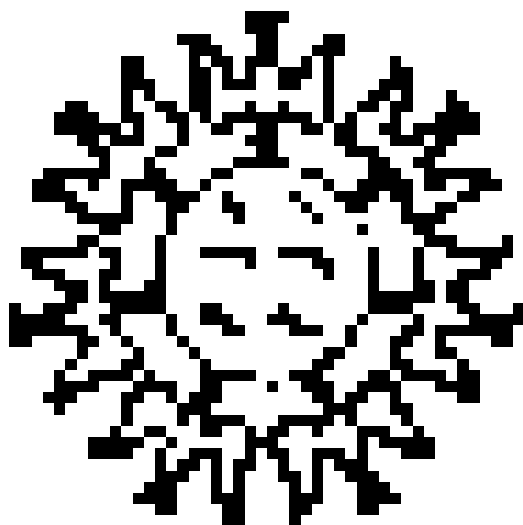


# Going On Before



Bible Notes

January – March 2009

25p

### January 1<sup>st</sup> (Naming of Jesus)

Acts 15 v35

When we look at the longer books of the Bible in these notes, one quarter is often not enough to finish the book. It can be frustrating to cut off half way through the story. On the other hand, I am aware that some readers get more out of some books than others and six months on one book might be too long. Acts is, however, so thrilling that I am going to risk the boredom factor and carry on.

The story so far is that the young Church has begun the mission Christ gave it – to be His witnesses to the whole world, commencing in Jerusalem and moving out through the surrounding countryside to the whole of the Holy Land and to the Samaritans and to all the Gentile nations. Heroes of the faith, like Stephen and Philip, Peter and Paul, have been instrumental in pushing back the boundaries. “Ordinary” Christians too have shared their faith with friends and neighbours, business associates and travellers. Even when they have had to move to escape persecution they have borne witness to the faith of Jesus in their new homes.

Including Gentiles as part of the people of God on Paul’s first missionary journey had provoked a crisis in the Church, but this had been resolved in the Council of Jerusalem with an agreement that God’s love is all-encompassing and that it is of the very nature of the Church to welcome everybody into full membership. Having agreed this at Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch with Silas and Judas to tell Christians there the good news about the Gentile mission. Silas decides to stay on in Antioch.

### January 2<sup>nd</sup>

Acts 15 vv 36-41

New Christians need support and encouragement. So do local churches. So Paul decides to visit the places where he has been instrumental in founding new churches and his second missionary journey begins. I wonder what we think about Paul refusing to take Mark? At first sight, Paul seems a bit unchristian. Some people claim, however, that the Church makes a mistake when she is too nice to tell people that they haven’t got the talents for the jobs they want to do – the would be soloist who can’t sing, the lesson reader who won’t speak up, the

preacher who hasn't really got a message, the organiser of liturgical drama who thinks standards don't matter because *it's only going to be done in church*. If we are too nice to tell people, the jobs don't get done right, the people concerned may fail to find their true vocation and visitors to the church may think that even we don't regard what we're doing as very important. (Incidentally Mark and Paul are reconciled later on in the story!)

#### January 3<sup>rd</sup>

Acts 16 vv 1-5

Timothy's mother's family was Jewish, but had accepted Jesus as the Saviour. Paul wanted Timothy to work with him on the mission and so he was circumcised in order to be able to minister to the as yet unbelieving Jews. For Paul, it is a major principle that Gentiles do not have to be circumcised before they can become Christians. All that is required is faith. However, the mission takes precedence. It is vitally important that people are given the opportunity to get to know Jesus and matters of ceremonial or personal preference have to be set aside if they stand in people's way of hearing the Gospel.

#### January 4<sup>th</sup>

Acts 16 vv 6-10

Sometimes, when we attempt something which we believe to be good, all sorts of impediments get in the way. Maybe what we want to do is in fact good, but God has something even better for us to get on with. It was good that Paul wanted to continue his mission in Asia Minor, but God closed the doors in front of him. At last he had a vision and he saw that he had to start a mission in Europe – which was better still. He was to go to Macedonia (what we think of as northern Greece). Remember. Paul's original plan was to revisit the places he had called at before in his first missionary journey. Now he finds himself entering completely new territory. And this is my reservation about parish plans and diocesan strategies. We can come up with all sorts of good ideas about what we want to and where we to be next year or ten years from now. But doors close, our plans don't work out and we find that God has given us entirely unanticipated opportunities. Maybe it is wise to have plans for our Church, but such plans must always be subject to revision in the light of God's plan!

January 5<sup>th</sup>

Acts 16 vv 11-13

Paul's usual technique is to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath day and take the opportunity to preach there. For some reason he did not do this in Philippi, but he still went to a place where people normally met for prayer. A synagogue would have had at least ten men. All these people are women, but there seems to have been no problem about Paul speaking to them. They were open to God and to what He was doing in sending His Son Jesus Christ into the world. That is enough invitation for any Christian to share his faith.

January 6<sup>th</sup> (Epiphany)

Acts 16 vv 14&15

Lydia seems to have been an important woman. She is a trader in purple – a luxury commodity in the ancient world. She appears to have been head of her household. Most likely, she is a widow. Through God's grace (because without it faith is impossible) Lydia accepts Jesus into her life and is baptized. She is hospitable (hospitality being a particular Christian virtue) and she invites Paul to stay with her.

It is interesting that, when Lydia is baptized, so is the rest of her household. In modern times in the West, we have come to emphasise the individual. Individuals make up their own minds about whom to marry and whether to stay married. We decide individually what political opinions to hold. I decide, you decide what religion we want to practise, if any. We try not to judge other individuals and we resent it if they judge us. Parents even hesitate to inculcate particular beliefs or values in their own children.

For most of human history, however, and in many parts of the world today, the communal matters much more than the individual. People believe and do what their families expect them to do and conform to the values of the communities in which they live. Parents are expected to teach their children how to behave and children are expected to obey their parents. Rebels are not admired; they are disciplined or ostracised.

I question how far, even in the modern West, we really act and adopt beliefs purely as individuals. Most of us are hugely influenced by the culture around us and conform to its values. Christianity plays a big

part historically in the shift towards individualism. When people were converted, they acquired a new loyalty to Jesus, which transcended their loyalty to family, tribe and nation. That is one reason why Christians were persecuted.

In ancient times, individuals converting to Christianity brought their families and their servants with them, but the Church also admired wives, children and slaves who individually defied their pagan husbands, fathers or masters by becoming Christians. Later on, whole tribes were baptized when their chiefs converted. Nations were baptized when their kings were converted. This is what happened in 597AD here in Kent. Yet the Church reveres those individuals who stood fast and remained Christian when the rest of the tribe reverted to paganism under a new king.

Individual or collective? Do you have the right, is it your responsibility, to incorporate into the Church through Baptism your children, your wife, your servants, the class you teach, your employees, the people you rule over? It isn't as easy to answer as it might at first appear.

January 7<sup>th</sup>

Acts 16 vv 16-18

I don't know about you, but I often wonder what was going on in these cases of reported demon possession. I don't think we can discount the biblical view that these unfortunate people are in the grip of some evil force. Maybe we should call it mental or physical illness and treat it differently from the way it was treated then. Maybe it is something different. I have a sort of "parallel universe theory" of this, which I probably can't explain properly. What I mean is that there may be things going on (somehow related) in parallel in both the spiritual and the physical realms. That is how I read Michael's defeat of Satan in the spiritual realm (Revelation 12) and Christ's Death on the Cross in the physical realm. Anyway God is Lord of both and we use both prayer and the drugs and other physical treatments He gives us in the treatment of all kinds of disease.

What is clear is that it is appalling that people are exploiting this poor girl's troubles for their own personal gain. Where is the compassion?

Yet so often people are not treated with compassion when they are mentally or physically ill or in some other kind of trouble. Where is our humanity?

January 8<sup>th</sup>

Acts 16 vv 19-24

The poor girl's masters have got so used to profiting by her ranting that, instead of being pleased that she is cured, they have Paul and Silas punished for curing her. Apparently, in the East End of London 100 years ago, there were parents who deliberately allowed their children to die for the insurance money. They did not thank the doctors who tried to save them. Human beings can be terribly perverted. Much more subtly though, people may profit by others' misfortunes and it can be hard to give up what we enjoy in order to secure justice for the people we knowingly or unconsciously exploit.

