I suppose the point about Rahab is that she acted on what she did know of the LORD. She was perceptive enough to see what was coming. She made the right choice and acted courageously on it.

February 22nd

Deborah

Judges 4 vv 1-9

It isn't true that in Old Testament times there were no women in positions of authority. Neither is it true in the New Testament or in the history of the Christian Church. There have always been powerful women, though only a minority have held official positions of leadership. Feminist theologians see this as evidence that women always had the potential to be leaders but that their leadership was suppressed by men. Traditional theologians tend to see these examples of women in positions normally held by men as exceptions. If you take the feminist view, you will say that the Church should seize the opportunities presented by the modern world and ordain capable women to serve the Church as leaders alongside men – although there is a bit of a division between those who imply that women and men are essentially the same and those who imply that women and men are equal, but different, and are therefore needed to complement one another.²

On a personal note, I can't help feeling that Deborah has to show leadership here because the male general is a wimp!

² If you believe that men and women are essentially the same, you will believe that they should have equal opportunities to be ordained as a matter of justice to them. If you believe that men and women are equal but different and meant by God to be complementary, you might believe that a "whole" ministry requires both men and women to be ministers or you might believe that ordained ministry is an exclusively male rôle, complemented by women and laymen in exclusively other positions.

February 23rd

Jael

Judges 4 vv 18-24

Deborah and Barak defeat the Canaanite army and the Canaanite captain flees the field. Then we see how the woman Jael deals with him. Not exactly ladylike, is it? Not what we envisage as Christian conduct. But think of all the women caught up in conflicts. And men. The horrors people find themselves perpetrating. What would you have done if you'd been in her shoes? Alone in the house, the enemy commander takes refuge with you. Do you let him go to fight again? Do you try to hang on to him till some soldiers of your own side turn up? Do you risk him killing you? Or do you do what Jael did? I would hope never to be in that situation, but pray for those who are.

February 24th

Sisera's Mother

Judges 5 vv 24-31

This is Barak and Deborah's victory song. They imagine Sisera's mother waiting for her son to return from the battle. As modern, western Christians, we probably think first of the grief she will feel when she finds out that her son is dead. That is what we think of when we see those coffins return from Afghanistan. But Deborah's song imagines Sisera's mother and her ladies thinking about his victory. What about women who encourage their men folk into battle and delight in their victories? The whole nation profits by its armies conquests. We are all kept safe by the sacrifices our soldiers make to defend us. What about the women who sent white feathers to men who were slow to join up in the First World War? War is something that everybody is involved in, not just the soldiers and politicians. Unless we are absolute pacifists, we will support and encourage our soldiers when we believe they are fighting just wars. We are all culpable if we encourage our politicians and soldiers to fight in unjustifiable conflicts.

February 25th

Jephthah's Daughter

Judges 11 vv 29-40

This is a terrible story. The Old Testament is vehemently against human sacrifice. It is a pagan custom which justifies the destruction of pagan culture. Jephthah was brought up as an outlaw, which is possibly why he didn't know better. He made that stupid vow and then equally stupidly he carried it out. His daughter seems to have been a saint. Religion is rational. You have to be sensible in carrying out your religious obligations.

February 26th

Samson's Wife

Judges 14 vv 1-20

Samson was one of those men who ruins his own life (and damages a lot of other people) because he couldn't be rational in his dealings with women. He allowed his heart to rule his head.

Samson married a girl (against his parents' advice) from another faith and culture. There was bound to be a conflict and, when it came, which would they choose, one another or the families into which they were born, the people from whom they came, and the faith in which they were brought up? Samson remained a loyal Israelite. His bride took the side of her own family and their friends.

February 27th

The Harlot of Gaza

Judges 16 vv 1-3

They say it is the oldest profession. It doesn't say much for Samson's virtue that he visited a prostitute. Neither does it say much for his common sense that he went to one in a Philistine city. Maybe he liked the danger.

