

The Acts
Of
The Apostles

Bible Notes
January - December
2021

January 1st (Circumcision & Naming of Jesus)

Acts 1 vv 1-11

ALMIGHTY God, who madest thy blessed Son to be circumcised, and obedient to the law for man; Grant us the true Circumcision of the Spirit; that, our hearts, and all our members, being mortified from all worldly and carnal lusts, we may in all things obey thy blessed will; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

Happy New Year! I don't usually make much of New Year. It is after all just an arbitrary date on the calendar. It's not like Christmas or Easter or Remembrance Sunday in that it marks something very important which we should never forget. Because it is the eighth day of Christmas, it is (though not member people remember this) the day on which the baby Jesus was circumcised and formally received that holy Name which is above all other names. So there's a reason to come to Church New Year's Day if you're not too tired from partying all night! This year, however, we are all hoping that the New Year will bring relief from the pandemic which has so much dominated 2020. We want a fresh start, a new beginning. And, of course, we have that in Christ. Our collect reflects what the Bible teaches about new hope in Christ, new life in Him. As we come to Him in repentance for our sins and in faith, our sins are washed away. We make that new beginning. Our old human nature is mortified with Christ. We rise with Him in glory. What matters is not outward signs of belonging to the people of God like circumcision in OT times or even in these NT times the outward of appearance of repentance and faith. What matters is what we pray for in the collect, a new beginning, a transformation, to receive God's grace to live the risen life of Christ – no longer controlled by what S Paul calls the lusts of the flesh, but led in all things by the Holy Spirit – a new creation. *Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.* (II Corinthians 5¹⁷).

In St Luke's Gospel, he tells the story of the way in which God renews the whole world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke continues that story, relating how the Church, in accordance with Christ's commandment, in the power of His Spirit, began the task of turning the world upside down by the power of the Gospel.

Psalm 109 is a difficult psalm. It is often left out or drastically pruned when it comes round to be read as part of our collective worship. I think it is a mistake to do so. The whole of Scripture is the Word of God, even the parts we find uncongenial. We need to be challenged as well as affirmed by our reading. Psalm 109 is a bitter denunciation of people who have badly betrayed the trust and love of the psalmist and a prayer that they will receive the punishment which they richly deserve. It is no use pretending that we do not experience emotions like these in similar circumstances and it is far better to admit to God and ourselves how we feel than to pretend otherwise. We get nowhere by being dishonest with ourselves or with God. I mention all this because Peter is quoting Psalm 109 in verse 20 of our passage and applying it to Judas. Judas did betray Jesus. He did so with a kiss. In betraying Jesus, he also betrayed the other eleven apostles and all the things they had experienced together. It is perfectly understandable that Peter and the others were very hurt and felt that he deserved what happened to him.

Peter says that the number must be made up again to twelve. It is significant in the Bible that there were twelve tribes of Israel and twelve apostles. The twelfth had to be a witness of the three years from our Lord's Baptism by John up to the Crucifixion and, most importantly of all, a witness to the Resurrection. Millions of people have subsequently believed although we have not seen. Through their testimony, we have received the blessings and promises which Jesus brought from the Father and with which He endowed first the apostles and then, through them, the whole Church, and the commission He gave them to proclaim the Good News to the ends of the earth. But the apostles had to be witnesses in the flesh to Jesus and what He said and did and how He died and rose again. *These, with the prophets, are the foundation of the Church, Jesus Christ himself being the head corner-stone.*

Back to Psalm 109. It is honest, which is desperately important as we worship a Saviour Who is Himself the Truth. The devil is the father of lies. Psalm 109 is perfectly understandable. Christ understands us. He is like us in all respects save sin. We need to understand ourselves. But when we read Psalm 109 in prayer, we read it in the light of Jesus. He did not pray for the destruction of His tormentors. He prayed that they might be forgiven. He told us too to pray for those who spitefully use us.

January 3rd (Christmas 2)

Acts 2 vv 1-13

It is a curiosity of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer (some people think) that it provides no collect or readings for Christmas 2. (When Christmas falls on a Sunday, Monday or Tuesday, there is no Christmas 2). We're told to carry on with the readings for the Circumcision till the Feast of the Epiphany. New beginnings, a fresh start. This Gospel of Jesus, what we celebrate at Christmas - that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us - absolutely has to be proclaimed to the ends of the earth. That can only happen by the power of the Holy Spirit. He may not always act as dramatically as He does in this story, but whatever we may achieve in doing God's work, we achieve it through the Holy Spirit. Everything we do, therefore, whether as individuals or as churches, must be done in the context of prayer. Without Him we can do nothing. With Him we can do everything. We can even relax in the faith that what He requires of us He gives us the resources to effect.

Psalm 127. EXCEPT the Lord build the house : their labour is but lost that build it. 2. Except the Lord keep the city : the watchman waketh but in vain. 3. It is but lost labour that ye haste to rise up early, and so late take rest, and eat the bread of carefulness : for so he giveth his beloved sleep.

January 4th

Acts 2 vv 14-21

In the Creed we say, *We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.* The prophet Joel prophesied the coming of the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit spoke through him. What God accomplishes in Jesus is God's eternal plan. God authenticates what He is doing in the world by inspiring the prophets to predict, proclaim and explain His mighty works. The people who met Jesus, preached the Gospel and later wrote down what He had done understood Jesus in the light of what God had already revealed in the OT. Hence the importance of the OT for Christians. Joel prophesied that *whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.* Peter was granted a much greater understanding of what this means for us drawing on what he already knew from the OT and on what the Holy Spirit was showing him now. Then said he unto them, Therefore every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old.

January 5th

Acts 2 vv 22-36

The polyglot crowd is made up of Jews (and proselytes, people who were very close to joining the Jewish faith) coming up to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost from the many countries in which Jews lived in the first century – the Diaspora - as well as those who live in Jerusalem and Judaea. Peter speaks to them from the Scriptures (OT) to explain Jesus to them, the Scriptures which he clearly believes and now understands in a new light, the Light of Christ, which Peter is now constrained by the love of God to share with the world. The crowds were no doubt excited to be in the Holy City and to see the holy sites. They may have been shown the tomb of David. Peter is clear that what has happened to Jesus, while those responsible for the Crucifixion on their part were plainly guilty of great wickedness, is nevertheless essential to God's eternal plan. He quotes the Psalms of David as prophesying the powerlessness of death over God's Messiah. David clearly could not mean that he himself (though he was the Lord's anointed in his own generation) would not die. All those people in the crowd could visit his tomb if they so desired. David is prophesying the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus. Jesus is the fulfilment of God's purposes for Israel and for all the nations, the whole creation in fact.

January 6th (Epiphany)

Acts 2 vv 37-47

O GOD, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles: Mercifully grant, that we, which know thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of thy glorious Godhead; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Epiphany means manifestation or revelation. The infant Jesus was made manifest to the wise men, the first Gentiles to know and worship the incarnate Son of God. After His Death, Resurrection and Ascension, the Gospel is to be proclaimed to all nations so that we may know Him and in Him receive the gift of eternal life. This mission begins in Jerusalem and will spread out throughout the world. *What shall we do?* ask those hearers who have accepted the message. *Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remissions of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.* It's absolutely straightforward. Three thousand respond and their lives are turned upside down. They share everything. They enjoy fellowship with one another in worship. They pay close attention to the Word & break bread together. Miracles follow and the nascent Church grows in accordance with God's Will. How far do they provide us with a model of what a Church should be like?

January 7th

Acts 3 vv 1-11

There is a story about a man visiting the Vatican during the reign of one of the more venal mediaeval popes. The supposed successor to S Peter points to all the treasures and says Peter can no longer say, *Silver and gold have I none*. The visitor points out that he can also no longer say to a lame man, *In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk*, and expect a miracle. Obviously, the Church would change as it spread out across the world incorporating millions of people from many different cultures and backgrounds, but have we changed in the ways in which we ought to have changed or have we compromised our faith by assimilating too easily the ways of the world?

January 8th

Acts 3 vv 12-18

Peter gives God the glory. It is not he and John who have wrought the miracle. It is God, acting specifically in the name of Jesus. It is always by the grace of God that we achieve anything worthwhile. We commit what we intend to do to the Lord in prayer. We seek His guidance as to whether we are doing the right thing. We ask His help to accomplish whatever it is that we are trying to do. If you don't feel you can ask God's help in doing something, you probably shouldn't be doing it! After we have succeeded, we credit the One by Whose grace we have accomplished the task, whatever it was, and give thanks. This ought to be true of what we do as individuals and what we do as a Church.

January 9th

Acts 3 vv 19-26

The Jews have Moses and the Prophets. Jesus fulfils the Law and all the promises of Scripture. The Gospel was first of all proclaimed to the Jews. God's eternal plan, after the fall of the whole of humanity in Adam, has always been to restore the whole of humanity in Jesus Christ, the second Adam. God chose Israel as a holy nation whom He would prepare to receive the Messiah Who would be the Saviour of the whole world. So the Gospel was first of all proclaimed to the Jews. Many believed, but it is a matter of grief in the New Testament that so many did not, even though the rejection of the Gospel by the Jews very often provided the opportunity to preach to the Gentiles. When you think about it, it is astonishing that so many Christians and even the Church as an institution have been anti-Semitic. Don't they read the Bible?

Most churches remember the Baptism of Christ on this Sunday, as we shall, COVID permitting. Huge crowds go out to hear John the Baptist proclaiming that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. We must prepare by repenting of our sins and being baptised. Though Himself without sin, Jesus is baptised in solidarity with us. God acknowledges Jesus as His Son and the Holy Spirit comes upon Him in the form of a dove. When we are baptised in Christ at the Christian font, God acknowledges us as his sons and daughters and we are anointed with the Holy Spirit. We become the dwelling place of God, temples of the Holy Spirit.

In the 1662 BCP, today we celebrate the visit of the 12 year old Jesus to the temple at Jerusalem – the temple made with human hands, after the pattern which God showed to Moses on Mt Sinai of the heavenly temple. On that occasion, the important men in the temple were impressed with the young Jesus and engaged Him in questions and answers and were astonished at His understanding.