January 9<sup>th</sup>

Acts 16 vv 19-34

Despite what they have suffered, Paul and Silas still praise God! There is an example. I'm not sure why they don't take advantage of the earthquake to escape. Perhaps it is because they are concerned for their gaoler! Anyway the gaoler realises that what Paul and Silas stand for is true and wants to join. All he has to do is to believe and he can be baptized – be born again, washed clean from his sins, receive the Holy Spirit, become a member of the Body of Christ. Note the whole household is baptized. The gaoler then exhibits Christian hospitality.

January 10<sup>th</sup>

Acts 16 vv 35-40

Paul stood on his rights as a Roman citizen. I've often wondered whether he ought to have done that or meekly turned the other cheek? I think he was probably right to do what he did. The magistrates had been entrusted with power and they had abused it, maltreating people weaker than themselves. Maybe they were friends with the possessed girl's masters. They were certainly afraid of the mob and permitted mob rule. They had let down their office by acting unjustly. I think Paul was right to use the law to punish an abuse of power on the part of officialdom – and I think we sometimes have to do the same thing! Someone who wasn't a Roman citizen couldn't have stood up to the magistrates. So it was more important that a citizen should.

### January 11<sup>th</sup>

Acts 17 vv 1-9

This visit to Thessalonica follows the pattern. Paul preaches in the synagogue. A few of the Jews believe. Far more women and Gentiles believe and the unbelieving Gentiles stir up trouble for Paul and the missionaries. The local man Jason, with whom the missionaries were staying, also falls under suspicion. If we identify with what is right, we may find ourselves having problems, but there are times when it is necessary to do the right thing, whatever the consequences.

### January 12<sup>th</sup>

Acts 17 vv 10-15

The door effectively closed in Thessalonica and the missionaries had to leave the city – though not without leaving behind a nascent Church. Paul and Silas are not, however, discouraged. They don't give up. They preach in the place to which they have had to flee – Berea. As it happens, they enjoy a much better reception there, but then their opponents from Thessalonica come after them. But this too will lead to a new kind of mission. The Holy Spirit is not defeated and neither are we, so long as we continue to work with Him.

### January 13<sup>th</sup>

Acts 17 vv 16-21

I suppose Athens saw itself as the cultural capital of the Roman Empire. There was a Jewish community. There were various schools of philosophy. There were many temples and shrines. Athens is generally regarded as the cradle of democracy. So maybe the Athenians felt quite superior! Paul, however, is shocked that, for all their culture, the Athenians are idolaters. They worship vanities, emptiness. For all their supposed superiority, their lives are meaningless. So Paul speaks to them about Jesus, the Word of God.

[Our word “logic” for reasoned discourse comes from the Greek Λογος, Logos, which is the word St John uses for Jesus, when he writes, the Word became flesh. Jesus is the Wisdom of God and the power of God. Any human wisdom which does not align itself with the divine wisdom is on the wrong track. Wisdom in Greek is Σοφία, Sophia and philosophy is the love (φιλία, philia) of wisdom. The true lover of wisdom is one who loves Jesus.]

January 14<sup>th</sup>

Acts 17 vv 22 & 23

It seems that the Athenians wanted to be quite sure. As well as setting up altars to all the gods they knew, they also made shrines to unknown gods just in case these unknown gods took offence at not being worshipped. But notice how Paul, good teacher that he is, starts with something they know. He uses their altar to the unknown God as a way in to talking about the God Who makes Himself known.

January 14<sup>th</sup>

Acts 17 vv 24&25

The common people might have believed literally the absurd stories about gods and heroes which made up the official Greek religion, but the philosophers knew better. Logic had taught them that God is a unity and that God is far above needing anything from us or acting capriciously or selfishly.

January 15<sup>th</sup>

Acts 17 vv 26&27

This is the God Who has made everything that is. So all the marvels of the universe, the very fact that anything exists at all, point to the reality of God. Paul goes further, however, than a belief in God as some sort of abstract force, the ultimate explanation for why everything is. Paul says that human beings are special. We are all “of one blood”. The destiny of individuals and nations is in God’s Hands. We are not on our own in an impersonal universe – as modern, materialistic, western culture seems to assume that we are. God holds all of us in His Hands. He is close to every one of us and it is His longing that we should reach out to Him and enter into a relationship of mutual love with God. We are born to be His children. I strongly suspect that the indifference that most people in Britain today display when it comes to joining in public worship arises from the fact that we have lost our sense that God is interested in each one of us individually and that our lives are in His Hands. People don’t bother to participate in the Church’s worship because they don’t really believe it makes any essential difference.

January 16<sup>th</sup>

Acts 17 v28

This verse is really worth pondering. Paul is drawing not on the Scriptures, but on the insight of Greek poets. God does reveal Truth outside the boundaries of established religion! He is communicating



with Athenian culture using the genuine insights that culture has to demonstrate a larger truth – that God has made Himself known in Jesus and invites all human beings into a filial relationship with Himself. The Nature of God and our relationship with Him is such that *in him we live and move and have our being*. If we share that insight, we cannot be indifferent to God.

January 17<sup>th</sup>

Acts 17 v29

Forgive me if I've made this point before in these notes. We are not likely to make graven images or statues to worship as gods. Your god, however, is what you worship, and what you worship is what you devote your life to. In that sense, most of us do make gods of gold or silver or stone. We devote our lives to material things. Instead of worshipping God, we worship the things He has made. Indeed we worship (in the sense of devoting our lives to) the things we make ourselves – money, houses, position, power. Paradoxically, lives devoted to the selfish worship of material things are wasted lives, whereas those who seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness discover that all these things are added unto them. As the psalmist puts it (Ps135 vv 15-18): *As for the images of the heathen, they are but silver and gold: the work of men's hands. They have mouths, and speak not: eyes have they, but they see not. They have ears, and yet they hear not: neither is there any breath in their mouth. They that make them are like unto them: and so are all they that put their trust in them.*

January 18<sup>th</sup>

Acts 17 vv 30&31

People ought to have recognised God from the evidence of creation. They ought to know right from wrong because we all have consciences. Logic leads us to an openness to the divine Logos. Because of original sin, however, humanity's universal rebellion against God, we have been unable to use our God-given senses and perceptions to recognise the Truth which is right in front of our eyes. So God sends Jesus into the world. The Logos is made flesh and everything changes. Once we encounter Jesus, we must repent and put our faith in Him and share that faith with the as yet unbelieving world.

January 19<sup>th</sup>

Acts 17 vv 31 & 32

Then we hit the sticking point – the resurrection. Maybe many of these philosophers would have been open to the message of a god whose reality is outside this material world. They would have gone along with the idea that God is immaterial and all-powerful. They would have accepted that human beings are bound to behave virtuously. The idea of active intervention by such a god in the affairs of this world would, however, have been repugnant to them. Miracles would have been problematic, a resurrection impossible. However, God did raise Jesus from the dead – a fact which is essential to Christian faith and Paul could not “dumb down” his message to make it more palatable to his audience. We do everything we can to express God’s Word in a way in which our hearers can understand it, but we cannot change the message!

January 20<sup>th</sup>

Acts 18 vv 1-6

Paul moves on to Corinth where he will have a lengthy and fruitful mission. There was already anti-Semitism in the ancient world and the emperor Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome. This misfortune created an opportunity. Aquila and Priscilla, Christian Jews, help to spread the Gospel in Greece. Note that Paul carries on his trade to support himself. He takes great pride in not being a financial burden to the churches, though he thinks it right that normally ministers should be paid out of the offerings of the faithful. There are many issues in funding ministry. A minister who has to do an ordinary job will have less time for his parishioners, though he may have opportunities for ministry at work. Some ministers in some churches seem to live in great style at the expense of people much poorer than themselves. In other churches, congregations expect themselves to live with all the perks of a professional lifestyle while allowing their vicars (and especially curates) to subsist in a sort of genteel poverty. Some people think that the clergy (like monks) ought to renounce all worldly wealth. Others think that, as professionals, the clergy should have similar lifestyles to doctors or teachers. If each congregation has to maintain its minister, the ministry will suffer in poor areas and where few people attend church – the very places where ministry is most needed. But people who support their own local church financially are often not keen that their offerings should be redistributed to other churches.