What God has given between a man and a woman is almost sacramental, a precious gift at the heart of the marriage bond. It is tragic and a consequence of original sin, that sex is so often cheapened and, worse still, used for exploitative and destructive purposes. Nobody perhaps will listen to us in the world as it is today, but I am sure that the Church should continue to bear witness to the truth that sex is for lifelong marriage and only for lifelong marriage.

February 28th

Delilah

Judges 16 vv 4-21

A woman can have enormous power over a man. Like everything else, power can be used to do good or to do harm. The attraction between a man and a woman ought to be used to cement the marriage bond. It ought to be the foundation for family life. A husband and wife ought to use their love to build one another up in the Lord, to support one another, to make one another better people. But they can use their power over one another selfishly. They can use it to hurt, even to destroy. They can use it to make their partners do bad or foolish things. We are answerable to God for how we use our power.

March 1st

Naomi

Ruth 1 vv 1-13

What a sad life Naomi had. Because of a famine, her family was uprooted from their home country of Bethlehem and went to live in Moab. There her sons grew up and married Moabitesses. Then her husband and her sons all died, leaving the three women unprotected and in what was to Naomi an alien land. There were not many respectable occupations for single women. By and large women depended on their men folk to protect them and provide for them. Close as they evidently were, Naomi decided that her best course of action was to release her daughters in law from any bonds of loyalty to her in the hope that they would marry again in Moab and she herself would return to Bethlehem in the hope of finding some means of sustenance there.

Naomi was resourceful and decisive from a position of weakness, like so many women have had to be.

The great puzzle in welfare reform in our own day is how to support people in their needs. Too generous a system undermines self-reliance and is unfair to those who try but remain poor. Too judgmental a system is bound to fail to help people in genuine need, people who really cannot help themselves.

March 2nd

Orpah and Ruth

Ruth 1 vv 14-18

Orpah did what appeared to be the sensible thing. Indeed she did what Naomi told her to do. But it is Ruth we warm to. Ruth loved Naomi so much that she was prepared to do what most people might have said wasn't sensible. A young widow herself, she would go and live with an old widow in a foreign country where she knew no-one and where she had no idea how she would support herself. She would join the people of Israel. She would worship the God of Israel. Presumably she had learnt about God from Naomi and maybe from the men in the family. I like to think that their shared faith was one of the reasons Ruth wanted to stay with Naomi and to live in the land of Israel. Such faith would also have sustained her in her pilgrimage.

March 3rd

Gleaning

Ruth 2 vv 1-3

Farmers in ancient Israel were supposed to make a point of leaving some of the crop for gleaning. They weren't to harvest to the edge of the field. They weren't to pick up what they dropped. The poor could then follow the reapers and get something for themselves. It is a good principle to make sure we leave something over from what we earn to give to people who are in greater need than we are. Boaz was Naomi's rich relation. She knew what she was doing in suggesting Ruth went to glean in his fields.

March 4th

The Experience of Gleaning

Ruth 2 vv 4-17

Boaz directs the young men not to interfere with Ruth when she is gleaning. A young woman in such circumstances would have been vulnerable. The harvesters might have chased her away so that she couldn't take any of the harvest. They might have made unwanted advances. When we give in charity it is important that we respect the recipient. We must not exploit their relative weakness. Neither must we patronise them. Charity is agape (αγάπη), the great Christian virtue. God is agape. The point of charity is to build people up, not to "keep them in their place."

March 5th

Acting Wisely

Ruth 2 vv 18-23

Naomi has been proved right. Boaz is looking after Ruth. He is protecting her while she gleans and ensuring she is able to gather a reasonable amount. There is a family obligation. There is also the fact that Ruth is a good person. It is not unreasonable that Naomi and Ruth should rely on Boaz honouring his moral debt. The poor have rights, too, which ought to be respected. But rights are based on right. They are not merely arbitrary. Nobody has the right to decide simply to be idle and to rely on others working to support him or her. If a person is unable to work because of ill health or because there is no work available which he can do, that person has a right to expect help from the community. But if a person simply prefers not to work, I cannot see that he has the right to live on benefits. I can see, however, that a long term unemployed person in an area of high unemployment might become demoralised and clinically depressed and therefore to sick to work.