33 years later, Jesus has ascended into heaven and commissioned His Church to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth, to baptise all who believe and to teach us to keep His commandments. This the apostles have begun to do and attracted a huge crowd of believers and worshippers. Now the temple authorities are worried. Where will all this lead? They must have feared that they would get the blame for having the Messiah crucified. If the Jews believed, as many of them did, the Sadducees and Pharisees would lose credibility. They might fear rioting as was not uncommon in the febrile atmosphere of occupied Jerusalem. They could also be in trouble with the Romans. The priests' strategy was to preserve the peace and to maintain their own position by facilitating Roman rule in return for Rome respecting their traditions. Caiaphas thought it was expedient that one man should die for the people. They handed Jesus over to Pilate for political reasons. This had now gone very badly wrong.

O LORD, we beseech thee mercifully to receive the prayers of thy people which call upon thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

January 11th

Acts 4 vv 5-12

By what power, or by what name have ye done this?

The question of authority. How do we justify doing what we do? By what right do we preach the Gospel or teach the faith? By what power do we pray for others? What authority do we have to lead the Church or to rebuke sinners? What do we have to offer when we offer care to other people and pastoral support? I've framed this as though these were questions for clergy. So they are, but they are also questions for all Christians. On what basis do we act? By what right do we do whatever it is that we do? The answer is that is our calling to act as the apostles did in the Name of Jesus. When we preach, teach, pray, lead, support, rebuke or whatever it is that we do, we seek to act in the Name of Jesus – which means first seeking His Will, then working with His grace, and afterwards thanking Him for what He has done through us. *Whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.* (Colossians 3¹⁷).

January 12th

Acts 4 v13

They perceived that Peter and John were unlearned men. But that didn't prevent God from using them. We may very often feel inadequate for the task in hand. But that does not prevent God from using us. I'm not saying that we shouldn't prepare or train for what we believe to be our vocation, but neither should we fear that we shall be unable to do what God wants us to do. God is infinite and can supply us with whatever gifts we need in order to perform the tasks He assigns us.

January 13th

Acts 4 v13

There is a lot to think about in this verse. So I'm taking it over two days. *They took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus.* They say that owners grow like their pets and vice versa. Long married couples know what their husbands or wives are thinking before they even speak. We do tend to pick up the mannerisms and attitudes and even the accents of the people we mix with. That's why parents are often anxious about the friendships their children are forming. But that people should take knowledge that we have been with Jesus – that we have picked up His attitudes and mannerisms, that we think and speak and act like Him. What a friendship to cultivate!

January 14th

Acts 4 vv 14-18

We sometimes think that if only God would demonstrate His mighty power by working miracles, everybody would believe Him and obey His commandments. It doesn't work like that. It is perfectly possible to witness a miracle and still reject the invitation to put your faith in Jesus through Whom it was performed. It took ten plagues to persuade Pharaoh to let God's people go. Despite seeing all this happen, miraculously passing through the Red Sea, being fed on the manna and drinking from the rock, the people of God very quickly lost their faith, manufactured a golden calf to worship instead of God and disobeyed His commandments. Miracles can be signs to encourage those who are prepared to be open-minded about faith to come to Jesus. They can also be signs of the judgment coming on the hard-hearted who will not accept the Word of God. But miracles alone do not compel faith. If they did, they would override God's gift of freedom to accept His invitation or to reject Him. If love were coerced, it would not be love.

January 15th

Acts 4 vv 19-22

Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye.

Obviously, it isn't. Our duty is always to obey God. If our duty to God conflicts with the demands of human authority, we have respectfully to disobey human authority even at the cost of martyrdom. Normally, however, our duty to God is to obey properly constituted human authority. If we were to pick and choose which laws we would obey, there would be anarchy and chaos. The presumption is to submit to those in authority over us. But not always – not if they seek to prevent us from doing our duty or to compel us to do what we know to be wrong. But the hard question is where to draw the line. At what point do we say to our boss, or a policeman or bureaucrat, or HM government, or a bishop, or our commanding officer, *I'm sorry, but my conscience will not allow me to comply with your instructions?* There is such a point but those of you who know me will be surprised when I say that it is a distant point. The norm is to comply with human authority. It is generally speaking God's Will that we do. It is only in exceptional circumstances such as those in which John & Peter found themselves that we should disobey. The prayer we prayed on 10th is much needed!

January 16th

Acts 4 vv 23-30

Peter and John belong to the fellowship of the Church. They are not solo performers. They share their experiences with their fellow believers. These unnamed fellow believers share their joy. They no doubt supported the apostles with their prayers. Their money is held in a common community fund. If any suffer, all suffer with them. When any rejoice, they all rejoice together. They knew their bibles. So they were able to understand what was happening to them in the light of Scripture – in this case Psalm 2. These are people who attend to the Word. They live in fellowship with one another. They share what they have. They break bread together, which I am sure has Eucharistic overtones even though it is not what we would recognise as a service of Holy Communion. They break bread with thanksgiving. They share it with one another. Jesus, the Bread of Life, is present with them, strengthening them, sustaining them, promising to be with them always. We don't always remember that companions originally were people who shared bread (pain in French, panis in Latin, panis angelicus in Christian worship) together. Passover unleavened bread, Manna, Holy Communion, the Bread of Life.

January 17th Epiphany 2

Acts 4 vv 31-17

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth; Mercifully hear the supplications of thy people, and grant us thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*.

That's quite some collect for these times. How we long for peace, for God's healing power, for an end to the pandemic, for wisdom for those in authority, for rest for the overworked and worthwhile employment for those forced to be idle, for courage for the fearful, care for the sick and frail, consolation for the bereaved, strength for those who feel overwhelmed, guidance for the lost, strength for the weak, comfort for the lonely and depressed, protection for those who feel threatened, for a sufficiency of all the good things which we need to sustain our lives on earth. We look to God for these things, God who governs all things in heaven and earth. In Christian fellowship such as is described in today's reading, we experience a foretaste of God's Kingdom, we are ourselves sustained in our pilgrimage through this passing age, and we are fitted to play our part in working with god to answer our prayers for the world.

January 18th

Acts 5 vv 1-11

And say not, His mercy is great, he will be pacified for the multitude of my sins: for mercy and wrath come from him, and his indignation resteth upon sinners. (Ecclesiasticus 5⁶).

I'm writing these notes in November when the first reading for Mattins & Evensong in the BCP on weekdays is from the Apocrypha. We have read through most of the OT in the course of the year and we shall read Isaiah (which some people call the fifth gospel) in the days leading up to Christmas. The Apocrypha is a collection of books which some Christians (RC & Orthodox) think should be included in the Bible and most Protestants don't. The C of E view of the Apocrypha is this. *And the other books (as Hierome saith) the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine;* (Hierome is Jerome who translated the Bible into Latin from Hebrew and Greek to meet the needs of Latin speaking people in the Roman Empire.) This morning, I was reading Ecclesiasticus and it struck me how apt it is when thinking about the story of Ananias and Sapphira. We're not comfortable with this story. It seems very harsh that these two people were struck down dead for lying to the Church about the value of their offering. Surely, God is loving and merciful. Surely, He wouldn't punish anyone, especially for something which we might think is relatively minor. But justice and mercy are indivisible. God is just. There are such things as right and wrong and there is justice. We should expect to receive what we deserve. Mercy is not a matter of pretending that wrong-doing doesn't matter. Forgiveness is not down-playing the seriousness of evil. Mercy takes evil very seriously indeed. There has to be justice for the sake of the victims of evil. Justice comes first. Then mercy opens up the path to forgiveness. Sin is dealt with, not ignored. Evil is taken with extreme seriousness, not just disregarded. Forgiveness has a very high price, the death of Jesus on the Cross. We must not (as Ecclesiasticus says) take forgiveness for granted and carry on in sin believing that God is too nice to punish us for whatever we might do. What Jesus achieved on the Cross for us was not a *get out of gaol free* card, setting us free to be as wicked as we like. Jesus' Death sets us free not to be bad but to be good. In the NT reading for 6th November (today), S Paul says the same thing. *I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works.* (Titus 3⁸).

January 19th

Acts 5 vv 12-16

This the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I remember it being marked in a much bigger way than it is today. We used to go to one another's churches, exchange preachers and share meals together. I can remember once when I was a child attending such a service in a freezing cold church coughing repeatedly until the person in front of me gave me a fisherman's friend to suck. One of the reasons it is now marked less is that there is a great deal which has already been achieved. We are much more open than we used to be to the genuineness of other Christians. Another reason, I'm sorry to say, is the fact that people are generally becoming less interested in what the churches are doing and less committed. Another reason, I suspect, is that we have gone as far as many people really want to on the path to unity. We respect and enjoy fellowship with other churches, but we don't want to give up our own individuality by merging with them. Mostly, our churches don't have the fizz of the Church described in today's reading. Should we expect miracles and rapid growth in numbers in England today? Some Christians believe that we should. Others believe that that was God's plan for then – the very beginning of the Church. We shouldn't expect the Holy Spirit to work in the same effervescent manner in churches 2,000 years old. Personally, I don't believe that we should expect miracles on demand and growth in numbers is a matter for God so long as we are faithful in our witness to the world, but I do believe that there could be more fizz in our churches if we had the same commitment to Christ and to one another as they had.

January 20th

Acts 5 vv 17-28

The very success of the Apostles' preaching turned the world against them. Are we, as an established Church, too comfortable with accommodating ourselves to the world, avoiding confrontation at the expense of effectiveness? As has happened to so many other faithful Christians, the apostles were locked up. God sent His angel to set them free. God could miraculously set free all those who have been imprisoned for their faith, but mostly He doesn't. The world would be a very different place if the trials of believers were always magicked away and the schemes of the wicked thwarted by divine intervention. Would there be any genuine freedom of choice in such a world?

January 21st

Acts 5 vv 29-32

*We are his witnesses of these things, and so is also the Holy Ghost,
whom God hath given to them that obey him.*

When we stand up for Jesus, we are very far from alone. We are working with and supported by the third Person of the Holy Trinity. Pray for those who are persecuted in the world today for their witness to the Gospel. Pray for those who may be fearful of standing up for the Truth in a hostile or indifferent world.

January 22nd

Acts 5 vv 33-39

Gamaliel was a much respected Pharisee, a wise and good teacher. Saul was one of his pupils long before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus and became Paul the Apostle. Various people had set themselves up as leaders of men and rebelled against Rome, only to bring crushing defeat on themselves and their followers. Wisely, Gamaliel points out that the Jesus movement will come to nothing unless it is of God. If it is of God, nobody can stand against it. So the sensible course of action is to wait and see how things turn out. Good advice when we are prone to rush to judgment about other people and their motives.