### January 21<sup>st</sup>

Acts 18 vv 7-17

This account of the Church at Corinth epitomises the situation in these early years. The mission starts by preaching in the synagogue. Some of the Jews and many of the Gentiles (probably largely those who had been visiting the synagogue for some time, seeking an account of God which made much more sense than pagan religion) believe. The unbelieving Jews then make trouble for the missionaries and the growing Church. The Roman authorities are largely indifferent, so long as it doesn't affect them directly.

### January 22<sup>nd</sup>

Acts 18 vv 18-23

This is classically regarded as the end of Paul's second missionary journey and the beginning of his third. He returns to Jerusalem and Antioch in Syria, the church which first commissioned him as a missionary. Note that he has not given up his membership of the Jewish community. He wants to be in Jerusalem for the Jewish Feast. Either he or his friend Aquila has his head shaved in a Nazirite vow. It is not incompatible to be a Jew and a Christian. Also note that he takes what opportunities he can to preach the faith while on his journeys. I would not say that we should try to force our beliefs on the people we meet, but neither should we let slip the opportunities that do arise to give an account of the hope that is within us.

### January 23<sup>rd</sup>

Acts 18 vv 24-28

Reading between the lines, we can see that the missions of Paul and Peter we read about in Acts were not the only missionary activity of the early church. Apollos has somehow heard about Jesus and wants to preach. But he's not got everything right. He needs Aquila and Priscilla to guide him. We can recognise people's enthusiasm and they need to be encouraged, but they also need to be guided and enthusiastic people who refuse guidance might have to be disciplined. As we noted above, everybody's gifts are to be used, but we make a mistake if we are so desperate for help or so reluctant to offend that we allow people to do things for the church whether they are either incapable or unwilling to do properly. Anyway Apollos is an effective scriptural preacher and we shall see tomorrow what might have been wrong with his doctrine of Baptism.

January 24<sup>th</sup>

Acts 19 vv 1-7

You remember that John told the crowds that he baptized with water but that the One coming after him would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire? John's Baptism signified repentance and cleansing from sin in preparation for the Kingdom of God which Jesus would bring in. Jesus commanded His disciples, the Christian Church, to proclaim the Good News to the whole world, to make disciples of all the nations and to baptize all those who desired to be disciples in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Those baptized would become the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, children of God, members of the Body of Christ. It seems that there were some groups who knew about John and knew something about Jesus, but did not understand the full implications of Christian Baptism. Paul explains more fully and lays his hands on them so that they receive the Holy Spirit. In the early Church, the laying on of hands became part of the rite of Baptism, signifying the gift of the Spirit. Much later on, this laying on of hands became separated from Baptism in the rite of Confirmation. This is a useful practical arrangement when babies are baptized and confirmation can be delayed until the child is old enough to claim the faith for himself, but really all those who are baptized ought to be confirmed at some stage. It is the completion of the rite.

January 25<sup>th</sup> (Conversion of St Paul)

Acts 19 vv 8-12

The pattern at Ephesus is pretty much the same as at Corinth. Paul was an incredibly gifted man and played a huge part in the establishment of the Christian Church.

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

January 26<sup>th</sup>

Acts 19 vv 13-20

In 1 Corinthians 11 v29, St Paul warns us that, if we eat and drink the Eucharistic bread and wine unworthily, we eat and drink our own damnation. It would be more comfortable to suppose that those who ate

and drank with faith received the Body and Blood of Christ, but that those who ate and drank unworthily merely received bread and wine. But that is not what it says. Spiritual power is not “all in the mind”. It has an objective reality. When these vagabond exorcists misused the names of Paul and Jesus, in Whom they did not believe, they did not merely fail to cast out evil; they unleashed the power of evil against themselves. When we handle holy things, the benefits are not merely in our minds. They are objectively real. If we handle holy things unworthily, we may well find that spiritual power acting against us.

And what does it mean *to eat and drink unworthily*? I should say, most importantly, that it means coming to Communion when we are not in love and charity with our neighbours.

January 27<sup>th</sup>

Acts 19 vv 21-41

There is a lot of money to be made out of religion. Look at the New Age and occult shops. Look at the shrines you find in Christianity and other religions. Look even at church and cathedral gift shops. People will pay good money for souvenirs and even better money in the hope that it will make it more likely that their prayers are answered. Well, Christian work has to be funded and churches have to be paid for. People appreciate religious art and artefacts. Spontaneously they want to make offerings to God. It is a fine line between making opportunities for people to do what they want naturally to do and exploiting their gullibility or desperation. It is a fine line between expressing your faith with a thank offering and hoping to buy God’s favour with a generous contribution. Unscrupulous people can grow rich by exploiting other people’s superstitions or even their genuinely religious impulses. They may get very agitated if more honest preachers show people the more excellent way and this is what happens at Ephesus. Some people join the riot simply because they enjoy rioting. The opponents of the Church have a weak case, but they avoid discussing it by shouting the Christians down. Eventually, the authorities manage to restore order. Incidentally, the image of Diana (or Artemis depending on whether you speak Latin or Greek) which came down from heaven was probably a meteorite and it had obviously impressed a superstitious people.

January 28<sup>th</sup>

Ephesians 20 vv 1-13

Paul revisits places where he has established churches previously and is now helped by young Christians from those churches. It must have been wonderful to see that kind of growth and it is wonderful today when we see relatively new converts or people we have known since they were children taking their share in the Church's work. It is clear that Jesus told His Church to *do this in remembrance of Him*, but sometimes it is disputed how often we should celebrate the Eucharist. I think all the evidence is that, from the earliest times, the Church broke bread every week on the day Jesus rose from the dead, the first day of the week, what we call Saturday night/Sunday morning. Jesus made Himself known in the breaking of bread at Emmaus on the very first Easter Sunday. Here we have Paul breaking bread with the rest of the Church on the first day of the week. Later on, non-Eucharistic services (which evolved into our Mattins & Evensong) were observed **in addition** to the Sunday Eucharist, but it was only a millennium and a half later that anyone seriously supposed that these could **replace** the Eucharist as the principal Sunday service. If we respect the "faith of our fathers" we will meet for the Eucharist at least every Sunday.

The experience of Eutychus demonstrates God's power working through Paul. I also find it humorous. I'm glad to know that even a preacher as great as Paul can send his congregations to sleep!

January 29<sup>th</sup>

Acts 20 vv 13-27

We see here some of the difficulties and complexities of Paul's little band's travelling arrangements. I think we can also sympathise with the mutual desire of Paul and the Ephesians to see one another, but the need to avoid getting too delayed by another visit to Ephesus. Do you ever spot someone you really want to talk to across the street when you are in a hurry to get to another appointment? That is how Paul must have felt about Ephesus. Paul knows that he is going to run into trouble in Jerusalem, but he sets his face to go there (as Jesus did) because he knows it is God's plan for his life. Paul has done his best. He has preached to Jews and Gentiles. He has preached the full gospel, not holding back to protect himself or in an effort to add numbers rather than Christians to the churches. He now has to say "Goodbye."

January 30<sup>th</sup>

Acts 20 vv 28-38

This passage is often read at ordination services. In fact the word used for the Ephesian elders or overseers who constitute Paul's audience is επισκοποι, episcopoi, which came to mean bishops. What a responsibility! The Christian congregation, each one of them, has been purchased by the Blood of Christ. My father, when he was a wages clerk, used to have to carry all the money to pay the entire workforce at the paper mill in a briefcase from the bank at Gravesend to the mill at Northfleet. He would not have been very popular if he had lost it or allowed it to be stolen. The Christian congregation is infinitely more valuable than a case full of money and it is to God we answer for them. We certainly need the prayers and support of the congregation if we are to discharge our duties! There is always the danger of division, disputes, false teaching, etc. Our task is to remain faithful and to co-operate with the Holy Spirit in presenting the Church as the pure and spotless bride to Christ her royal bridegroom.

January 31<sup>st</sup>

Acts 21 vv 1-17

So Paul is warned that trouble awaits him in Jerusalem. His companions try to dissuade him from carrying on, but he knows that it is God's plan for his life. He needs to "touch base" with the Jerusalem Church. He needs to give his testimony there. He seems to know that the crowning glory of his life will be martyrdom. So he carries on, using whatever transport is available and supported by his friends.

