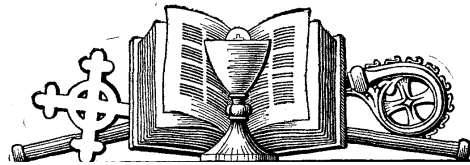


The Rest of the Story
Completing Chronicles
Finishing Timothy



Bible Notes July – September
2008

50p

July 1st

Ezra 1 vv 1-3

Quite often we start part of the bible in these notes and then we don't finish. Three months is not enough time to look at everything. Then, perhaps, we don't get back for the end of the story. So I thought we could use this quarter's notes to tie up a few loose ends.

In the early part of the year, we studied the two Books of Chronicles, which tell the story of Israel up to the Exile in Babylon. We read about the glories of worship, of lives offered to God, and we also read about the consequences of human rebellion against God. *The wages of sin is death*. Finally, after centuries of rebellion, repentance and more rebellion, the Holy City is destroyed by the Babylonians. The Temple is demolished. Worship can no longer continue in the style celebrated in Chronicles. The royal family and the leading citizens are all deported to Babylon. Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of the return. Ezra is obviously meant to be linked to Chronicles because it starts with the three verses that end II Chronicles, but we shall see that the style is not quite the same and, probably, it is not by the same author.

The points to note are that it is God Who brings the exiles home. They do not achieve the restoration of Israel by their own efforts. Neither does God save them because they deserve to be saved. As always, when God does anything for human beings, it is a matter of His grace, His mercy, not our desert. Moreover, God is able to use the pagan King of Persia to bring the exiles home and to rebuild Jerusalem. He does not depend on believers in Him to accomplish His purposes. The destiny of all nations is in His Hands. We may feel weak and few in number, but it the omnipotent God Who makes things happen.

July 2nd

Ezra 1 vv 4-6

This is a shared effort. Some of the Jews in Babylon are going back to the Holy Land to build the Temple. There will be other people who never made it to Babylon. They are expected to help too. So are the Jews who, at least for the present, will stay in Babylon. Those not actually engaged in the building work will supply money and materials. In our ministry as Christians, some people have roles where everyone can see what they are doing. Maybe they conduct worship or preach.

Perhaps they chair committees or have some other public role, such as catering for a social event or organising a fellowship group. All of us, however, all Christians share in the work of the Church. Maybe it is by giving money or by helping in the background in some way. Certainly we will all support the work of the Church by our prayers. The responsibility to accomplish Christ's purposes in the world is shared by all of us who are called Christians.

July 3rd (St Thomas)

Ezra 1 vv 7-11

So the returning exiles take the free will offerings of the people and also Cyrus returns the goods originally plundered from the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar, decades earlier. There is something new and something old. There are the present day offerings and the heritage of things offered in previous centuries.

We too are blessed with both. We have a rich inheritance from the past. We have the opportunity to contribute generously in the present – whether of goods, money, time or talents. Some churches rashly discard their inheritance from the past. Some cannot escape from it. But, in the Bible, the sensible man brings out his treasure things new and old (Matthew 13 v52).

July 4th

Ezra 2 v1 (vv2-63)

There was recently an exhibition of art, normally on display in Russia, at the Royal Academy in London. The Russian Government made our Government promise that it would all be returned. In the various upheavals of C20 – especially the Second World War – many valuable art items were stolen or confiscated or liberated from their owners. Those owners' descendants understandably want them back. Present owners may, however, have acquired them in good faith, not knowing that they had originally been misappropriated. There can be a good deal of murkiness about how a work of art came to be in particular hands. The Russian fear was that, if they sent these works to London, people claiming ownership might institute court proceedings, which could be lengthy, expensive and perhaps eventually inclusive. So we promised we wouldn't allow this. Otherwise the exhibition would not have gone ahead at all. In this chapter of Ezra, they are setting out clearly who is

who, who is descended from whom and who is entitled to what. Will these people want the family land back when they get to Israel? What will happen to the people who have been occupying their land for the last fifty years? You notice in verses 61-63, certain people claim to be of the priestly families and therefore to be entitled to certain dues. They fail to prove their claim, however, and get nothing.

In some ways, it seems mean to be obsessed with heredity and inheritance. In other ways, it seems only right and fair. What do you think?