March 6th

Harvest Festival

Ruth 3 vv 1-7

Getting in the harvest was hard work. Surviving the Winter depended on a good harvest. For both those reasons, harvest traditionally finishes with a celebration. Traditionally in England, we had special church services and a Harvest Supper. Like many things in the Church today, these are no longer what they were as God features less and less in the lives of busy people. I can't help wondering, however, if people are really better for spending their time on work, sport, DIY, watching TV, playing computer games and shopping, rather than on worship, giving thanks and prayer. The Devil deludes them into thinking that religion is boring and unnecessary and they become part of his harvest.

Anyway Ruth tags along at the celebration and, on Naomi's advice, makes her bid to get Boaz's attention.

March 7th

Boaz Provides for Ruth

Ruth 3 vv 8-18

The implication is that women were not expected to be present at the harvest celebration. We're probably exceptional in the modern Western world in taking it for granted that the things we do should always include both men and women. Most cultures separate men and women for at least some of their cultural events. This may be on the grounds of function. Men, say, might be warriors or labourers or more interested in sport and women, say, might be responsible for the care of children. Separation of the sexes might be for ritual reasons as in the worship in synagogues and mosques. Men and women may be kept apart in circumstances where society needs to avoid the distraction and complications of sexual attraction. Men and women may meet separately for social reasons – as they still do in the WI.

Ruth's conduct is making a claim on Boaz as a kinsman, perhaps according to a recognised ritual.

March 8th

Redemption

Ruth 4 vv 1-12

In ancient Israel, land belonged inalienably to families. It was passed down from generation and could not be permanently sold. If it was sold, it would come back to the family in the Year of Jubilee – the 50th year. Moreover, there were few respectable ways for a single woman to

support herself. So, when a man died childless as Naomi's husband had effectively done, a member of the family was expected to marry the widow both to protect and support her and to keep the land in the family. This is what Boaz now undertakes to do by marrying Ruth. It appears, however, that there is a closer kinsman who would like the land, but he doesn't want to marry Ruth. So he steps aside and gives Ruth to Boaz, which is just as well since he has fallen in love with her.

These OT practices are outlandish to us, but the principles underlying them are important. We need mechanisms in society to prevent people from becoming destitute. We need fair rules on inheritance. We have to protect the vulnerable from exploitation by unscrupulous financial organisations, who might lend to people who cannot repay only to repossess, or who lend at extortionate interest rates, or who lure naïve people into making foolish investments. Family is very much what we turn to first when we need help. Society depends on strong families who stay together and recognise their mutual obligations.

March 9th

Naomi's Old Age

Ruth 4 vv 13-22

If you don't derive your morals or your ethics from God, where do you get them from? Religious people believe that it is God Who teaches us how to behave. Christian ethics is based on the belief that God is love and that love always determines how we ought to act. We are responsible to God for how we treat all of creation. Human beings are special because: they are made in the image of God; God became human in Christ and Christ died for everyone of us. When people try to do ethics without God, they tend towards utilitarianism, the greatest good of the greatest number. That sounds OK till you start considering what happens when the needs of individuals or minorities conflict with those of the majority. You can use utilitarianism to justify torture, the disregard of minority rights and the neglect of those who may be a burden on society, the chronically sick and the frail old. As Christians we have to maintain the doctrine of the sanctity of life. We have a duty to care for everybody whether or not they deserve our love, are entitled to our care or are generally useful in society. Ruth will look after Naomi in her old age. It is a reproach on our society that so many old people are not cared for and treated with the respect they should have.