January 23rd

Acts 5 vv 40-42

Three extraordinary things.

1. Even though they supposedly took Gamaliel's advice, they still beat the apostles.
2. The apostles rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His Name. They were that much in love with Jesus. Later stories hold that Peter was crucified upside down and Andrew on a diagonal cross because they did not feel worthy to suffer exactly as Jesus had suffered. That takes some thinking about in our pain averse society in which there has to be a pill for every ill because we can't bear to be other than happy and comfortable all the time.
3. Despite the imprisonment, beating and warning, the apostles did not cease to preach and teach Jesus Christ daily in the Temple. Do we give up too easily in the face of opposition or even embarrassment?

January 24th (Epiphany 3)

Acts 6 vv 1-4

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities stretch forth thy right hand to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

So far, apart from the incident with Ananias and Sapphira, the young Church seems to have been perfect. The Church is, however, a human institution as well as being the Body of Christ. The Church is made up of redeemed human beings but we shall not be perfect until we get to Heaven. In the meantime, as S Paul says, *The flesh lusteth against the spirit*. There are quarrels and even division within the Church. As S James says of the way we speak, *These things ought not to be so*. Yet they are and we have to deal with them. It fell to the apostles to give leadership and to restore unity to the fellowship and, in order to do so, the administrative problem had to be resolved. But the apostles' gifts, given them by the Holy Spirit, were in prayer and the ministry of the word – full time occupations. *It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables*. A lot of clergy today feel that it is waste of the talents God has given us to be concerned with the mundane details of church life – the modern equivalent of waiting at tables – which not only take up a minister's time, but also diminish his ability to perform the tasks to which he is called. Surely, like the deacons about to be appointed in Acts 6, these tasks should be given to other members of the fellowship who are endowed with the appropriate gifts. And yet, if it seems that the minister doesn't care about *waiting at tables*, those who do wait at tables may feel undervalued and, if no-one is over all in charge, the governance of the church is likely to be inchoate.

January 25th (The Conversion of S Paul)

Acts 6 vv 5-8

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.*

Quite a coincidence. We read about Stephen's ordination on the day we celebrate the conversion of the man who looked after the coats of the men who stoned him. What an amazing example of God's grace it is that Saul the persecutor became Paul the great apostle. The lesson surely is always to be open-minded about what God can do.

January 26th

Acts 6 vv 9-15

One of the interesting things about Acts 6 is that there is no record of the seven deacons appointed for that purpose ever waiting at tables. Presumably they did, but the author of Acts is far more interested in the other things they did – Stephen the preacher and first martyr, Philip the evangelist and father of four daughters who had the gift of prophecy. We might think of people as only being capable of certain straightforward tasks. They might think of themselves in the same way. But only God really knows us and what we are capable of. He calls people we might not expect to do things they might not think themselves capable of and He supplies the grace so that they can. It is very important that our church structures, programmes and protocols do not attempt to quench the Holy Spirit. Stephen's preaching was so effective that it alarmed the opposition. He challenged their complacent and very limited understanding of God, seeming to them that by putting faith in Jesus and preaching in His Name, he was downgrading both the Temple & the Law, whereas Jesus is in fact the One in Whom the fulness of the Godhead dwelleth bodily (the truth to which the Temple points) and the One Who fulfils the Law and the Prophets. Our God is much greater than what we know of Him already. Be open.

January 27th

Acts 7 vv 1-53

If you want a condensation of biblical history, read Stephen's sermon. Stephen understands Jesus, the Light of the World, in the light of Scripture. He understands Scripture in the light of Jesus. This understanding that he has of Jesus, to Whom the Scriptures bear witness, is the basis of his preaching. What is true of Stephen is true of all Christians. We understand Jesus in the light of Scripture and Scripture in the light of Jesus. The Jesus Whom we thus know is the Jesus Whom we proclaim in the way we live. To summarise Stephen's message even further. God is always faithful. He has always cared for His people. But human beings are faithless. In our indifference to God and our active rejection of His ways, we continually bring disaster on ourselves. God saves us and we are briefly grateful. Then we forget Him again. In OT times, the people of Israel were especially favoured as the chosen people and therefore especially culpable for their rebellion against God. This rebellion culminated in the Crucifixion of Jesus. But, by the astonishing grace of God, this final act of rebellion on the part of humanity is also the means by which God effects our salvation.

January 28th

Acts 7 vv 54-60

Stephen looks to Jesus. Sometimes, when everything seems on top of me, I find it hard to pray. I'm too busy. My mind is full of other things, working out how to solve my problems. Sometimes, I confess, if I'm blaming my problems on other people, my thoughts are not very holy. *Be still and know that I am God*, we are told in Psalm 46. It would be wise to take note. Stephen follows Jesus in the way of the Cross. He follows His example. He commends himself to God (in the words of Psalm 31, also appointed for the morning of November 6th). He forgives his enemies. Again, the example for us to follow. Psalm 31 finishes: *O love the Lord, all ye his saints : for the Lord preserveth them that are faithful, and plenteously rewardeth the proud doer. Be strong, and he shall establish your heart : all ye that put your trust in the Lord.*

January 29th

Acts 8 vv 1-5

The martyrdom of Stephen might have proved a serious setback in proclaiming the Gospel. It would have been perfectly understandable if people had been afraid to profess and proclaim their faith. Many did leave Jerusalem, but they took Christ's commission with them. They continued to preach the Word wherever they came to. As Tertullian would write a couple of centuries later, *The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church*. It is also likely that witnessing Stephen's death was a big factor in preparing Saul for his conversion in chapter 9, after which he would do more perhaps than anyone to build Christ's Church, the Church he had tried to destroy.

January 30th

Acts 8 vv 5-13

Simon was a celebrity in Samaria. It appears that he was a sorcerer and people were amazed by the powers which apparently he exercised. When Philip came, however, with the true power of God, the Samaritans believed him and many were baptised in Christ's Name, including Simon. We hear a lot about celebrities and influencers promoting good causes, taking up political stances, commending particular lifestyles (some foolish, but by no means all bad), and jumping on popular bandwagons. What we and they need to do is to consider these causes, stances, lifestyles and bandwagons in the light of Christ – the power and wisdom of God.

January 31st (Septuagesima)

Acts 8 vv 14-17

O LORD, we beseech thee favourably to hear the prayers of thy people; that we, who are justly punished for our offences, may be mercifully delivered by thy goodness, for the glory of thy Name; through Jesus Christ our Saviour, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. *Amen.*

This is one of two passages in the NT which underpin the practice of Confirmation. There are only two Gospel Sacraments – Holy Communion & Baptism – and these alone are *regarded as generally necessary for salvation*. Confirmation, ordination, matrimony, penance and unction are different, even though they are regarded as Sacraments by many Christians. So, why Confirmation, given that Baptism in faith suffices for us to become Christians with all that entails? In this passage (and Acts 19), it appears that the laying on of hands was needed for the full blessing of the Holy Spirit to be manifested. Later on, in the early Church, the laying on of the bishop's hands was incorporated into the Baptism rite. Later still, the laying on of hands became separated from the immersion in water and became the separate rite of Confirmation. This does allow for those baptized before they could speak for themselves to make a public profession of the faith for which their godparents stood surety at the font and provides an opportunity to prepare the candidates with a course of study and prayer before undergoing the rite. There is no suggestion, however, that those baptised but not confirmed are any less Christian than the confirmed or that they are called to any lesser degree of commitment. Those who were baptized as babies ought to come forward for Confirmation in order to reaffirm their absolute commitment to Christ and to seek His grace so that they may fulfil their Christian calling.

1st February

Acts 8 vv 18-25

After this incident, the serious sin of trying to charge for the gifts of God's grace is called simony. We have to be very careful that we do not commit simony in charging for church services or for prayer candles or letting people think that their prayers are more likely to be answered in return for generous donations, or in any other way suggesting that people should pay the Church for what God freely gives. I'm not quite comfortable that fees for weddings and funerals etc. don't come into this category. I'm also sorry to say that Simon's repentance was short lived.

2nd February (Presentation of Christ in the Temple)

Acts 8 vv 26-40

ALMIGHTY and everliving God, we humbly beseech thy Majesty, that, as thy only-begotten Son was this day presented in the temple in substance of our flesh, so we may be presented unto thee with pure and clean hearts, by the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.* On this the 40th and last day of Christmas, Simeon hailed the baby Jesus as a *light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel*. In today's passage, this high-ranking Ethiopian official receives the Light of Christ. Was he a Jew or a Gentile? At the very least, he must have been interested in the Jewish understanding of God. He had gone up to Jerusalem to worship. He was reading the Jewish Scriptures – specifically the Book of Isaiah. As a eunuch, he would not have been allowed to participate fully in the temple rites. It was Philip who explained to him the meaning of Isaiah's prophecy that Jesus, through His suffering and death, sets us free from evil and the fear of death. Jesus is Light in the darkness, scattering fear and gloom. The treasurer embraces faith in Christ immediately and is baptised straightaway. I often think of this when I hear of churches which insist on all sorts of conditions including long periods of preparation before accepting candidates for Baptism. To be fair to such churches, however, this Ethiopian clearly evinced a joyful and real faith. That is not always so obvious when families bring their babies to be christened. Even so, I do believe that it is necessary to make people feel welcome and nourish the knowledge of God they already have, rather than make them feel inadequate and unwanted by seeming to put obstacles in their way.

3rd February

Acts 9 vv 1&2

One of the issues debated during the Brexit campaign was the European Arrest Warrant. Those in favour of the EWA see it as a good thing that people who commit crimes in one European country and then flee to another can fairly easily be brought back to face trial. No more English bank robbers enjoying retirement on the Costa del Sol. Similarly, we have extradition treaties with many other countries around the world. Those nervous about the EWA and other extradition arrangements point to examples such as the one in our reading – when people who have done no wrong but have annoyed the authorities in a particular place can be brought back and punished. Like everything about the administration of justice, extradition depends on the integrity of those in authority.

4th February

Acts 9 vv 3-9

This is an amazing story. Unless we have experienced heavenly visions, we can barely imagine the awe and fear of such an encounter with the Risen Christ. It is also amazing that Saul's life was so turned round from arch persecutor to leading builder of the Church.