February 1<sup>st</sup>

Acts 21 vv 18-25

All the first Christians including the apostles were Jews and observed the Jewish religion. The Old Testament teaches that the Jews are the people of God – called to be holy because He is holy. It becomes apparent through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that God chose the Jews as part of His plan for the salvation of the whole human race. In Christ, all human beings, Gentiles as well as Jews, are invited to join the people of God, to be holy as He is holy. Jesus commissioned His apostles (and through them the whole Church) to proclaim this Good News to the whole world. So the Jerusalem apostles are delighted with Paul's success in evangelising the Gentiles, just as they are proud of the large number of Jewish converts at home in Judaea. The question is

how much of the Jewish Law (Torah) is it necessary for Christians to observe? Paul has been granted the insight that everybody's membership of the people of God depends on faith, not on obeying any law, but it is also true that a genuine faith inevitably results in a person acting lawfully. So what is the Law of God universally binding? Surely, this is the law of love? But what then of all those other commandments about sacrifice and diet and dress? The Jerusalem Church evidently believes that these are binding on Jewish Christians (but not Gentile Christians) and wants evidence that Paul himself respects them.

February 2<sup>nd</sup> (Candlemas)

Acts 21 v26

The four men and Paul took a Nazarite vow. This meant that, for a period, they would forego wine (and even grapes) and allow their hair to grow. The end of the period of the vow was marked with appropriate sacrifice. (Samson was a lifelong Nazarite.) One can imagine that such a vow was both an offering to God and an opportunity for spiritual growth. It seems appropriate that we have reached this point in the story on the day we commemorate Mary and Joseph taking the baby Jesus to the Temple and Simeon praising God because this holy child is *a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel*.

February 3<sup>rd</sup>

Acts 21 vv 27-32

Is it significant that (as in the case of Stephen) the violent opposition to Paul is provoked not by the Jews living in Jerusalem, but by visiting Jews from Gentile lands? Maybe they felt more threatened by the success of the Christian mission to the Gentiles. Anyway, Gentiles were not admitted to the court of the Temple and the suggestion that Paul has brought a Gentile into the Temple is enough to start a riot. Now, Paul had not offended their religious sensibilities by disregarding their rules and customs. He had, however, demolished the theory which lay behind the exclusion of Gentiles from the Temple. Paul knew and preached that all peoples have access to God in Jesus Christ.

February 4<sup>th</sup>

Acts 21 vv 33-40

We sometimes feel that the Jews' feeling of superiority over us Gentiles is arrogant and wrong and so it may be. The Jews are not the only ones,



however, who make distinctions between who belongs and who does not belong. In the Roman Empire there were those who, like Paul, were officially citizens and those who were not. The citizens had more privileges than those who were not. If we are honest, we have to admit that human beings generally define themselves and the communities to which they belong and implicitly or explicitly exclude others. It might be by race or manners or by the way people speak or dress. Even the jokes we tell identify us as belonging to certain social groups, but definitely not to others. One of the problems of modern Britain is that our laudable desire to exclude no-one has left us without a sense of community. If there are no boundaries, if we can't laugh at the Irish, despise homosexuals, fear the Communists or confine blacks and Jews to their ghettos, what limits are there to our community? If everybody belongs, no matter who they are, what they believe or how they behave, what common values can we hold, what common loyalties?

The message of Jesus is, of course, that everyone is a neighbour, including the despised Samaritan (or anyone else we might despise, fear or mock). There are only two sorts of people – Christians and everybody else. There are only two essential communities – the Church and the world. The common values of the Christian community (the Church) are faith and hope and love and, because of those very values, the Church is open to everybody who wants to join. The only people excluded from the fellowship of the Church are those who exclude themselves by their faithlessness, their rejection of hope and their uncharitableness.

Paradoxically, modern Britain thinks that it can only build an open society with common values by the relegation of religion from the public to the private, whereas, in fact the only fully open society based on common values is the Church of God.

February 5<sup>th</sup>

Acts 22 vv 1&2

Apart from being a great Christian, Paul is an incredibly talented human being, including among his many gifts, the ability to speak several languages. He uses these gifts to reach out to everyone, to be all things to all men. We have to use our gifts to achieve the same thing.

February 6<sup>th</sup>

Acts 22 vv 3-16

Paul's opponents in the crowd are where Paul was before he came to know Jesus. He tells them his story both to vindicate himself and, more importantly, to give them the chance to share what he has got. We all have a story to tell, a story of our faith, of what Jesus means to us. If we can relate that to other people (in both senses of the word *relate*) we may well be able to open up the way for them to get to know Jesus too.

February 7<sup>th</sup>

Acts 22 vv 17-21

Reading Luke's account of what happened the immediate aftermath of Paul's conversion in Acts and Paul's own account in Galatians, it is quite hard to work out exactly what did happen. My impression is that Paul did some preaching in Damascus and had to be evacuated pretty smartly when some of the Jews there turned on him. He then made a very quick visit to Jerusalem, where he did not make much contact with the Jerusalem Church, and then went home to Tarsus for quite a long while. In Jerusalem, he has a vision of Jesus, strengthening him, but then he argues with Jesus. Paul thinks, very reasonably, that with his experience he is just the person to preach the Gospel in Jerusalem, but Jesus tells him that his mission is to the Gentiles. We may think that a particular course of action is very reasonable. What matters, however, is to obey the will of God for our lives and for our Church.

February 8<sup>th</sup>

Acts 22 vv 22-30

More than most people, Paul knows that God is no respecter of persons. God treats everyone alike – Jew and Gentile, Roman citizen and barbarian, free man and slave, man and woman, Greek and Scythian. What God requires is that we all behave as we all are – made in His image. God is love and all human beings, made in His image, are called to love. God tells us to love Him with our whole hearts and our neighbours as ourselves. Failure to love is sin. Sin cuts us off from God, but God reaches back out to us in love through what Jesus has done for us and all we have to do, whoever we are and whatever we have done, is to repent and believe. Paul knows all this more than most, but he is quite prepared to use his advantages in society to obtain decent treatment for himself and to spread the Gospel.

February 9<sup>th</sup>

Acts 23 vv 1-5

This incident appears very odd. Ananias certainly should not have ordered the defendant to be struck. As with Jesus, the case against Paul seems to have been conducted in a very sloppy manner, the outcome being determined before the evidence had been heard, and the proceedings being little more than a cloak beneath which to perpetrate an act of injustice. Why did Paul not recognise the high priest? Some people attribute this to his supposed short-sightedness. Others think that there might have been a disagreement about who ought to be high priest. In the Old Testament, the high priesthood was a hereditary position held by the descendants of Moses' brother Aaron until their retirement. By these times, however, high priests were appointed and deposed by secular rulers and many people doubted their legitimacy. (This Ananias was assassinated at a later date!)

February 10<sup>th</sup>

Acts 23 vv 6-9

There were various sects and groupings in the Judaism of Paul's time. The ordinary people were the *people of the land* ('am ha 'aretz, אֲמֵי הָאֶרֶץ). These were not able to spend so much time studying the Law as the others and may not have been so thorough in observing the Law. These were despised by the less attractive members of the other groups. The Essenes were a pseudo-monastic community at Qumran. They give us the Dead Sea Scrolls. They had some off beat interpretations of Scripture and put a great deal of emphasis on purity and ritual washings. They foresaw a great conflict in which the forces of light would defeat the forces of darkness. It is likely that there were many Essenes living outside the monastic communities. John the Baptist may have spent time with the Essenes. The Sadducees were much as described here. They only accepted the first five books of the Bible (the Books of Moses, the Law) as authoritative. They were sceptical about the supernatural. They supplied the priesthood and were close to the Romans and the political class in general. The Pharisees were determined to follow God's Law to the letter. They studied it and endeavoured to carry out all its commandments. They were more open to the authoritative status of the other two divisions of the Old

Testament (the Prophets and the Writings<sup>1</sup>) and to the possibility of spiritual beings and resurrection from the dead. Essenes and Sadducees disappeared when the Romans put down the Jewish Revolt c20 years after the events we are studying, but the Pharisees became the rabbis and the founders of the Jewish faith as we know it today. Paul was a Pharisee.