July 5th

Ezra 2 vv 64-70

It was a big crowd that travelled back from Babylon to Israel. And they took a lot of wealth with them. The prophet Isaiah sees this as a rerun of the Exodus – the escape of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, hundreds of years before this. Isaiah wrote of this event:

Therefore the redeemed of the LORD shall return and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads.

When we sing these words, more importantly than Exodus or return from Exile, we are probably thinking of all the millions of Christians - Jews and gentiles – who will end up in heaven with everlasting joy.

July 6th

Ezra 3 vv 1-3

The basis of the new Jerusalem is the Temple. Everything that it means to be human depends on humanity's relationship with the divine. We exist for worship. Our understanding of God is the foundation of our law and customs. Our relationship with God determines our relationship with other people. God is our hope, the subject and fount of our faith, the inspiration of our love. Societies which know this put religion at the centre. A secular society marginalises religion, prioritising the things you can see and touch, and leaves an aching void at the centre.

July 7th

Ezra 3 vv 4-6

At the time of the Exodus, God had given the Israelites a rhythm of life. One day in seven was the Sabbath – a day set apart for rest, family and worship. Three times a year were the great pilgrim feasts of Passover,

Pentecost and Tabernacles, when people celebrated what God had done for them in the past, marked out the agricultural year and joyfully anticipated the blessings they expected from God in the future. Living with this rhythm identified them as one people with their ancestors and their descendants and identified them as the people of God. Christians are a bit inclined to point out that this can all become an empty ritual. Surely, we should worship all the time, not just on Sundays and other feasts of the Church. Surely we should worship in spirit and in truth. It doesn't matter about coming to church on particular days, carrying out particular actions, saying particular words. And all that sounds very plausible, but does the person who gives up taking part in formal religion (church services etc) really worship all the time in spirit and in truth or is he more likely to forget God altogether? Certainly these returning exiles thought it was more important to re-establish regular worship than to do anything else towards the rebuilding of their city. Whereas we are more inclined to take part in organised worship only after we have finished all the "practical" tasks.

July 8th

Ezra 3 v7

Most people offer their services to the Church for nothing, freely donating their time, talents and money. But sometimes it is right to pay people. There are jobs for which we need professionals and professionals have to live. If they spend much of their time working for the church as youth leaders, stonemasons, musicians or clergy, they still need to eat and to feed their families. I find it a difficult question how well we "full-timers" ought to be paid. I don't think we should get fat on the offerings of the faithful. But I also think it is a bit of an insult if we apparently value work done for the church or for a mission or charity at much less than we value an ordinary job in the outside world. It is also legitimate for people working for the church for free to claim expense such as fares, cooking materials, telephone calls, etc. Some can afford to pay for these things themselves and some cannot. We should not turn down someone's offer of their time and talents to repaint the railings if they can't afford (or don't wish) to pay for the paint as well!

July 9th

Ezra 3 v8

Jeshua is the Archbishop of Canterbury and Zerubbabel is the prime minister. Well, it isn't quite like that, but Jeshua is the high priest and the head religious authority, and Zerubbabel is the governor, the chief civil authority. There is a separation of powers between church and state, but they work very closely together. Priest and king have different roles, but they are both vital. The Church has been too often corrupted by the enjoyment of worldly power, but a godless state is a state without a moral compass. Jeshua and Zerubbabel are both seen as anointed (Hebrew Messiah). In Jesus, the roles of King of Kings and one, true, priest are eternally combined.

July 10th

Ezra 3 vv 9-11

It was obviously a tremendous occasion when at last the foundations of the new temple were laid. A terrific effort went into the worship offered on this huge occasion in the nation's life. Can you imagine the excitement of being there and seeing this first step towards restoration after decades of ruin and poverty? It must have been like rebuilding after the Blitz, staging the London Olympics in 1948 and holding the Festival of Britain in 1951 and the coronation in 1953. Think of the cheering crowds.

The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord.

What we have is infinitely more wonderful!

July 11th

Ezra 3 vv 12&13

This is a delightfully human touch. We can date the return from Exile to 50-70 years after the destruction of the Temple. So there are at least two generations for whom all this is entirely new. They have never known anything other than Babylonian exile or they have grown up to scratch a living in the ruins of the old city. But the old do remember the old city and the old temple – its glories and its destruction. And their emotions are very different.