1 We sing the glorious conquest
before Damascus gate,
when Saul, the church's
spoiler,
came breathing threats and
hate;
the rav'ning wolf rushed
forward
full early to the prey;
but lo! the Shepherd met him,
and bound him fast today.

him
the bondman of his Lord!

3 O Wisdom ord'ring all things
in order strong and sweet,
what nobler spoil was ever
cast at the victor's feet?
What wiser master-builder
e'er wrought at your employ
than he, till now so furious
your building to destroy?

2 O glory most excelling
that smote across his path!
O light that pierced and
blinded
the zealot in his wrath!
O voice that spake unto him
the calm, reproving word!
O love that sought and held

4 Lord, teach your church the
lesson,
still in her darkest hour
of weakness and of danger,
to trust your hidden pow'r:
your grace by ways mysterious
the wrath of man can bind,
and in your boldest foeman
your chosen saint can find.

5th February

Acts 9 vv 10-18

Ananias was astonished. He had heard of Saul and what he had done to Christians in Jerusalem. He had heard that he was coming to Damascus to round up the disciples there. And yet Jesus wanted Ananias to cure Saul's blindness and to baptise him. Ananias' faith must have been tested. And, as the Church of England becomes more and more organised and business like, with policies for this and procedures for that, with mission plans and agendas, synods and bureaucracies, is it possible that we might shut out the God Who sometimes acts in ways which to us don't make sense?

6th February (Accession of HM Queen)

Acts 9 vv 19-22

ALMIGHTY God, whose kingdom is everlasting, and power infinite: Have mercy upon the whole Church; and so rule the heart of thy chosen servant *ELIZABETH*, our Queen and Governor, that she (knowing whose minister she is) may above all things seek thy honour and glory; and that we, and all her subjects (duly considering whose authority she hath) may faithfully serve, honour, and humbly obey her, in thee, and for thee, according to thy blessed Word and ordinance; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth, ever one God, world without end. *Amen*.
I heard today about plans to celebrate the 70th anniversary of her majesty's accession in 2022. It did occur to me that planning two years ahead for someone as advanced in years as HMQ is taking a lot for granted. But forward planning always is. A year ago, we never imagined that we would be facing the COVID pandemic. S James warns about presuming to plan twelve months ahead. Jesus tells us not to worry about tomorrow. Saul confounds expectations by preaching the Gospel he had come to Damascus to destroy. But we have to plan at least provisionally if we are going to celebrate adequately a 70 year reign in two years time. That word *provisionally* is the key. We do need organisation, administration and planning, but we also commit our plans to the Lord, knowing that His plans for us might be quite different from what we propose.

7th February (Sexagesima)

Acts 9 vv 23-25

O LORD God, who seest that we put not our trust in any thing that we do; Mercifully grant that by thy power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*.

Fr Dobromir who is pastor to the Bulgarian community which worships at S Michael's recently told me a horrible story about the tortures inflicted on a particular saint by fellow Christians who disagreed with him. They mutilated his mouth so that he could not speak and cut off his hand so that he could not write. Religion is a very powerful force. We care deeply about what we believe. Sometimes our passion for what we believe to be the truth becomes evil. They tried to kill Saul. They tortured Maximus. There is a long bloody trail of executions, mutilations, imprisonments and other penalties inflicted by religious believers who, by their very participation in such activities, deny the God to Whom they believe themselves to be being faithful. Pray for those facing martyrdom. Pray for our persecutors. Pray for the wisdom to deal with religious differences in love. While, thankfully, we don't use violence against those who disagree with us in the Church, but we don't always show love.

8th February

Acts 9 vv 26&27

Barnabas saw Saul's qualities. Not unnaturally, most of the Christians in Jerusalem were suspicious of this persecutor who now claimed to be a convert. Barnabas had seen the evidence. He was open to the possibility that God had wrought a fundamental change in Saul. He was prepared to put his own reputation on the line by giving Saul a good reference. Churches are sometimes challenged by the arrival of newcomers, especially if they offer to take on what other people have always done and bring in new ways of doing things. Churches are also challenged when someone who may have been a thorn in the flesh in the past claims to have changed. There is a place for suspicion. The newcomer who takes over may be arrogantly trampling on the feelings of good people. The person who claims to have changed may not have done so. He may believe himself that he has changed when really he hasn't. Terrible things have continued to happen when naive church leaders have believed that a former abuser has thoroughly repented and now can be trusted. On the other hand, Christians can never give up on people. We cannot close our minds to the possibility that God is doing something in our Church which we would never have thought possible.

9th February

Acts 9 vv 28-31

The *Grecians* in this passage are Greek-speaking Jews. As in the case of Stephen, they seem to have been the ones most opposed to the Christian message. Perhaps, Stephen and Saul preached to them because they thought they would be most likely to believe the Gospel. Or it could be that the Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora were less confident in their Jewish faith and membership of the commonwealth of Israel than those whose homes were in the Holy Land. If they felt insecure of their own status, that might have made them more vehement in defending it. Anyway, the Christian community in Jerusalem gets wind of the plots against Saul and sends him off to Tarsus, which is the city he came from.

Think about v31. *Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.* Isn't that what we'd want for all our churches?

10th February

Acts 9 vv 32-43

The focus shifts to Peter and his work for the Lord. Christ on the Cross overcame all the powers of evil and death. He forgives and cleanses. He heals and quickens. In those early days, there were many miracles and these were signs for those who were open to the possibility of faith. As we have seen, miracles make no impression on closed minds. With or without miracles, the Church continues Christ's work of forgiveness and reconciliation through the preaching of the Cross. As professionals like doctors and nurses or simply as amateurs doing it for love, we care for the sick in prayer and by helping in practical ways. We are entrusted with the words of life.

11th February

Acts 10 vv 1-8

One of the rules of writing fiction is supposedly that you don't have two characters with the same name. So Simon Peter lodging with Simon the Tanner must really have happened because, if it were made up, Luke would have given them different names! A trivial point, but it is important that Luke is respected by many scholars as a trustworthy historian. Much more importantly, Cornelius was obviously a good man, seeking God. He sought and found. God made Himself manifest to Cornelius. Moreover, Cornelius was a Gentile, the first one we know of who became a Christian. The Gospel is spreading out from Jerusalem, through Judaea and Samaria, to the uttermost parts of the earth.

12th February

Acts 10 vv 9-18

God couldn't use Peter until Peter surrendered some of his pre-conceived ideas about who should be welcomed into fellowship with the people of God. We're back to the thought that a companion is someone with whom one shares bread or food in general. In the ancient world, a sacrifice was normally eaten by the worshippers. It was a shared meal with God – table fellowship, a sign of belonging. Jews did not eat with Gentiles. They did not eat certain foods described in the Law of Moses as unclean. Peter and the people of Israel in general belonged to God. They were family (the Children of Israel). They had a special relationship with God. God is showing Peter that His plan is fulfilled in Christ and that all who come in faith (Jews & Gentiles) belong to God.

13th February

Acts 10 vv 19-29

Peter's heart then is opened to the possibility of table fellowship with Gentiles and he goes with Cornelius' envoys. The question is are there people we might feel don't belong in our Church? After all, it isn't really our Church; it's God's Church. Are there people who don't belong in God's Church? We might be surprised, if we're honest, to discover that there are categories of people who would make us uncomfortable if they attempted to join us. And that wouldn't be right, would it?

14th February (Quinquagesima)

Acts 10 vv 30-33

O LORD, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth; Send thy Holy Ghost and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee; Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake. *Amen.*

The cards in the shops this last week, the flowers, the special meals are more likely to have been for S Valentine's Day than for Quinquagesima and, even so, the emphasis will hardly have been on a long dead Christian saint about whom very little is known. The day is about love and passion. And so is religion. The Church is the Bride of Christ. Love is the be all and end all of our relationship with God. Cornelius longed for love, the love of God. Peter was passionate for God as Christ was (is, as God dwells in the eternal now) for Peter & Cornelius & for you & me. God responded to Cornelius' need for love by revealing himself to him in Jesus and the Holy Spirit. God used Peter to befriend Cornelius and, in doing so, showed Peter that the love of God is unlimited in its range.

15th February

Acts 10 v34

God is no respecter of persons.

This statement is made on numerous occasions in the Bible. God is not impressed by us. He doesn't respect the rich or powerful more than the poor. He demands that the courts are just to rich and poor alike. (Is that true in modern Britain where legal fees can be so high?) He doesn't expect us to defer to the wealthy or to look down on people worse off than we are. He doesn't love Jews more than Gentiles or vice versa. God is love and the love of God is universal.

16th February

Acts 10 v35

But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness. Is accepted with him.

Those who seek find, those who ask receive, the door is opened to those who knock. God is like the father of the prodigal son, looking out for us, longing for us to return to Him, ready to embrace us when we come to Him (even if like the prodigal son we do need a bath and a change of clothes after living with pigs and walking miles in the heat). And this true whoever we are. *All that the Father giveth me, says Jesus, shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.* Think about that. God calls us. We respond. Jesus embraces us. Pray that God will call all those whom we love and that they will have the grace to respond.

17th February (Ash Wednesday)

Acts 10 vv 36-43

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made and dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent; Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins, and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Peter and the other apostles were witnesses of what Jesus said and did after the Baptism of John and of His Crucifixion and Resurrection. Peter briefly summarises the Good News of Jesus in these words to Cornelius and his household. It would be good for us to be able to express the Gospel in the same way because we too are witnesses. While we did not know Christ *after the flesh*, we do know Him by the Spirit Who teaches us to address God as *Father* and Jesus as *Lord*. Like Peter, we are enthused with the Spirit of the Risen Christ and we are His witnesses. We might not be teachers or preachers of the Word, but the way we live our lives testifies to who we are, people who have been with Jesus.

18th February

Acts 10 vv 44-48

The unfettered power of God. We correctly think of the Holy Spirit coming to us at Baptism or Confirmation or Ordination. We rightly regard Sacraments and prayer and sermons and bible readings as means of grace, as ways in which the Spirit works. But God can and does work in any way in which He pleases, any order. These people manifestly received gifts of the Holy Spirit even before they were baptized. Never think of God as limited to working in certain ways prescribed by the Church, even the means of grace which He Himself has prescribed. Everything is of God and He acts as He pleases.