#### February 11<sup>th</sup>

Acts 23 vv 10 & 11

Paul is comforted by Jesus. It is vital that, in all the things which press in on us, we make time to commune with Jesus. So many things demand our attention. We can feel so weighed under, certainly too busy to pray, but prayer is the necessary thing. It is only if we commune with Jesus that we can cope with the rest. He told Martha that one thing was needful and it was Mary who had chosen that good part.

#### February 12<sup>th</sup>

Acts 23 vv 12-22

Paul's opponents were really determined to get rid of him. It is quite an adventure story with this plot and the way that it is thwarted. The underlying message is that God is in control and looking after us, no matter what wicked people may plan.

#### February 13<sup>th</sup>

Acts 23 vv 23-35

The story of Paul's martyrdom is told as a parallel with the story of the Death of Jesus. The people who should have been prepared to receive his message, the Jews, reject him and try to destroy him. The Romans, who would have been relatively ignorant of the ways of God, try to protect him on the grounds of straightforward justice, but circumstances conspire so that the Romans eventually give the Jews what they want. It is an outworking of the Christmas Gospel, John 1. *He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:*

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<sup>1</sup> The Old Testament consists of three sections. The first five books are the Law or Torah (טורה). Joshua-II Kings (except Ruth), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve minor prophets make up the Prophets (נביאים). All the other OT books are the writings (כתובים).

#### February 14<sup>th</sup>

Acts 24 vv 1-9

Felix intends to give Paul a fair trial. After all, he is a Roman citizen. So he keeps him in the fortress until his accusers can come and present their case. They hire a professional orator to make it sound better and he manages, at the same time, to lay on the flattery and apologise for bothering Felix. The implication is that Paul is a little local difficulty with whom they would have dealt themselves if Lysias had not interfered. They are, of course, completely loyal to Rome! An echo of *We have no king but Caesar* at the trial of Jesus when they thoughtlessly made nothing of the universal sovereignty of God!

#### February 15<sup>th</sup>

Acts 24 vv 10-23

Paul simply answers with the truth. He has done nothing to breach the peace at Jerusalem, at least not until he is already a prisoner and admits to a belief calculated to divide his opponents. His opponents' real objection is not some offence they think he has committed in the last couple of weeks. Their problem is his successful mission preaching Jesus to the Gentiles, but that would not be something Felix would be likely to worry about nor, at this stage, to come into conflict with Roman Law. It is something we see in politics today and in disputes in churches and other places. People can't pin on the opposition what really narks them. So they attack them over something else. For example, you can't say that the leader of the opposition has no right to propose more popular policies than the prime minister's, but you might try to discredit him if, for example, you could prove he took drugs while at university.

#### February 16<sup>th</sup>

Acts 24 vv 24-27

Felix doesn't want to harm Paul, but he is afraid to let him go because of the Jews. We then find mixed motives. He rather hopes that someone might give him a bribe to release Paul, but he is also taken with Paul's preaching and thinks there might be something in it. Human motives are seldom entirely pure. When I was a curate, my vicar said it was unwise (and perhaps uncharitable) to ask questions like *Is this person offering to help with the youth club because he really cares about the youth or because he wants to look good or because he really doesn't know what else to get up to on a Saturday night?*

February 17<sup>th</sup>

Acts 25 vv 1-5

The Jews, frustrated by their inability to have Paul condemned by the Roman legal system, try again to get their hands on him themselves and kill him. Again, the Romans are too smart for them, protect Paul and insist on due legal process. As with Jesus, there will be no formal conviction for any actual wrong-doing because Paul is innocent. St Peter teaches us that it is a fine thing to bear deserved suffering patiently, but Christians often have to bear undeserved suffering and take that in the same way (1 Peter 2 v19 ff).

February 18<sup>th</sup>

Acts 25 vv 6-12

Paul knows that he is innocent of any breach of the criminal law – Jewish or Roman. He also knows that he has no chance of a fair trial in Jerusalem. So he asserts his right as a Roman citizen to be tried in Rome. We never hear that this trial took place, but his appeal brought Paul to Rome, the capital of the empire and gave him the opportunity to play his part in the building of the Church there. Paul, like Peter, would be martyred in Rome. As Tertullian said, the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church. So the martyrdom of two apostles in Rome itself was a major factor in the eventual conversion of the Roman empire and the establishment of Christianity from Britain to Persia, from Germany to North Africa.

February 19<sup>th</sup>

Acts 25 vv 13-27

The Holy Land had been part of the Roman Empire since long before Jesus was born, but they kept changing the way it was administered and various members of the Herod family at various times ruled various parts of the Holy Land under the authority of Rome. Note again the parallels with the trial of Jesus. The Roman governor does not know what to do with the prisoner. He'll upset the Jews if he lets him go free. It will be an injustice if he is convicted. Paul has complicated the situation even more for Festus by appealing to Rome. How can you commit a prisoner for trial unless you have some clear charges and at least some evidence against him? So, just as in the case of Jesus, the Roman governor involved a member of the Herod family who might be expected to understand a bit more about the Jewish situation.

February 20<sup>th</sup>

Acts 26 vv 1-18

Paul again tells his story. He was always a fervent Jew but he now recognises that the Jewish faith necessarily leads to the Christian faith. All the law and the prophets point to Jesus. There is nothing unreasonable in the belief that the God of the Old Testament would raise His Son from the dead and, with Him, all those who have put their faith in Him. This is the third telling of the story of Paul's conversion in Acts. In the same way the story of Peter's vision of a sheet descending from heaven indicating that God welcomes Gentiles as His people is also told three times.

It is worth pondering the Words of Jesus as He explains to Paul the purpose of Christian mission: *to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of their sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.* This is why we believe and why we have to welcome other people into our Church.

February 21<sup>st</sup>

Acts 26 v19

Paul obeyed the vision. Now we have to be careful of visions. The mentally ill claim visions and voices telling them to do all sorts of things. We sane people can sometimes persuade ourselves that God is telling us to do what we really want to do ourselves or, perversely, that He is telling us to what we would really hate. God does guide us sometimes as to what we ought to do. We can test the vision by more prayer and thought, by measuring what we believe God wants us to do against what He has already revealed in Scripture and the life of the Church through the ages, and by sharing our thoughts with trusted Christian friends including the ministers of our churches. If we are sure God is calling us, we have to follow Paul's example.

February 22<sup>nd</sup>

Acts 26 vv 20-22

I like it that Paul says he witnesses to both small and great. He is not afraid to speak of Jesus to kings and governors. Neither does he think it beneath him to have fellowship with slaves. Christ died for every human being and the ministry of His Church is there for everyone, neither fawning on the rich nor condescending to the poor.

February 23<sup>rd</sup>

Acts 26 vv 23-26

*Much learning doth make thee mad.*

You can't win. Many people write off Christianity as childish. They are too clever and sophisticated to believe in a God Who answers prayer, an afterlife and a last judgment, One Who both creates heaven and earth and becomes a child like me, One Who is the source of all life and yet helplessly dies a shameful death.

So you engage all their questions and doubts. You point to the deep wisdom underlying Christian belief: the Bible, learned tomes written, great sermons and lectures. You try to discuss the issues they raise with sophistication and subtlety and they still reject you. If minds are open, there is in Christ sufficient to satisfy every appetite for wisdom, but if minds are closed in makes no difference what you say or how you say it.

February 24<sup>th</sup>

Acts 26 vv 27 & 28

*Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.*

Aren't they the saddest and most frustrating words? Do you have friends who seem so close to becoming Christians, but never quite take the step? The argument for faith is compelling. Jesus is incredibly attractive. The promised blessings are phenomenal. God is rightly described as *mysterium tremens et fascinans* – a tremendous and fascinating mystery. Some people listen attentively to you when you speak about your faith. They seem interested. They seem to agree with the things you say. They are well-disposed towards the Church. But they will not or cannot make that commitment. Maybe they feel there is just too much to give up. I suppose you can only go on praying for them.

February 25<sup>th</sup>

Acts 26 vv 29-32

Agrippa is almost convinced that Paul is right about faith in God. Festus thinks Paul is some sort of religious odd ball, but they both know that he has done nothing contrary to the law. However, Paul has created a situation by appealing to Rome and to Rome he must go. This seems to have been Paul's plan and Jesus'. It certainly worked out to the benefit of the Church that he went to Rome, albeit as a prisoner.