March 10th

Bathsheba

II Samuel 11 vv 1-13

Perhaps David was going through a midlife crisis. He was considered too old and too important any longer to lead his men into battle. He was forced to stay in the palace twiddling his thumbs. His eye fell on Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, and he sent for her. She then told him she was pregnant.

How do we see this from Bathsheba's point of view? Was she foolish to bathe on the roof of her house or did she know she was overlooked from the palace? Did she mean to snare the king? Was she honoured when he summoned her? Or was she horrified, but unable to refuse? A Hollywood film version of this story hints that Uriah was effeminate and perhaps therefore an unsatisfactory husband. There is nothing in the Bible, however, to suggest this.

What would Bathsheba have felt when she realised she was pregnant? Everyone would know that she was an adulteress and she could have been stoned. In Israel, the king wasn't above the Law; so David would have been in trouble too.

Love and sexual attraction are very beautiful and powerful. It can be hard to see why an illicit relationship is wrong if *they love one another*. But illicit relationships cause trouble not only for the couple but for many innocent people.

March 11th

The Deaths of Uriah and Abimelech II Samuel 11 vv 14-27

David and Bathsheba had to cover up their adultery. David first tried deception. Then he resorted to murder. There are two women in this story – the pampered Bathsheba and the woman who threw the millstone from a besieged city wall and killed Abimelech. It makes you think how desperate the defenders would be in a siege. It reminds us always of the need to pray and work for peace.

March 12th

Philippians 4 v11

II Samuel 12 vv 1-14

St Paul says in Philippians: *Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.* Are you a David or a Paul? Never satisfied or content?

March 13th

What About Bathsheba? II Samuel 12 vv 15-23

I find the account of David's grief over the child very moving, but we are not told how Bathsheba felt. They say that the loss of a child is the worst thing that can happen to you. This is still true even if the child is grown up and the parents are old. Parents often blame themselves, usually unfairly. In this case, David and Bathsheba had good reason to blame themselves. Grief is the perfectly natural response to the loss of someone you love. It is perfectly OK to grieve. People ought not to try make you suppress your grief or to diminish our loss (for example by saying you'll have another child one day). Forty years ago five stages of grief were described (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance) which may help you and your friends and family to understand what you are going through – but these stages are descriptive, not prescriptive. Not everyone goes through them and certainly people do not go through them at the same rate. We should never try to manipulate people's feelings according to a preconceived scheme.

March 14th

David and Bathsheba II Samuel 12 vv 24&25

David comforted Bathsheba. One of the things that grieves me is how often couples these days seem to part when they experience a tragedy. I think it is because one demands from the other what the other cannot give. But it is very sad. Marriage is about being there for one another whatever happens. If one or the other gives up on a relationship because the other is *failing to meet my needs*, paradoxically that person is ensuring that her or his needs will never be met. Selfishness is insatiable. It makes it impossible for our needs ever to be met. It is in self-giving that one finds oneself.

March 15th

Amnon and Tamar II Samuel 13 vv 1-14

Amnon falls for his half sister. People do become obsessed. They stalk. Friends of the same sex urge one another on to sexual conquests. They conspire. Yet conquest must be the wrong word. Sex is an expression of love. Love is the giving of self. Sex is itself abused if it is forced or if there is deception, exploitation or selfishness. Because people will not control themselves they do so much harm to themselves and to other people.

March 16th

Love and Hate

II Samuel 13 vv 15-18

Amnon didn't really love Tamar. He probably blamed her for his loss of self-control. Once he had got what he wanted, he hated her. It is not unusual for men to take against women they have abused. It is all so far from what Christian marriage ought to be, a relationship modelled on the relationship of Christ and His Church. Pray for the work of the Mothers' Union and all who try to support and encourage Christian family life.

In some circumstances, rape victims find themselves blamed for what has happened to them. Or they may themselves feel guilty and defiled.

We need to remain rational and apportion blame where it is due. The strong who exploits the weak is always wrong and the victim is not to be blamed.