19th February

Acts 11 vv 1-18

There is a story about a Church in America in the not so distant bad old days where the minister regularly preached on the universality of the love of God. God loves everybody. It so happened that he and the congregation were all white, not by accident, but as a matter of policy. He was asked one day what he would do if a black man came and asked him whether God loved black people too. He said, "I'd tell him, 'Of course God loves you and there is another Church on the other side of town just for people like you.'" In Peter's day, it was Jews and Gentiles, rather than whites and blacks who were segregated. It's not necessarily bad people who maintain these divisions; it's often just people who can't see how God is at work in the world. It was, however, so important to demonstrate to the infant Church that it was to be open to everybody, irrespective of race or status, that Peter had to repeat his story and Luke felt obliged to record that he did. The proof is in v 17: *Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he gave unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I that I could withstand God.* I get the impression that even Peter was surprised when Cornelius and his household received gifts of the Holy Spirit, but, if we open our eyes, we may see God at work in people in whom we might not expect Him to work, people who don't obviously belong to our fellowship.

20th February

Acts 11 vv 19-21

I am quite a shy person. When I was stuck at a bus station in Manchester late at night, I remember being relieved that the person I

asked for help turned out also to have been from Gillingham. It's easier to engage with people like ourselves. Almost unconsciously, if approaching strangers, we approach people like us. They talk like us, dress like us, look like us. We're more comfortable knowing how we're expected to behave & how they are likely to respond. We are uncomfortable with foreign languages & even different accents. People who go to live in a foreign country often choose to live with other people from their home countries. Areas of cities are predominantly inhabited by people of the same class & income groups. So, it wasn't unnatural that these refugees from the persecution in Jerusalem turned first to their fellow Jews. But what a difference those made who were brave enough to share their faith with people like us! (Gentiles).

21st February (Lent 1)

Acts 11 vv 22-26

O LORD, who for our sake didst fast forty days and forty nights; Give us grace to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey thy godly motions in righteousness, and true holiness, to thy honour and glory, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. *Amen*
Barnabas was a man of charity or love as we tend to say nowadays. The elders in Jerusalem respected Barnabas. So they trusted him to find out the truth regarding the fruits of preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles. He rejoiced at the great work God was doing and encouraged the new believers. They might have been doubtful as to whether or not they truly belonged to the People of God as they were not Jews. Barnabas assures them that they are. Barnabas knows a man who is exactly the person the Church now needs in this phase in her growth. He goes to fetch Saul from Tarsus, who, as Paul the Apostle, will teach: *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 3²⁸).

22nd February

Acts 11 vv 27-30

The disciples were first called *Christians* at Antioch. Before that, we were simply the people of the Way. *Christians* was probably a term of abuse at first, meant to suggest that believers were mindless followers of some self-styled hero. Whatever, *Christians* are one body. The Jerusalem Church was very different from the Church at Antioch. The

Jerusalem Christians were all or nearly all Jews. They kept to the Jewish customs and food laws. They worshipped in the Temple. Some of them had known Jesus in the flesh. Some of their leaders were still the original apostles. Antioch was quite different, a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, no Temple, none of the original apostles living among them, some doubt (as we shall see) whether Christians needed to keep the Jewish Law as it had been interpreted for centuries. Yet, Christians in Antioch and Jerusalem were limbs of the same body (the Body of Christ). When one suffered, they all suffered. When one was glorified, they were all glorified. So, when it was prophesied that there would be a famine, the rather better off Christians in Antioch determined to send relief to Jerusalem. Jerusalem had blessed Antioch in many ways; it was where the worldwide mission had begun. Now Antioch had the privilege of sharing with Jerusalem. Pray for our link dioceses and churches: Harare (Zimbabwe), Kondoa & Mpwapwa (Tanzania) and Estonia.

23rd February

Acts 12 vv 1-3

As we shall shortly see, Peter is rescued, but the puzzle is why, if God could deliver Peter, He didn't also save James? If you don't believe that God acts in the world, the puzzle is the opposite. If someone upsets a tyrant, his imprisonment and death is kind of what you expect. The problem, if you don't believe in a God Who intervenes in the affairs of this world, is how Peter escaped. But, for those of us who do believe that God answers prayer, the problem is that James was executed. Weren't people praying for him? The most important answer is that prayer is not magic. A magician seeks to exert control. He believes (or tries to make other people believe) that his spells bend the world to his will. But Jesus didn't teach us to pray *my will be done*; He taught us to pray *Thy will be done*. Prayer is aligning our will with God's Will, not getting God to do what we want, but working with Him to achieve what He wants. Granted that God is infinitely greater, better and wiser than we are, the world will run a lot better if His Will prevails than if our wills prevail. So, when God doesn't answer our prayers the way we should like, we have to trust that He knows what He is doing and that what happens is for the best even though it might not make much sense to us. The less important, but also valid, answer is that it would be a funny old world if we could have miracles on tap. What if political and religious prisoners were always set free by angels? What if our prayers for the church fete could guarantee that it wouldn't rain that day? There wouldn't be much space for

faith and Christians could rule the world, but probably not in a good way. When imperfect people (which we all are till we get to heaven) assume great power, the results are likely to be disastrous. Hence what happened to the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11.

24th February

Acts 12 vv 4-11

Peter was in prison in the lead up to Passover or Easter, the time which would come to be kept as Lent. He was in a dark & gloomy prison, chained, in the custody of armed men, expecting to be put to death. The Church was praying for him. Without Christ, we are sinners, slaves of sin, enslaved by the fear of death. We are chained by the flesh (our human nature which perversely rejects the love of God) and in the custody of the armed man, the devil. God sends His messenger. Our prison is filled with light. Our chains fall off. Our warder is powerless to prevent our escape. The prison gates are thrown wide open and we are free, free to live and to perform in the world those good works which God has prepared for us to walk in. I hope you can forgive an Easter hymn in Lent, but it's so apt.

1 Christ the Lord is risen again;
Christ hath broken every chain!
Hark, angelic voices cry,
Singing evermore on high:
Alleluia.

2 He who gave for us his life,
Who for us endured the strife,
Is our Paschal Lamb today.
We, too, sing for joy and say:
Alleluia.

3 Christ who bore all pain and loss
Comfortless upon the cross,
Lives in glory now on high,
Pleads for us and hears our cry: Alleluia.

4 He whose path no records tell,
Who descended into hell,
Who the strong man armed
hath bound,

Now in highest heaven is
crowned. Alleluia.

5 He who slumbered in the
grave
Is exalted now to save,
Now through Christendom it
rings
That the Lamb is King of kings.
Alleluia.

6 Now he bids us tell abroad
How the lost may be restored,
How the penitent forgiven,
How we, too, may enter heaven.
Alleluia.

7 Thou, our Paschal Lamb
indeed,
Christ, thy ransomed people
feed,
Take our sins and guilt away,
Let us sing by night and day:
Alleluia.

25th February

Acts 12 vv 12-19

It was James the brother of John who was martyred in verse 2. The James who was head of the Jerusalem Church was a different James, quite possibly a member of our Lord's earthly family. The reaction of Rhoda and the others reminds me of the massive crowd which gathered to pray for rain in a drought and nobody brought an umbrella.

26th February

Acts 12 vv 20-25

The Jewish writer Josephus tells a similar story about the horrible death of Herod, that his opinion of himself was so high that he rated himself up there with God and that God brought him down abruptly. Many Roman and Eastern rulers reckoned themselves to be gods and far too many men in positions of power have come to regard themselves as accountable to no-one. Their word, they think, is law. But we shall all have to answer for ourselves before the Judgment Seat of God. We should pray for people in power for the wisdom to rule: to recognise what the values of God's Kingdom are; to discern how to use the resources at their disposal towards the goals of peace, justice, freedom from want, good health for all, education in the broadest sense of the word; to be sustained under all the pressures they bear; and to be protected from the special temptations which power and status present.

27th February

Acts 13 vv 1-3

Discernment. How do we recognise whom God is calling to specific ministries – to serve as clergy or missionaries, teachers or evangelists, doctors of the body or the soul? There is no limit to the number of vocations to which God might call us – anything which contributes to the coming of His Kingdom. I once had to fill in an online form for the diocese about the number of hours worked by lay people in the service of the Church. I multiplied the number on our electoral roll by 24 and by 7. The number I came up with was too big to fit into the box provided! To me, it was the logical calculation based on one of my favourite verses (Colossians 3¹⁷): *And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the LORD Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.* I will not accept that, if you put a nice flower arrangement in the church building, you are doing Christian work, but not if you take some nice flowers to a lonely neighbour. They are both

ways to serve God to beautify His house, to cheer up one of His children. There is no limit to the number of ways in which we can serve God and our entire lives ought to be an offering of praise to Him. There are, however, specific callings. We pray to God that those being called will recognise their call and that they will come forward and that the Church will recognise and support their calling. We recognise the call and welcome the grace of the Holy Spirit in the laying on of hands.

28th February (Lent 2)

Acts 13 vv 4&5

ALMIGHTY God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves; Keep us both outwardly in our bodies, and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

Traditionally, we remember in Lent the 40 days Jesus spent fasting in the Wilderness, having been driven there by the Holy Spirit after His Baptism. There He prepared for His mission, overcoming the devil's three temptations - to doubt Himself and His calling, faithlessly to put God to the test, and to try to achieve God's purposes by the devil's means. He was with the wild beasts and the angels ministered to Him. Afterwards, He began to proclaim the Kingdom of God in Galilee, the commencement of three years of ministry which would lead to the Cross and the empty tomb, the Great Commission and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Paul, Barnabas and John Mark continue that work, following in the steps of Jesus, chosen and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The mantle of Jesus fell on the apostles and, by way of the apostles, Christ's mantle falls on the whole Church – empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Kingdom of God.

1st March

Acts 13 vv 6-13

People like Elymas lived by sorcery. People admired them and were a little afraid of them. It was not in Elymas' financial interest that Sergius Paulus should come to faith. True religion and science are both united in the seeking out of truth. One of the longest correspondences in the columns of the *Independent* newspaper followed from an article in which the famously atheist scientist Richard Dawkins and Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali combined to point out that astrology is nonsense.

Between them, religion and science have forced magic to the margins. Generally speaking – while not being totally closed minded on this point – the claims of magicians are false. Magic generally doesn't work, if it does it is by trickery as in conjuring, or it works psychosomatically like the placebo effect in medicine when people experience change simply because they believe that change will occur. The other objection to magic as noted before is that it is an attempt to gain power over people and objects (which bad religion & science also do). We don't need to fear magic. As we see here, faith is always more powerful than magic.