### February 26<sup>th</sup>

Acts 27 vv 1-6

Paul is sent to Rome under the guard of the centurion Julius. Julius treats him courteously. Paul is a Roman citizen and well behaved and has no intention of escaping. He is allowed to meet with friends when they put into port. One of the reasons for emphasising all these points in the story could be because one of the reasons for writing Acts may have been to show the Romans that Christianity was no threat. Christians were law-abiding people. They had generally been treated well (or ignored) by the Roman authorities and there was no need to persecute them now at Luke's time of writing.

It is interesting to see how Paul the prisoner is taken on ordinary merchant ships, the centurion engaging passages for them – not on some special official military or prison vessel.

### February 27<sup>th</sup>

Acts 27 vv 7-13

Paul really is the hero of the latter part of Acts. Not only is he a bold and effective preacher and a learned scholar, but here he is giving advice about the wisdom of sailing in certain conditions. As we shall see, he turns out to be right. Maybe God had somehow warned him what would happen or maybe it was simply that his astute mind had picked up a bit about sailing in all the travelling he had done on his missionary journeys. It isn't to say that the ship's captain was any less aware than Paul of what the weather might do, but he had a schedule to keep and the need for speed perhaps clouded his judgment.

### February 28<sup>th</sup>

Acts 27 vv 14-26

Some classical scholars say that this is the finest account of a storm at sea and a shipwreck to be found in ancient literature. It turns out that Paul was right about the probability of rough winds. You can imagine how frightening it must have been in the frail craft of those days, sails and oars useless, the hull shipping water and the woodwork coming loose, too dark even to see the stars to navigate by. The sailors do all they can, but it is Paul who rallies the spirits of everyone on board. He is a man of faith. He communes with Jesus and receives the assurance that they will all be kept safe. Paul has to get to Caesar and all his shipmates will be protected with him.

### March 1<sup>st</sup>

Acts 27 vv 27-36

They are approaching Malta. They put out sea anchors to make sure they are not thrown on to the rocks. It seems extraordinary that the sailors think of abandoning the passengers on the sinking ship, but it is again Paul who discerns what is happening and takes the appropriate action. It is Paul who encourages them to eat. Notice he says grace, breaks the bread and generally acts as head of the table. Paul's behaviour must have had an enormously calming effect in all the chaos of the storm and the impending shipwreck. This is the sort of leadership we need and note too that it is almost, if not quite, a Eucharistic leadership. He took the bread, gave thanks and broke it. The crucified and risen Christ is with us and promises us that we shall be with Him in all eternity.

### March 2<sup>nd</sup>

Acts 27 vv 37-44

So the ship is wrecked, but everyone gets ashore either by swimming or by clinging to the wreckage. Look at the ruthlessness, however, of the soldiers who would rather kill the prisoners than risk their escape! Fortunately, all the prisoners are saved because Julius wants to protect Paul. But human beings are capable of terrible acts of inhumanity. The human race needs a Saviour and it is the Church's job to tell the human race about Him.

### March 3<sup>rd</sup>

Acts 28 vv 1-6

The scene is morning. 276 wet, cold, battered and frightened people have made it to the shore. The thing is to get warm and eat a hot meal. So they need a fire. The "barbarous" people (i.e. not civilised Greeks or Romans or even Jews) do the humane thing and help the shipwreck victims. Amazingly Paul is still working hard, caring for other people. A snake bites him and he shakes it off without being harmed by it. The superstitious people first think that he must be very wicked because the snake bit him. Then they think he is a god because he isn't harmed. They are wrong on both counts. Paul is working with the risen Christ. (See Mark 16 vv 14-20, which was probably not originally part of Mark's Gospel, but does describe the experience of the early Church.)

#### March 4<sup>th</sup>

Acts 28 vv 7-10

As in some other places on his missionary journeys, Paul got on well with the Roman official in charge. He performed a healing and then others too came for healing. Paul and the rest of them were very well treated on Malta and eventually took another ship. The Church is very strong on Malta right down to the present day. Notice the use of “we” by the narrator. The person who wrote this story (probably Luke) was actually there!

#### March 5<sup>th</sup>

Acts 28 vv 11-15

Although Paul has never been to Italy, there are already communities of Christians there – presumably planted by other missionaries. They have heard of Paul and are pleased to welcome him. The centurion is still evidently happy for Paul to see his friends, even though Paul is still a prisoner. The Church is a worldwide fellowship and hospitality to visiting Christians was always a Christian virtue. Last Summer the people of Canterbury were asked to help out with warm clothing for some of the bishops and their families who had come to the Lambeth Conference from much warmer and poorer climes than this one. I understand they rallied round just as delegations from England to our link dioceses overseas are often overwhelmed by the welcome they receive.

#### March 6<sup>th</sup>

Acts 28 vv 16-29

It seems that Paul was allowed considerable freedom as a prisoner in Rome. It looks as if he was kept under a fairly loose house arrest and certainly he was allowed to receive visitors. The encounter with the Jewish community in Rome sums up the early Church’s relationship with the Jews. They first attempt to share the Good News of Jesus. Some Jews believe, but a majority do not. The Good News is then proclaimed to the Gentiles. Such was God’s plan, that Jew and Gentile alike would come to Him through faith in Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament, the Jews are chosen and prepared for the Birth of the Messiah. When He comes, and only when He comes, the full meaning of the Law and the Prophets is made manifest. Jesus fulfils everything they say by what He is, by what He says and by what He does. The Good News entrusted to the Jews is now unfettered and available to the

whole of Creation. We can all receive it (or rather Him) and all we who receive are commissioned to pass it on until the whole world has heard the Word of God and had the opportunity to share in the life He comes to bring.

#### March 7<sup>th</sup>

Acts 28 vv 30&31

What happens now? Some people think that Paul managed the trip to Spain he was planning during these two years. More likely, he simply stayed at Rome, taking the opportunities he could to preach the Word of God. Maybe he was eventually tried before Caesar. It is surely likely that he had some opportunity to meet Caesar as Jesus told him that this was the reason for his going to Rome. The Bible does not tell us what happened to Paul, but there is a very strong tradition that he was martyred about the same time as Peter – in the persecution which followed the Emperor Nero blaming the Christians for the Great Fire of Rome which he had himself caused. Paul and Peter are both believed to be buried in Rome and of course Rome came to be a major Christian centre, though this is not the place to discuss the rival claims of Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism. What matters is to have faith in Jesus and to live by that faith.

#### March 8<sup>th</sup>

Psalms 91

A year ago we were studying Psalms and came to end of the quarter at Ps 90. So I thought we'd look at a few more psalms in the three weeks left to us this quarter. I have a special affection for Psalms 90-100 because we studied them at college in our elementary Hebrew class.

Psalms 91 is a great psalm of confidence in God. We can always trust Him. He is always present to look after us and to hear our prayers. We are not to abuse His trust, however. When Jesus is tempted for forty days in the wilderness, the devil tempts Jesus with vv 11&12 of this psalm, trying to persuade Him to jump off the pinnacle of the Temple. Jesus says we must not put God to the test. We trust Him in good and ill. We pray to God and we trust Him for the outcome.

### March 9<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 92

This too is a psalm of trust in God. The psalmist knows that God looks after the righteous person. If we follow the Maker's instructions, the world works. If we don't walk in the ways of God, we lose our way and stumble. The righteous person doesn't necessarily have it easy. He may face a martyr's death, but he knows that God is always with him and he need not be afraid.

### March 10<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 93

Are we sufficiently awed by the world we live in? We are so used to its marvels that we take them for granted – the night sky, mountains and rivers, the sunshine, the power of the storm, the way things grow, the love of human beings. To some extent we are insulated from the wonders of nature by the wonders of human technology which God has wonderfully enabled human beings to create. Yet we can pause, we ought to pause, and reflect on the universe in which we live and the infinite greatness of the God Who created it.

### March 11<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 94

It is the same Lord Who said *Let there be light*, Who also decreed  $E=mc^2$ , Who also commanded *Thou shalt not steal* and *Thou shalt do no murder*. God made everything: the material universe with its scientific laws discovered by observation and measurement; the moral universe with its precepts recognised by conscience, debated by moral philosophers, and revealed in religion; and the spiritual realm of angels and archangels, of human spirits and souls. There is nothing outside God, nothing not created by Him, nothing not observed by Him, nothing not of interest to Him. So we can be of confident as justice as we are of gravity.