March 17th

Absalom's Revenge

II Samuel 13 vv 19-29

As the stronger sex, it is incumbent upon men both to respect and to protect women. Because of this, a man may well feel that he is himself dishonoured if someone has dishonoured one of the women in his household. I suppose that in the modern world many people would say that a woman can stand up for herself or that, if she cannot, she should be able to rely on the authorities (representative of society as a whole) to defend her. She does not need to be patronised, a feminist might say, by her brother, father or husband. I'm not sure about this.

Unscrupulous men may well insult or annoy vulnerable women and it is not possible to think that the police will involve themselves in every incident how ever trivial. Absalom here, however, goes to the opposite extreme. He keeps the grudge for two years and then exacts his revenge by murdering his half brother. Whatever punishment Amnon deserved (and it ought to have been a severe one) it should have been imposed according to Law, not by an aggrieved victim's supporter. If we take the Law into our own hands, we have anarchy, even when we are in the right. Absalom's revenge on Amnon will ultimately lead to civil war in Israel, which would be the consequence if enough of us lost confidence in the Law today.

March 18th

The Wise Woman of Tekoah II Samuel 14 vv 1-21

David was naturally furious when he learnt that Absalom had killed Amnon and Absalom had to go into exile for his own safety. Joab, David's unscrupulous right hand man, could see that David would not be happy unless he could find a way to be reconciled with his son. So Joab plotted with this wise woman from Tekoah. She would appeal to the king as supreme judge of Israel in a case Joab made up for her. She was supposed to be a widow with two sons. One had murdered the other and the rest of the family insisted that the murderer should be put to death himself. This would have left the widow bereft and with no means of support. A difficult case! She wanted the king to overrule the strict requirement of the Law so that the murderer could be spared to care for his mother. She then comes clean and argues that the case of Amnon and Absalom is similar and that Absalom should be spared.

I like what the woman says in v14. *Yet doth he (=God) devise means that his banished be not expelled from him.* I take that to mean that God finds ways to restore the sinner to eternal life.

March 19th

Solomon's Mother

I Kings 1 vv 11-31

The hereditary principle was not firmly established in Israel and, in any case, David had several sons by different wives. Now that David was dying, who would succeed him? There was always the risk to the unsuccessful candidates and their supporters that they would be eliminated as potential rivals. David was fading and Adonijah made his bid for the kingship. Bathsheba claimed that her son Solomon had been promised the kingdom and in this she was supported by Nathan the prophet. Solomon was the man of peace who would build the Temple which David had not been allowed to do because there was blood on his hands. Bathsheba was ambitious for her son and concerned about the consequences for both of them if Adonijah reigned.

So she approaches the dying David to obtain his blessing on Solomon's succession. Between them, she and Nathan present the case in as favourable a manner as possible and David bestows his blessing on Solomon. David's authority and prestige are so respected that people fall into line and acclaim Solomon king.

March 20th

The Judgment of Solomon I Kings 3 vv 16-28

What Solomon is famous for is his wisdom. It was what he asked God for and this story is told at this point in order to demonstrate the wisdom of Solomon. Think about these two poor women. They are prostitutes, prostitutes in a time when there is no effective contraception. They live together, though probably they are rivals as much as friends. Then this tragedy happens and one of them wakes up to find her baby dead. You can imagine her grief. Perhaps such grief explains, although it cannot excuse, the attempt to swap her dead baby with her flatmate's live one. Nowadays they might have had a DNA test. Solomon put a mother's love to the extreme test and found out which was the real mother that way. You have to empathise with the humanity of these stories if they are to mean something to you. When you do so empathise, your sympathy goes out to other people in desperate situations and demands that you do what you can towards the day when God's Kingdom comes and His Will is done in earth as in heaven.