2nd March

Acts 13 vv 14-37

In some ways, the synagogue service was (and still is) like our Mattins and Evensong. A synagogue is a coming together of God's people, just as a church is. Neither needs a building. Neither can exist without people. The service consists in the synagogue of readings from the Law & the Prophets, as we have readings from the Old & New Testaments. Psalms are sung. There is a sermon. It appears that visiting teachers such as Jesus and Paul might be invited to deliver the word on a particular Sabbath. In the synagogue, men and women would sit separately and, in NT times, there might be others present who were not Jews nor ready to become Jews but who were interested in a religion which preached one God and the highest standards of behaviour – very different from much Roman & Greek religion in those days. Paul's sermon on this occasion was the standard apostolic preaching – that the Law & the Prophets (what we think of as the Old Testament) are fulfilled in the story of Jesus.

3rd March

Acts 13 vv 38-43

The recurrent theme of the Old Testament is that God is faithful and people are faithless. He creates us and redeems us and supplies all our needs. He sets before us a way of life which will bring glory to Him, further our own well-being and promote the welfare of our fellow human beings and of God's creation in general. And we reject God and disobey His commandments. The result of our faithlessness is that we bring disaster on ourselves. God, however, is faithful. He hears our prayers and saves us from the consequences of our own folly. And then

the cycle repeats itself. We let Him down again. God's ultimate intervention is to send Jesus to save us all, through faith in His Name, whether we be Jews or Gentiles. The point is not to feel superior to those who in OT times time and again went astray and fell from grace. The point is to examine ourselves in order to ensure that we don't make the same mistakes. Receive what God has done for us with thanksgiving. Seek His grace that we may live in accordance with His Will. When we fail, repent, ask His forgiveness and pray for the Holy Spirit's aid that we may do better in future and become more like Christ.

4th March

Acts 13 vv 44-52

This is the pattern in these early days. The Gospel is first preached to the Jews. There is some success, but also a lot of rejection and opposition. The Gospel is then preached to the Gentiles, who receive it with much greater enthusiasm than the Jews. As pagans, they may have understood their need for Jesus better than the Jews who already had Moses and the prophets and who may have been complacent that their lives were good enough as they were. Jesus came to call sinners. Those who fail to recognise that they are sinners don't listen. Those who vehemently reject the Gospel challenge then turn on those who proclaim Christ's Word. But *the disciples are filled with joy and the Holy Ghost*.

5th March

Acts 14 vv 1-7

In recent years, British governments have been in two minds about religion. On the one hand, religion promotes community cohesion. It brings people together with a common purpose. It provides a forum in which people can meet who might otherwise be lonely. It plays a big part in the education of the young. Religious people are very much involved in charitable work. Ultimately, most of us derive our values from religion. Prayer and worship bring us comfort and peace. Religious people even tend to live longer. On the other hand, religion can be divisive separating people into those who belong and those who don't. Religion can be intolerant. False religion can be intolerant to the point of violence. Religion may well challenge contemporary values. Evangelism can be embarrassing. If compelled to choose between loyalty to our understanding of God and loyalty to the British state, many of us will choose the former. It is a question for us religious people how we stand up for the Truth without doing more harm than good.

6th March

Acts 14 vv 8-18

Both as Jews and as Christians, Paul & Barnabas were rightly horrified at the idea that they might be worshipped as gods. Only God is worthy of worship. It is interesting how they say that God has been patient with us in our failure to acknowledge Him but that we ought to have known that there is a great Creator from our experience of His Creation. Now we have Jesus, there is no excuse for not coming to God in faith.

7th March (Lent 3)

Acts 14 vv 19-22

WE beseech thee, Almighty God, look upon the hearty desires of thy humble servants, and stretch forth the right hand of thy Majesty, to be our defence against all our enemies; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

You might think that Paul would have given up, having been stoned so badly that they thought he was dead. It would take much less than that to discourage me! But, no, Paul and his companions continued to preach the Gospel, going back to the very places their persecutors came from. Paul warns Christians that we must be prepared to pass through tribulation if we are to enter the Kingdom of God. I'm ashamed to admit to how trivial some of the discouragements which might put me off doing my Christian duty are. Is there anything that would put you off doing what you know you really ought to do for Jesus?

8th March

Acts 14 vv 23-28

I was chatting with the archdeacon recently about two types of ministry. Some ministers are like me. We put down roots in the places where we minister. In fact some of us have never moved very far from home. You can think of it as incarnational ministry if you like, ministering to a community as a member of that community. Such local leadership is essential to churches. Paul ordained elders in every church. But Paul himself didn't stay in any one place for very long. He was a pioneer. He did what God had given him to do in each community and then he moved on. He belonged in a different sense. He kept in touch with his Christian family by letter. I think Paul would have got on well with Zoom. After ordaining elders in Iconium etc., Paul went back to his base in Antioch and then Jerusalem. There are churches in Iconium, Cuxton & Halling, but the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. We are members one of another with Rochester & Canterbury, Rome, Jerusalem and wherever there are Christian people throughout the world.

9th March

Acts 15 vv 1-5

For people brought up to believe that they, the Jews, were the chosen people and that God had given them the Law which they were obliged to keep, including the circumcision of their males and eating only kosher food, it was a big step first to acknowledge that Gentiles could join the Church and then another to accept that they didn't have to observe those parts of the Torah which would much later be described as *as touching Ceremonies and Rites [which] do not bind Christian men*. Sometimes, we have to face the possibility that what we have always believed to be right might not be. What follows is a model of how the Church should resolve the tensions between what many maintain is a matter of loyalty to the faith once delivered to the saints and a different course of action which others believe is required by the Holy Spirit working in new ways within the world today. Examples we face in our lifetimes are women ministers, the possible remarriage of divorced people, Sunday observance & gay marriage. Does God require us to be faithful to what we believe has always been His Will for us or is He now telling us that it is time to embrace new ideas and make big changes in what we believe and practise?

10th March

Acts 15 vv 6-11

So how did the Church in Jerusalem, the Church from which the Gospel had gone out into the world and therefore the Church to whom people looked for leadership, handle this challenge? The apostles and elders came together to consider the matter. We have to be open to the meeting of minds. Attend to one another. Respect one another. Contribute to the debate the insights God has given to us. There won't be any progress towards unity if we don't talk to one another or if we don't listen to one another or if we shout across a chasm of suspicion. We may have to meet by Zoom or on the 'phone or by letters or articles in journals, but, I am sure that face to face meetings as respected colleagues are the best way ahead where possible. They then listen to Peter. He is a respected figure. He knows what he is talking about. He shares what he knows about the way God is working in the world to bring in the Gentiles. God has shown Peter through his meeting with Cornelius that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, not by observing the Law, a task which has proved beyond every human being except Jesus, because it demands perfect love, perfect obedience to God, the absolute sacrifice of self. Israel could never save itself by obedience to the Law. Only God can save. God saves us through what Christ has done, not by anything we can do.

11th March

Acts 15 v12

Paul and Barnabas were the radicals, the outsiders even. They weren't from Jerusalem. They had not been numbered among the original apostles. They were the ones who were pushing the Gentile mission and had conveyed the Gospel far father than probably anybody else had so far managed. They had endured the hardships of travel and suffered persecution. Paul, in particular, was a leader in insisting that Gentile converts did not have to be circumcised and could eat pork. Were Paul and Barnabas, then, men whom the Jerusalem community would naturally trust or would they be regarded with suspicion? Peter had paved the way for giving them a fair hearing and that is what they received. It is not always easy for us to be open to new ideas especially when they are advanced by people we might think of as outsiders.

12th March

Acts 15 vv 13-22

It's a nice touch that James calls Peter Simeon, the Hebrew version of his name, rather than the more Greek Simon. I expect his Jewish mates normally did call him Simeon. James, as church leader, weighs what Peter, Paul & Barnabas have said in the light of Scripture. Their experience as missionaries and evangelists casts new light on the Old Testament and its witness to the eternal Word and James concludes that it is now made manifest that God's eternal plan requires the inclusion of the Gentiles in His Kingdom and that they do not have to obey Torah *as touching Ceremonies and Rites*. James makes a few exceptions here, but they don't seem to have lasted long. I did once hear a Christian speaker who wouldn't eat black pudding (blood) or chicken (probably strangled), but its not usual for Christians to observe these prohibitions.

13th March

Acts 15 vv 23-35

Not only James, but the other apostles and the elders and the whole Jerusalem Church agreed to this understanding of the divine Truth and the policy it entailed. So they wrote to the Christians at Antioch and sent with the letter, not only Paul & Barnabas, but also others, including Silas and Judas, who could be trusted to authenticate it. *It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and us*. The Council of the Church, attentive to the Word, obedient to Scripture, open to what God was teaching them, prepared to listen respectfully to one another, discerned the Will of God.

14th March (Lent 4 Mothering Sunday)

Acts 15 vv 36-41

GRANT, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that we, who for our evil deeds do worthily deserve to be punished, by the comfort of thy grace may mercifully be relieved; through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

People talk about Paul's three missionary journeys. This is the second. He wants to catch up on the news from the places where he has established Churches, to encourage them and to extend the mission to new places. Follow up is important. Sometimes people come forward seeking what they need in Church and even make a commitment, but then fall away again if there is no follow up, if existing Church members don't encourage them. The fact that Paul & Mark fell out is an instance of that sad fact of Church life that sometimes Christians do fall out – even though we are called by God to love one another. It is good to know that, later on, Paul & Mark were not only reconciled, but that Mark was a great help to Paul (II Timothy 4¹¹). We ought always to pray for reconciliation, no matter how painful the quarrel. Mark was also a great help to Peter towards the end and many people believe that it was Peter who gave Mark the information he needed to write the gospel which bears his name.

Give thanks for our mothers today, for Mother Church & for the Blessed Virgin Mary and pray for mothers in their task in the world today.

15th March

Acts 16 vv 1-5

Paul was adamant that circumcision was unnecessary for Christians, but he insisted that Timothy was circumcised. Why was this? People are generally reckoned to be Jews if they have Jewish mothers, as Timothy did. She (Eunice) and Timothy's grandmother (Lois) were pious women and brought Timothy up to have faith in God. Perhaps there was some uneasiness in the minds of some people as to whether Timothy was a Jew or not, given that he had a Gentile father and a Greek name! So maybe the mission was impeded by people's doubts about Timothy's status. In the end, it doesn't matter, says Paul, whether people are circumcised or not. What matters is the Gospel and Paul was prepared to do what ever was necessary to get people to pay attention to

God's Good News. I Corinthians 9: ¹⁹ For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. ²⁰ And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; ²¹ To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. ²² To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. ²³ And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.