### March 12<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 95

This used to be a psalm very well known to Anglicans. In the old prayer book, it was appointed for Mattins every day except Easter Day. You can see why a congregation would want to encourage one another to come into the presence of God and to rejoice in Him. You can see why a congregation would marvel at the splendour of the world God has made and how that would make them want to praise Him. It is not

difficult to exult in the thought that we are God's people and He is our God. When we think of the greatness of God, it ought naturally to follow that we open our hearts to receive His Word and that we should be aware of the consequences of disobeying. Mattins will continue after Ps95 with more psalms, readings from the Old and New Testament and canticles, creeds and prayers, which are either scriptural or based on Scripture. Worship implies an openness to the Word of God, a recognition of judgment to come and a celebration of His mercy and loving-kindness.

March 13<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 96

This is another splendid exultation in the greatness of God. The psalm celebrates God for Who He is and for what He has done both in creation and redemption. It invites the whole creation – the seas, the fields and the forests – to join in with such sentient creatures as human beings and angels in praising God.

*We praise you for your glory.*

Verse 5 of the psalm contains a pun. The gods (Elohim, אֱלֹהִים) of the heathen are vanity (Elilim, אֱלִילִים): it is the LORD who made the heavens. Most people waste their lives on what is ultimately profitless – things like wealth and power. Nothing is worth living for except the LORD Who made Heaven and earth.

March 14<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 97

It is good news that God is King. We need justice. So it is good to know that the One in charge is the just God. Those who reject God ought indeed to fear. Those who love God ought indeed to be confident. They are free to reject what ever is evil. They never need think that the end justifies the means or that they have to live with the less than ideal for the time being. God is in charge and the time to trust Him is now.

March 15<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 98

At Prayer Book Evensong, Psalm 98 is an alternative to the Magnificat, though, these days, not a lot of people know that. In the Magnificat

Mary celebrates the fact that she is to be the bearer of the Eternal Word and that, through Him, God will bring justice to the earth. This psalm too invites the whole world to join in celebrating the justice which God is bringing with His Kingdom. In the Old Testament, it is first and foremost a celebration for God's people Israel, but it flows out to encompass all nations. In the New Testament, we might think first and foremost of God's deliverance of His Church, but it is a salvation on offer to the whole world. Even nature joins in and it becomes apparent in the New Testament that God's redemption encompasses not merely humanity, but the whole created order. The psalm is full of joy and seeks to share that joy with the whole world.

March 16<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 99

We are to praise God as King – as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In the Old Testament, God is the King of Israel and He rules with justice. The weak are protected, the wicked punished. The human king on the throne of David in Jerusalem reigns as God's viceroy. It is his duty to rule in accordance with God's Justice. All of them, of course, fail, but there is a new king, the Messiah, Son of David, Jesus, Who is fully God, at One with the Father, and everything a human being should be. We worship Jesus as our King and, indeed, also as our priest, prophet and intercessor, all the tasks epitomised, attempted and ultimately failed by Moses, Aaron, Samuel and all the rest.

March 17<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 100

You may know this psalm as the *Jubilate Deo*, also used in Prayer Book Mattins (as an alternative to the Benedictus). It is very like the opening of Ps 95, with its exhortations to come into the presence of God and its exultation that we are His people and can absolutely depend on His mercy and truth. Incidentally, in v2, some of you may have *he hath made us and not we ourselves* while others may have *he hath made us and we are his*. It depends whether you read לוֹא or לוֹ in the original Hebrew. Either would sound like *Lo*. The first means *not* and the second means *His*. *His* would seem to make more sense, but then where did *not* come from?

March 18<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 101

Do you mix with “unsavoury” characters? If you do, there are two risks. The worse one is probably the risk of being corrupted yourself. That is why you worry when your children mix with the “wrong” sort or get into “bad” company. The other danger is of course that, if you mix with “unsavoury” characters, you might be lied to, cheated, robbed, beaten up or worse. So we can understand why the psalmist thinks it is wise and virtuous not to mix with the ungodly. On the other hand, of course, Jesus mixes with publicans and sinners. They might be errant children of God, but they are still children of God. They are to won back to their loving heavenly Father by the love of His Son (or , since His ascension into Heaven, by the love of the Body of His Son, the Christian Church). It takes quite a lot of wisdom to see how to relate the understandable concerns of the psalmist and the example of Jesus.

March 19<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 102

Some Christians give the impression that good people need never expect to experience problems. Maybe they go so far as to blame any problems you have to face on lack of faith on your part. It therefore becomes impossible to complain to God about how wretched you are. Even to acknowledge that you have a problem is a denial of faith. This is not the biblical way. God’s people may find themselves in deep despair and, just as in the happy times, they ought always to pray honestly and truthfully. At the other extreme, some people do not see God as having much to do with every day life and so they don’t pray for help to get through their problems. And they too are wrong. We ought to pray honestly and truthfully no matter what, sharing everything with God. This psalmist’s lament is at least in part occasioned by the miserable state of Jerusalem in his day and we might feel the same about the miserable state of the Church in ours. We live in a country in which people are better off than they have ever been and they are so busy getting and spending that they cannot even be bothered to worship the God Who gives them everything they have. You may, however, recognise the way the last few verses are taken up in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Heaven and earth will pass away, but God’s Word will remain for ever, Jesus and the people God has given Him.



March 20<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 103

This psalm is sometimes used at funerals. It contrasts the frailty of our flesh, which withers and dies like the flower of the field, with the eternity of God's merciful goodness. It speaks of God's unfailing faithfulness to His people and His preparedness to forgive utterly all our sins. All we have to do is to repent and believe and God gives us the gift of eternal life.

March 21<sup>st</sup>

Psalm 104

If you consider the Universe and all its marvels, you might also consider that it must have been made by someone, a someone infinitely more marvellous than the Universe he has made. You might well feel awed by that someone and wish to praise him. If you left it at that, however, you would not be a Christian, nor a Jew, nor a Moslem, nor any kind of religious person at all. The God we believe in is not merely some incredibly skilful mechanic who has constructed the mechanism of the Universe and set it up to run. God is intimately connected with the Universe He has made. *The lions roaring after their prey: do seek their meat from God.* Nothing happens outside of the providence and love of God. Nothing exists without His sustaining power. God upholds, knows about and cares about everything. Most of all He cares about human beings.

*The winds and waves obey him, by him the birds are fed;  
Much more to us his children, he gives our daily bread.*

So we give thanks as well as praise. And we pray about everything. And we seek to conform every detail of our lives to His Will for us and confess it as sin when we fail to do so. And we have the sure and certain hope that the life we enjoy in Him now is but a foretaste of the life we shall enjoy in Him in all eternity.

March 22<sup>nd</sup>

Psalm 105

God is in charge. This psalm takes us through several centuries of Israelite history, but the point is that things have not happened by chance. When things seem to have happened by chance, in fact God's Hand was behind everything, guiding the people of Israel and defending them. Likewise, when people have done wrong and disobeyed God,

even when they have deliberately set out to thwart His Will, nevertheless God has been guiding events to the fulfilment He always intended, the redemption of His people. This was not because the Israelites were a great nation. It was not because they were a particular deserving nation. God did all this simply because He promised that He would.

In the same way, God is looking after us as individuals. He is looking after His Church. He is looking after His world. Chance cannot prevent the coming of His Kingdom. Neither can the deliberate endeavours of wicked people. He invites us to cooperate with Him and there are consequences for us if, with our own free will, we reject Him, but we cannot thwart His ultimate purpose. And God's Will to give us the Kingdom is not because we are such wonderful people that we deserve it. It will happen because He loves us and He has promised us.

March 23<sup>rd</sup>

Psalm 106

Can we, then, rely on God to help us? The psalmist recognises that he (and perhaps the whole nation) are in trouble. He knows that God can put things right, but can he expect God to put things right? He knows that things have gone so badly wrong because he (and perhaps other people) have not followed the ways of God. God's perfect Law of love is the only way to live if we want the world created by the love of God to run right. In other words, the psalmist knows that his troubles and those of his people are their own fault. So can they ask God to help them and is He likely to listen to their prayers if they do? The answer is to look back through history. Time after time, especially in times of material prosperity, people have forgotten about God and disregarded His laws. The result has always been disaster. But God has never given up on His people. He has always remembered His covenant, His promise. He has never stopped loving and, as soon as His people have repented, He has saved them. The message is still as true today. If only the nations would turn to God, they would find in Him their peace.