March 21st

The Queen of Sheba I Kings 10 vv 1-13

The visit of the Queen of Sheba is like the story of the two prostitutes in that it demonstrates the wisdom of Solomon. When the Queen of Sheba comes to call, Solomon has just built and dedicated the Temple. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.* Solomon's kingdom is at peace – another fruit of wisdom. It is also prosperous. Prosperity tends to flow from wise rule, justice and peace. Wisdom and goodness don't guarantee a man success, but they make success more likely. The biblical writer revels in the magnificence and wealth of both monarchs. It is proof of the prosperity of the kingdom under Solomon that he attracts such an exotic visitor. Wisdom, peace, faith, justice. These are still the foundations of a successful society. They are not lessons to forget.

March 22nd

The Wages of Sin I Kings 11 vv 1-13

Solomon's lust led him to make relationships with unsuitable women. These in turn led him to weaken in his faith. The consequence of alienation from the LORD was the loss and division of the kingdom. You cannot serve two masters – God and Mammon. Only by single-mindedly serving God will you succeed in life.

March 23rd

The Widow of Zarephath I Kings 17 vv 1-16

The Israelite King married the Tyrian princess Jezebel and, like Solomon, he allowed his pagan wife to undermine his own loyalty to God. This is why the prophet Elijah prophesied a drought and the whole country suffered because under its king it was guilty of apostasy. The drought affected the good as well as the bad. These things do! Elijah himself needed food and water. God sent him to Zarephath where a widow was willing to share the last of what she had and, because she shared, she never ran out.

March 24th

The Widow's Son I Kings 17 vv 17-24

Life is often unfair. This good woman had a son and he became ill and died. The woman even wondered whether the presence of the prophet had reminded God of her sins. People instinctively look for reasons as to why things happen. Elijah prayed. Even he questioned the justice of God in allowing this boy to die. We can question God. We can agonise and struggle in prayer. In this case the breath returned to the boy. (Was some kind of artificial respiration involved?) The woman acknowledged that Elijah was a man of God. It is much harder, perhaps, when we pray for what we believe to be right and God doesn't grant our requests. We still need our faith, however. We still need to believe that there is a God, that He does love us and that He does hear our prayers and answer them in the way that He knows is best. Without this faith in times of trial, we should be lost.

March 25th

Jezebel

I Kings 21 vv 1-16

Jezebel's ethics derived from her religion. She believed that being in a position of power meant that you could take what you wanted. She was quite prepared to suborn false witnesses and to arrange the judicial execution of an innocent man. Ahab, her husband, was a weak man and a greedy one. He coveted Naboth's vineyard, but he didn't quite like to take it. He knew that the King of Israel was subject to the Law. Rulers rule under God and are answerable to Him. The Laws a country establishes and the way they are administered must not be arbitrary, in the interests of the powerful, or corrupted. Law and its administration must reflect the principles of justice. Those who make and enforce laws ought to be especially scrupulous in avoiding self-interest.

March 26th

Judgment

I Kings 21 vv 17-29

A prophet is God's messenger. It was Elijah's task to proclaim God's judgment against this wicked couple who had so outrageously violated the sacred trust of authority. The unjust judges now faced judgment themselves. We are all answerable to God for our lives. We are answerable for what we do professionally as well as for our personal lives. If we are soldiers or politicians, financiers, manufacturers or administrators, whatever we are, whatever we do, we shall be judged by God for the way we conduct our affairs. We cannot lay our Christian morality aside when we go to work!

Ahab and Jezebel come under judgment, but you notice that even Ahab can repent and receive God's mercy.

March 27th

Naaman's Wife's Maid

II Kings 5 vv 1-3

This little girl is an example to us all. She's been taken prisoner by the enemy. Very likely her home has been destroyed and her family killed. She's been made to work as maid to the wife of the enemy commander in chief. Now you might think that she would be pleased when Naaman caught leprosy. At the very least you might have expected her to do nothing. But she didn't. She shared with her mistress her idea for getting Naaman cured – as indeed he was.