16th March

Acts 16 vv 6-13

It was around the time of the European referendum that I was asked to take assembly in one of our schools. It certainly wasn't my place as a preacher or teacher of the faith to tell people whether or not Britain should be a member of the EU. It is an issue on which it is possible for Christians to hold different views. I hold strong views on the subject which I hope are not incompatible with my Christian beliefs. What I know of God in prayer and in Scripture restrains me from the temptation to be an extremist or to treat other people who hold different views from mine with disrespect. I don't mind sharing my views on the EU if asked, but I would not represent my opinions on the matter as the official teaching of the Church. I would, however, as a spokesman for God, insist that the discussion be conducted with integrity and respectfully. [On reflection, the last time I was threatened with physical violence was in a pub when I was talking to someone who strongly disagreed with me about the EU and that was years before 2016. We didn't fight, however. He was entitled to express his opinions, but not to back them up with his fists and I would neither back down nor fight him!] Anyway, that assembly in June 2016 was a good time to tell the children this story of how the Gospel first came to Europe and eventually to England.

17th March

Acts 16 vv 14 & 15

It is good to think of these women meeting in the open air on the banks of the river each Sabbath for prayer. It seems probable that there were not many Jews in Philippi and that there was no synagogue. You need

10 men for a synagogue. No men are mentioned here at all, just these faithful women. Purple was expensive and it is probable that Lydia was quite wealthy. Once she had come to faith and been baptized, she offered support to Paul, just as certain women (including the better off) supported Jesus (Luke 8³). We know the names of famous people who achieve great things in public, but we sometimes forget how they depend on the support of other less prominent people. Wives or husbands and families, friends, volunteers, paid staff all play their part and there are far more musicians in the orchestra than there are soloists! We need to honour the backroom boys and to support them and to remember that we can be very useful in such capacities ourselves.

18th March

Acts 16 vv 16-24

I'm not entirely sure how to understand what was wrong with this poor young woman. What is clear is that her masters exploited her troubled mind. For centuries, showmen made money out of exhibiting "freaks" and the public lapped it up. Of course, there might have been few other ways for a seriously deformed person to make a living. Some people beg, using their sick children to move the hearts of potential donors. Some parents have even deliberately injured their children in order to make them more effective beggars. There is a great deal of wickedness in the human heart. The demon which possessed the girl recognised who Paul and his followers were and understood their mission. In the Gospels, too, the demons recognise Jesus as the Son of God, when far too many of His human hearers failed to do so. Just as Jesus did, Paul cast out the demon. Then the authorities sided with the owners of this young slave because they had lost a source of income. When slavery was eventually abolished in the British Empire, the government compensated slave owners for their financial loss with large sums of taxpayers' money. There is much wickedness in the human heart and too often it is to be found in those entrusted with wealth and power.

19th March

Acts 16 vv 25-34

I have very vague memories of a black and white TV series about Paul in which this scene is depicted – Paul & Silas singing hymns despite the beating they had received, the earthquake, the chains falling off and the gaoler ready to kill himself because he will be blamed if the prisoners

escape. It is a very impressive story. Paul & Silas are ready to forgive and befriend the gaoler. Through their ministry to him, he becomes a Christian and then he ministers to their bodily needs. Like Lydia, the Philippian gaoler is baptised with his whole household. Nowhere in the Bible does it specifically say that infants were baptised, though Jewish baby boys were inducted into the Covenant of the People of God by being circumcised on the eighth day. Many Christians believe that people should not be baptized into the New Covenant People of God until they are mature enough to know what they are taking on. However, none of us knows what we are taking on when we become Christians except that we undertake to follow Jesus wherever He leads us. Some human beings never grow to understanding (perhaps because of brain damage) and surely they are not excluded from God's family. Neither does it make sense to think that children cannot belong to God's Church and we join the Church through Baptism. Most Christians, therefore, want their children to be baptized. It is argued that there were probably children included in the households of Lydia and this gaoler when they were baptised. It would be normal in most human cultures for the whole family or household (including live in servants or slaves) to act together, under the direction of the head of the house, in something like adopting a faith. The children (and possibly servants) of Christian parents would be expected to be Christians themselves and it would be the duty of the head of the house to see them brought up in that way. A recent book (Joseph Henrich: *The Weirdest People in the World*) suggests that we westerners are odd in that we do encourage people to act as individuals rather than as members of a family or a community or tribe. The book also suggests that Christianity is one of the reasons why we are so individualistic. We make a personal choice to follow Jesus. We read the Bible for ourselves and make up our own minds what it means. It is also suggested that we might have gone too far down that road and lost our sense of belonging, but that is another story.

March 20th

Acts 16 vv 35-40

Meekness is a Christian virtue. *Blessed are the meek*, says Jesus, for *they shall inherit the earth*. Jesus Himself was meek. But does meekness mean allowing yourself to be trodden all over? Is it even

good for the people who are treading you down if you let them think they can get away with it? Certainly, we should forgive those who mistreat us. We should try to understand them. We shouldn't resist them by behaving towards them as they have behaved towards us. Jesus again: *But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.* But is it good for the people who have mistreated you to let them think that it doesn't matter? Isn't it legitimate to defend yourself within the law – God's perfect law of love? Is it fair to other potential victims of bullies if we let the bullies get away with their bullying behaviour unchallenged? I note that Paul generally stood on his legal rights. He himself writes: *Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.*

March 21st (Lent 5 Passion Sunday)

Acts 17 vv 1-4

And of the chief women not a few.

The Christian faith was instantly attractive to many women. Maybe this was because Christianity treated women with greater respect than many other contemporary cultures. Furthermore, the Christian religion treats relations between men and women as sacred. A man is to love and care for his wife as Christ loves and cares for the Church. A woman is to respect and love her husband as we, the Church, love and respect our Lord. As we have seen, some women behind the scenes supported both Jesus & Paul in their ministries. Reading Acts and the Epistles, we meet powerful women with prominent parts in the life and work of the Church. Women like Lois and Eunice passed on their faith to their children. Today would have been my grandmother's birthday. She passed on her faith to my father and to my sister and me. It is also the first day of Spring, symbolising the new life we have in the Death & Resurrection of Jesus Christ, but also the anniversary of the martyrdom of Thomas Cranmer, reminding us of the cost of following Him.

WE beseech thee, Almighty God, mercifully to look upon thy people; that by thy great goodness they may be governed and preserved evermore, both in body and soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

March 22nd

Acts 17 vv 5-9

Listening to the radio can be very depressing. The news and current affairs programmes are full of wars and famines and (lately) plagues, insoluble

political dilemmas, hateful accusations levelled at opponents, dreadful crimes and acts of terrorism, plus futile and fruitless arguments. I'm usually switched on at lunchtime when the consumer affairs programmes come on and you get the impression that there isn't a business out there which isn't either seeking to defraud its customers or else is itself the victim of criminals. I sometimes wonder if it is unhealthy to listen to all this stuff. We actually have a lot to be thankful for. Most of us are not the victims of plague, pestilence, or famine, or battle, murder or even sudden death. Most of the people we do business with are honest. But these things do go on in the world. There is a great deal of wickedness in the human heart. What wickedness to start a riot because you don't like what certain speakers are saying in public. (Cancel culture?) However, unwittingly, Paul's opponents point to the solution to the problem of evil. *These that have turned the world upside down have come hither also.* The Christian Gospel does turn the world upside down. No more greed or violence or dishonesty. No more infidelity. No more indifference to the needs and well-being of other people. All these sins can be repented of in Christ and new beginnings made in Him. In Christ, our lives take a new direction. Our aim is to follow in the footsteps of the Prince of Peace rather than to look after number one. Paradoxically, it is in that surrender of self and selfish desires that true life is to be found.

Mark 8 v34: *And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. 35For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it. 36For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? 37Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? 38Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.*

March 23rd

Acts 17 vv 10-15

I get the impression that Paul was quite a stubborn individual and that he would have carried on preaching at Thessalonica come what may. Unnamed followers were wiser and sent him and Silas away. After all, Jesus told His apostles to move on from the towns which rejected them and to shake off the dust from their streets as a witness to them. There is a time for staying in one place, faithfully and patiently overcoming the hostility of the people by

constant love, but there is also a time for admitting that staying in one place is doing more harm than good and that it is prudent therefore to move on. What is not always clear is which is which. Anyway, the Jews at Berea are commended because they listened to Paul and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so. That's what you do when you listen to a sermon. You check it against the Bible, especially perhaps if you don't agree with it!

March 24th

Acts 17 vv 16-31

Paul's experience in Athens is very different from what it is in most other places. It is a pagan city, famous for its philosophers and for its being one of the first states to have a functioning democracy. As elsewhere, Paul has touched base with the Jewish community, people who, like Paul, believed that there is one God, Maker of Heaven & earth, Who has made Himself known through Moses and the prophets. Paul firmly affirms all this and then adds that God has finally made Himself known through His Son Jesus and that this is Good News not only for the Jews but for the whole of creation. But the aspect of his mission to which the author of Acts devotes the most space is Paul's debating the pagan philosophers. He is horrified by their idolatry, but he makes use of one of their beliefs – in an unknown God – to proclaim that the God they don't know has made Himself known in Jesus Christ. Paul preaches that God is supreme over all things. He has created everything that exists. The lives of nations and of individuals are in His Hands. Paul draws out the implications of what some of their pagan philosophers and poets have realised, that we dwell in God and He in us. As a good teacher, Paul uses what they know already as a foundation for what he has to teach them – that God is Lord of all, that He has been patient with human failings, but that now He has sent Jesus into the world, He demands that we turn to Him & repent of our sins and that Jesus will return to judge the world.