March 24<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 107

I was once asked for this psalm at a funeral and the family were grateful that I allowed them to have all of it when, too often, clergy think that

everything has to be shortened and simplified because people haven't the patience or the intelligence to take it all in. How patronising! People miss out if we always cut things short!

This is quite a popular psalm – especially the bit about *they that go down to the sea in ships: and occupy their business in great waters*. It is a majestic psalm and the message is very straightforward. God is infinitely great. Everything we see in the world around us moves us to praise. This is the God Who created Heaven and earth, Who is also the fount of Justice and Mercy. He is the One Who says that  $E=mc^2$  and *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*. So things happen in the world and happen to us according to how far we conform our conduct to His nature. It is as pointless to think you can profit by dishonesty or violence as it is to think that you can make a river flow uphill. If we go against God (sin), things go awry. God upholds everything that is. He holds our lives in His Hands. If we reject His Love, things go wrong, but, when we repent and accept the love He offers, we are restored to life.

March 25<sup>th</sup> (The Annunciation)

Psalm 108

We praise God for His infinite greatness. We trust Him for eternal life because His mercy is greater than the heavens. Spiritual values are even more wonderful and more enduring than the wonders of the material Universe. We trust God for victory over evil and we pray to Him, *Thy Will be done*, because it certainly is and will be and we want to be part of it.

*We beseech thee, O Lord, pour thy grace into our hearts; that, as we have known the incarnation of thy Son Jesus Christ by the message of an angel, so by his cross and passion we may be brought unto the glory of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

March 26<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 109

This is a difficult psalm. In fact the Alternative Service Book of 1980 suggested leaving it out of our worship altogether. The psalmist longs for deliverance for the innocent and for the poor and trusts God to bring this about. So far, so good, but then there is all this material cursing the unjust oppressor. We know that the oppressed victim ought to forgive.

We may know that the victim cannot himself know peace until he is able to forgive the oppressor. But we mustn't move to forgiveness too lightly or too quickly. St Peter quotes this psalm shortly after the Ascension, indicating that what happened to Judas Iscariot was only what he deserved. And that is the point. Justice demands that people get what they deserve. Victims of crime feel that they have been treated unjustly if the police do not bother to catch the criminals or they get off on a technicality or the courts pass a light sentence which seems disproportionate to the seriousness of the crime. Imagine telling someone who had lost his family in the concentration camps that he has to forgive the Nazis. Talk of forgiveness, mercy even, can be too easy and appear not to be taking seriously the crime or injustice perpetrated. It can seem as if the sufferings of the victim are just not being taken seriously. Christian forgiveness has to take with full seriousness the injustice committed against the victim. It acknowledges that the victim ought not to be expected to say that the crime does not matter or to let off the perpetrator. It recognises that forgiveness of serious wrongdoing involves a major sacrifice on the part of the victim, but that that sacrifice is worthwhile because it offers a second chance not only to the perpetrator, but also to the victim.

#### March 27<sup>th</sup>

#### Psalm 110

This psalm is used of Jesus in the New Testament. It proclaims that He is King, a much greater King than David or any of the others who followed David on the throne in Jerusalem. It proclaims that Jesus is our high priest. Melchisedech was king and priest in Jerusalem long before David and long before even Aaron, the brother of Moses and first high priest of Israel. Going back so far is a way of indicating Jesus' primacy over these great figures in Israel's history and perhaps is a reminder that God's plan encompasses the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Melchisedech was a Gentile! Jesus is everything that it means to be King and High Priest – the One Who rules over us, Who protects us, and Whose commandments guide us, the One Who has access to the Father, Who opens the way to the Father for all who are baptized in Him, the One Who mediates God's blessings to the human race. Sing Psalm 110 as a hymn of praise to Jesus.

March 28<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 111

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.*

Why should this be? For a start, we may not be comfortable with the idea of *the fear of the LORD*. Do you fear your loving, heavenly Father? Maybe words like *awe* or even *respect* are better than *fear*. Nevertheless, I think there is a danger in losing altogether the concept of *the fear of the LORD*. When we modernised the Prayer Book, we were accused of substituting God All Mitey for God Almighty. Since then, congregations have melted away as people have felt that God does not really matter and nothing is going to happen to them if they take no notice of Him. That explains why so many people's lives seem devoid of meaning and why our world is falling apart. We shall only learn the full truth, of course, when we see Him face to face and then it will be too late.

The wise man prospers because he lives by the precepts of God. He builds his house on a rock because he lives his life with the grain of the Universe. He obeys the Maker's instructions. God made the world by His wisdom. That is why the world is as the psalmist finds it and the reason for his feeling moved to praise the One Who created and sustains everything, the One Who cares intimately about the fate of individuals, communities and nations.

The wisdom of God is Jesus and the wise man is the person who is baptized into Christ and walks with Him through this world towards our eternal home.

March 29<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 112

*Blessed is the man that feareth the LORD.*

We have it again that it is good to be God-fearing. The God-fearing person lives wisely. He delights in the commandments of God. If only we understood, we should not resent having to follow God's Law. The things we have to do – love, worship, sharing, witnessing – are good things which bring us joy. *If you love me*, says Jesus, *keep my commandments*. Conversely, the things which are forbidden – hatred, indifference, selfishness, violence, dishonesty – only bring misery to us and to other people, whatever Satan and the secular world try to tell you

to the contrary. Jesus is the Word of God and, living in Him, we live in accordance with God's Word. That is why St Augustine can say, *Love God and do as you like*. If you love God, what you like to do is to live in accordance with His commandments, because His commandments make you a Christ-like person, filled with an abundance of joy and a blessing to other people.

March 30<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 113

*From the rising of the sun to the going down of the same.*

Does this mean from dawn till dusk or from east to west? It doesn't really matter which it means; the LORD's Name is to be praised all day (and all night) and all over the world (indeed throughout the Universe and in Heaven as well as in this material realm). The LORD is unimaginably great and our natural response to His greatness is praise. We really enjoy singing fine hymns of praise. One of the oldest Christian hymns is *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, the hymn we quite often (and probably ought always {except in Advent and Lent} to) sing at Holy Communion. It contains the line *We praise you for your glory* – a sentence whose implications are well worth pondering, though I, personally, think that the modern translation of the *Gloria* is one of those weak pieces of liturgical writing which has encouraged the substitution of God All Mitey for God Almighty. I believe that the old translation conveys in its rhythm much more of the majesty we are striving so desperately to express.

*We praise thee, we bless thee, we worship thee, we glorify thee, we give thanks to thee for thy great glory.*

Anyway, the point of the psalm is that the sheer gloriousness of God manifests itself in that He cares for the very humblest of us. As the glorious angels sang to the humble shepherds, *Glory be to God on high*, followed inevitably by, *peace, goodwill towards men*. It is of the very nature of God that the Word is made flesh and dwells among us.

March 31<sup>st</sup>

Psalm 114

We finish on a psalm about the Exodus. God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt. He brought them through the waters of the Red Sea and the River Jordan. He brought them through the desert and led them to Mount Sinai, where they received His Torah. He provided for all

their needs for food and water and clothing in the wilderness. He brought them into the Promised Land. Not unexpectedly, this psalm is used at Passover, the annual commemoration of the time when God rescued His people from Egypt, the yearly expression of the unity of the Jewish people and their covenantal relationship with God. It is a time of celebration and thanksgiving.

Holy Communion is the Christian Passover. Indeed the Last Supper was a Passover meal. Every Sunday, we commemorate the event of our deliverance and celebrate our unity with all Christians everywhere and our covenantal relationship with God. The word Eucharist (Ευχαριστία) means thanksgiving. May our weekly meetings be times of celebration and thanksgiving so that we may be richly blessed as the people of God in Britain in the twenty first century!

*God be merciful unto us, and bless us: and shew us the light of his  
countenance, and be merciful unto us;  
That thy way may be known upon earth: thy saving health among all  
nations. (Psalm 67 vv 1&2).*