March 28th

Jezebel's End

II Kings 9 vv 27-37

Jezebel outlived her husband Ahab and continued in the reign of their son Joram. What happened next is a bit complicated. The King of Israel formed an alliance with the King of Judah (southern Israel) to whom he was related to fight the Syrians (Arameans). However the Israelite and Syrian generals themselves formed an alliance to overthrow their respective kings. Jehu, the Israelite general, made himself King of Israel and carried out a bloody purge of Ahab's legacy, Queen Jezebel and the worshippers of Baal. At the end Jezebel acted as she thought a queen would act, but some people would say that she behaved more like a prostitute by sitting in a window all doled up. The horrible way she died and the fact that she didn't get a decent burial is seen as appropriate punishment for the way she lived.

March 29th

Lady Wisdom

Proverbs 8 vv 1-36

I feel the need for a change from the violent history of Israel, the wicked women steeped in blood and even the noble ones who worked for peace, justice and true religion.

In the Book of Proverbs, Wisdom is represented as a woman. She is alluring to the man who is prepared to understand. Wisdom teaches a man how to live. To be wise is to walk in the paths of God. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.* Wisdom is a characteristic of God Himself. By Wisdom, God made and governs the universe. Wisdom is the every day solution to life's questions, the mundane as well as the sublime. The person who lives wisely makes the most of life. And that is so because the Universe functions in accordance with the Wisdom of God, Whose Wisdom is the source of whatever wisdom we might have.

March 30th

The Virtuous Woman

Proverbs 31 vv 10-28

When I was in my last job as curate at Newington, we had an annual service for the women's groups of three local churches. It was a very pleasant occasion and this was nearly always the OT lesson. It is an interesting picture of how an upper middle class woman was expected to live in ancient Israel. She obviously enjoyed a good deal of responsibility and took an active part in running the household. She was a blessing to her husband, children and household servants. Many of the things she did we would happily commend today – making sure her family were well fed and clothed, speaking wisely, working hard, more concerned about character than appearance. You might think that her husband doesn't seem to do much except talk with his mates in the gate! It is worth thinking how far we would like to see women acting like this today? Is the rôle here described an outdated relic of a patriarchal society or is it the way things are meant to be? Would we be happier today if women minded their distaff? I don't think that we in C21 West have worked out what we want from family life – how much independence we want and how much interdependence, how similar and how different we expect the rôles of men and women to be. I'm not sure what the answer is but I think our confusion explains a good deal of our dissatisfaction.

March 31st

Bride of Christ Revelation 22 vv 16&17

We far too easily equate the Church with a stone building. Even when we get beyond that, we still treat the Church like a human organisation. It has a growing bureaucracy and a political organisation based on PCCs and synods. Sometimes the Church of England or its parish churches behave like local authorities or government departments. Sometimes they act like businesses. Very often their members treat them as social clubs.

Not one of those models is biblical. The Church in the Bible appears to have owned no buildings. There was no bureaucracy. Meetings were ad hoc. The early Church had no political or legal power. It certainly meant more to its members than a branch of the leisure industry. Why else were they prepared to die for their faith?

The biblical models of the Church are spiritual. The Church is neither a building nor a human organisation. It is a living thing, an organism inspired, enervated and energised by the Breath of God. The biblical models of Church are about its unity with God, its unity in its own membership. The Church is about relating to God and existing to do God's work in the world. The Church worships and witnesses in the power of God.

One of these images of the Church we find in the Bible is the Bride of Christ. Think of the love. Think of the longing. Think of the essential oneness between husband and wife, the joy of living together in love. This is what it means to be Church.

If from our consideration of women in the Bible we have learnt anything about the Nature of God, about what it means to be truly human and about how we relate to God and God to us, then we have a foretaste, a hint of what is meant by the final consummation in the Beatific Vision – to live in perfect love eternally in Christ.

Mid toil and tribulation, and tumult of her war,
She waits the consummation of peace for evermore;
till with the vision glorious her longing eyes are blest,
and the great Church victorious shall be the Church at rest.