March 25th (The Annunciation)

Acts 17 vv 32-34

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.*

Back in the 1980s, there was a good deal of controversy surrounding David Jenkins, who was then Bishop of Durham. According to reports,

he didn't believe in the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection of Jesus – two biblical doctrines repeated daily in the Creed by ministers of the Church of England. I think that newspaper writers who themselves didn't understand what they were writing about misunderstood a man of deep faith. It is true, however, that the bishop alarmed a lot of Christians by saying that the essence of our faith in the Incarnation and Resurrection of the Son of God does not depend on Joseph and Mary abstaining from a normal married life or a grave being found to be empty three days after a definitely dead body has been deposited in it. Now, let me make it quite clear, I do believe that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was born and that His tomb was found to be empty. These miracles do not, however, compel faith. Millions of people treasure these stories at Christmas and Easter without apparently believing that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God, crucified, buried and risen again for their personal salvation. And, on the other hand, there are people who find it hard to believe that God so tampers with the normal course of events in the world that a virgin could give birth and a dead man walk and who nevertheless believe profoundly in Jesus as their Saviour. I believe that was what David Jenkins believed, though only God knows what is in anybody's heart. I respect people like David Jenkins, but I would insist that God can do anything. He can and does work miracles. He is a hands on God directing everything that happens in Heaven and earth. Given that, no miracle is impossible and I have no difficulty believing in the miracles described in the Bible. I wouldn't deny that a person who doesn't believe in miracles can have saving faith but I think that there is a risk that such a person will gradually become less conscious of God Who speaks to them through the pages of the Bible and attends to their prayers. Isn't the Eucharist a daily miracle, given that Jesus truly comes to us in bread & wine? God is not the clockmaker Who made the world, wound it up & left it to run. He is the One in Whom we live & move & have our being.

March 26th

Acts 18 vv 1-6

Why don't people like the Jews? I'm currently reading an account of the way the Nazis sent the gypsies to the concentration camps. The gypsies find the Jews already there and even worse treated than they are. What the Nazis did was the culmination of centuries of persecution

of the Jews by people and nations who called themselves Christians, even by the Church herself. How can anyone who has read the Bible hate Jews? The Bible is clear that we must not hate people of any race. God *hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the earth*. The Jews especially deserve our love and respect. They were God's chosen people to whom God's promises were originally made. The Law and the prophets prepare the way for Jesus. Jesus and His first disciples (including all the apostles) were Jews. The Gospel was preached to the Jew first and then to the Gentile. The New Testament is clear that Jesus is a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel. The NT prayer and hope is that the Jews will embrace the Gospel and that we shall all be one in the Kingdom of God. But it is not only Christians who have persecuted the Jews. The pagan Emperor Claudius had made the Jews leave Rome just before the action in today's reading. Centuries before that, in the Book of Esther, you can read how Haman set himself the task of wiping out the Jewish race and how God thwarted his evil designs.

I think it is partly just because the Jews are different that they are persecuted. That would also be true of the gypsies. People being different makes us uneasy. If they don't share our culture and language and religion they can seem like a threat. We feel safe with the people with whom we belong. It is not much of a step from there to feel unsafe with the people who don't quite belong, people who live separately from us, pursue a different way of life, dress differently, follow different customs, worship God differently.

I think it is also that the faithfulness of Jews to the one God and their adherence to high ethical standards pricks the consciences of pagans and of those Christians who don't live up to the high standards of honesty and integrity which the Law demands. They are even jealous of those Jews who prosper because they work hard and honestly.

March 27th

Acts 18 vv 7-11

The last verse of yesterday's reading describes the Jews' rejection of Paul and his message about Jesus and his warning that they will bear the consequences of their actions. It is episodes like these which some

people who call themselves Christians have used as an excuse to persecute the Jews. But note two things. One is that Paul does not seek to harm them himself. Everything is left to the God of justice – whether to reward or to punish. Ultimately, justice is in God’s Hands, not ours. It is presumptuous of us to condemn because we are all sinners. Justice is in God’s Hands and He is also the God of mercy. Paul’s prayer for the Jews (and for errant Christians) is not that they will be punished, but that they will find mercy. Moreover, not all the Jews reject Paul’s message. Even Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, becomes a Christian. Although generally the NT speaks of the Jews & the Pharisees & Sadducees in particular rejecting the Gospel, if you read it carefully, you see that many Jews, including Pharisees and priests, did accept Jesus. Having had to get out of the synagogue, they didn’t build a church; they worshipped in the house of a faithful man. Paul stayed much longer in Corinth than in most places he visited. Jesus told him to.

March 28th (Palm Sunday)

Acts 18 vv 12-17

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who, of thy tender love towards mankind, hast sent thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh, and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility; Mercifully grant, that we may both follow the example of his patience, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

All the places we read about in the NT in which Paul planted churches came under the dominion of the Roman Empire. Rome was very efficient. She preserved the peace and imposed law and order. She promoted trade and prosperity. She built the roads, aqueducts and other infrastructure projects. She kept the seas reasonably free from pirates. Many early Christians believed that God had chosen this period in which to become incarnate because Roman civilization provided the conditions in which the Gospel might be broadcast throughout the inhabited world, take root, grow and bear fruit. But Rome was also utterly ruthless. Vice and corruption extended to the very highest levels of society. A potential difficulty for the early Church was that Jesus had been executed by the Romans as a criminal, as One Who was a threat to the established order, as One Who proclaimed a Kingdom not

of this world and a kingship infinitely greater than Caesar's, as One Who was seen as a rabble rouser, a threat to Roman peace, as One Whose followers could turn the world upside down, Jesus half understood and misunderstood both by His disciples and by His opponents, both by the Jewish authorities and by Rome. If Rome, therefore, saw the early Church as a threat, it would be a formidable foe when it came to preaching the Gospel. Hence the importance of telling stories such as this to as wide an audience as possible, to the effect that, from the beginning, Roman officials had found nothing in the words or actions of Christians that warranted taking legal action against them.

March 29th

Acts 18 v18 – 19 v7

The toings and froings are a bit confusing. Paul leaves Corinth and travels to Ephesus, where he doesn't stay as long as they would like him to because he has made a vow which must be fulfilled in Jerusalem. Accompanying him is the married couple Aquila and Priscilla (sometimes called Prisca), who are very effective co-workers with Paul. Aquila and Pricilla remain at Ephesus. Meanwhile, Apollos turns up in Ephesus. We haven't met him before. He's heard something of the Gospel and is very enthusiastic for it. He preaches in the synagogue and enjoys some success. Aquila and Pricilla then help him to a fuller understanding of the faith. He becomes an even more effective preacher and goes off to Corinth with a letter of commendation from the Church at Ephesus. We meet Paul in Ephesus again and he discovers about twelve converts who have been baptised in the way John the Baptist baptised but without knowing anything about the Holy Spirit. Perhaps these were converted by Apollos before he was taught the full facts by Aquila and Priscilla. So Paul explains that repentance and preparedness for the Kingdom of God are very important, but that there is much more. John prepared the way for Jesus. Jesus pours out upon us His Holy Spirit. Paul gives them Christian Baptism and lays his hands on them so that they receive the Spirit. Some Christians read this (along with the story in Acts 8¹⁴⁻¹⁷) as a precursor to Confirmation.

March 30th

Acts 19 vv 8-12

As was his usual practice, Paul began by preaching in the synagogue. *To the Jew first.* When the opposition grew, he left the synagogue and preached in a school. It happens sometimes that we are obstructed in doing what we believe we should be doing. This COVID business has disrupted our church programmes in many ways. We have tried other ways of achieving the same ends. We obviously can pray alone and pray for one another even when we cannot meet. Not all the time, but a lot of the time we have been able to receive Holy Communion in one kind only. Christ comes to us in all His fulness in the bread. It is preferable to share both bread & wine, but not necessary. In the bread, we enjoy fellowship with Christ and with one another, as we do in the wine. There is also such a thing as spiritual Communion. Unable for whatever reason to receive the consecrated bread & wine, if we truly repent of our sins and believe faithfully in Jesus and give thanks truly for what He accomplished for us on the Cross, *we do eat and drink the Body & Blood of our Saviour Christ profitably to our soul's health, although we do not receive the Sacrament with our mouths.* Many churches have held services on line in which people can participate over such as Zoom. We can also just watch or listen to online, TV and radio services. We have shared teaching & preaching & prayer requests by the internet, by 'phone & on paper. There are always ways round any difficulties and God's plans are not thwarted. We have tried to find new ways of sharing the faith with those who do not yet know Jesus or who have rejected His love.

Having to try new ideas, we may have been opened up to fresh ideas for the future even when COVID is over. I'm sure we shall want to resume a lot of what we used to do, but perhaps not all of it. There will also be lessons we've learnt about Christian fellowship, service and evangelism which we shan't want to forget – different ideas for accomplishing Christ's work in the world today.

Every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old. (Matthew 13⁵²).

March 31st

Acts 19 vv 13-20

Recently, I had a couple of teenagers visiting me. They seemed to be obsessed with ghosts and spirits, alleged hauntings, churchyards & graves. A lot of teenagers seem to go through this phase, some experimenting with Ouija boards. I have the impression that it is generally older people who consult mediums, attend séances and watch those public displays of paranormal phenomena which are put on in theatres and even televised. Sometimes, I'm asked to bless a house or some other building or a person where there is a concern that there might be unquiet spirits involved. I can pray and ask for God's blessing. I do not perform exorcisms, which is a specialist ministry and only ever to be undertaken under proper authority and discreetly. As the sons of Sceva discovered, exorcism can go badly wrong if not undertaken under the authority of Jesus Christ, which is His to bestow, not ours to presume on. I told these teenagers what I always tell people bothered by such phenomena. While not ruling out totally the possibility of ghosts and spirits being involved, I am sure that most alleged psychic phenomena have a perfectly natural explanation. People are either making up these supernatural manifestations or they are mistaken themselves. In those extremely rare circumstances where spirits or ghosts might be involved, we don't have to be afraid. God is more powerful than any demon or ghost. Christ vanquished all the powers of the evil one on the Cross. The Holy Spirit is infinitely more powerful than any other spirit. So we don't have to be afraid. We shouldn't dabble, however, with forces we don't understand, forces which might wish to harm us. People have scared themselves badly playing with Ouija boards or by getting involved with séances or the occult more generally. The sole case in the Bible of a medium calling up a departed spirit is in I Samuel 28. King Saul gets the witch of Endor to raise the spirit of the prophet Samuel. Samuel complains about being disturbed and warns that Saul and his sons, together with many Israelites, will on the morrow join Samuel in the grave. So. Don't be too credulous about supernatural phenomena. Don't be afraid. Don't dabble. I don't want to finish the quarter on a gloomy note, however. So let's read on. When the people of Ephesus recognise where the Truth lies, they destroy all their magic books and idols. *So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.*