An obvious parallel is Remembrance Sunday. Some of you remember the World War only too well. Maybe you knew some of the people commemorated on the War Memorial. My generation are your children

and grew up in the aftermath, your memories still fresh of something we never knew, but which was very personal to the people we loved. My generation's children and grandchildren know the war mainly as history. All the generations have perspectives to share with all the others – the new and the old, tradition and invention, heritage and new ideas.

July 12th

Ezra 4 v1

There always seems to be opposition to the work of God and it is hard sometimes to understand why. After all God's work is about spreading the Good News. It is about life and love and joy, the things people claim to want. Yet there always seems to be opposition. In some cases, there is active persecution of the Church. Often the Church scores own goals, obsessing and even quarrelling over trivia, rather than getting on with the task in hand. Then there seems to be chance. How often we lay something on to attract children or young people only to find that it clashes with another attraction or activity laid on by somebody else! Is it chance? Sometimes there is a suspicion that it is deliberate. People occasionally blame the Devil. And, anyway, why is it that, when something the Church is doing clashes with what the school or the sports club or the music society is doing, people (even church members) seem to choose the secular over the sacred? Original sin? The work of Satan? Just chance? Anyway, there always seems to be opposition and the opposition generally looks more powerful than we are. But actually, self-sacrificial love always wins out in the end. God is more powerful than the Devil. Christ redeems us from original sin. And is there really such a thing as chance in a universe governed by an omnipotent Deity?

July 13th

Ezra 4 vv 2&3

In the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries BC, first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians set out to conquer large areas of the near and middle East. It was their policy to deport conquered populations to other parts of their empires in order to weaken opposition. So the Assyrians, having conquered Northern Israel, forced the Israelites into exile and settled the land with gentiles from other places. 100 years later, the Babylonians, removed the inhabitants of Southern Israel to Babylon, though they do not seem to have resettled the land. The pagan

tribes which the Assyrians had brought into Israel had learned to worship the LORD, but not purely. There was too much contamination with paganism. The returning exiles are determined to establish an absolutely pure religion because, after all, it was their failure to keep the LORD's Law which had led to the exile in the first place. So the question is, "Do we allow these half-hearted worshippers of Yahweh to join us and so to compromise our purity or do we reject them and preserve our purity?" They chose the latter. Jesus tells us both to be perfect even as His Father in Heaven is perfect and to accept into our fellowship publicans and sinners. It is a puzzle to know how we do both. Some churches are incredibly exclusive and risk shutting sincere seekers out of the Kingdom. Others are so open that apparently anything goes. Neither is Christian!

July 14th

Ezra 4 vv 4-6

Delay is always a good tactic if you want to stop something, but can't marshal the necessary arguments. Set up a committee to look into it. Ask for a more detailed budget. Point out that what is proposed might offend someone (someone else naturally, not you; you're far too broad minded to be easily upset). Put off making a decision until the next meeting. The last Bishop of Rochester used to say that the Church of England has the brakes of an ARTIC, but the engine of a lawnmower. He meant that there are so many mechanisms for slowing things down or stopping them and it is so very hard to bring a new idea to fruition and there are so many organisations like it!

July 15th

Ezra 4 vv 7-16

In these books, there is quite a bit of correspondence between the imperial capital and what is now an outlying province. They write in Aramaic (Syrian AV) because this is the official language of the empire. Notice they emphasise how loyal they are to the Persian King and try to impugn the motives of the Jews in rebuilding the city. They use the Jews' history against them, pointing out that Judah was formerly an independent state and inclined to rebel against foreign domination. Incidentally, do the names in these books make them the hardest books in the Bible to read out loud or does that honour go to Paul for the complexity of his arguments?

July 16th

Ezra 4 vv 17-24

The Persian emperor has the records searched and finds out that it is true that Judah was an independent state which formerly dominated the region from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean. He decides to play safe and orders the authorities in Samaria to put a stop to the work in Jerusalem. Samaria is the old capital of Northern Israel and now, it seems, the administrative centre of the region and dominated by the descendants of the tribes the Assyrians imported into the region more than a century before. These Samaritans are only too eager to put a stop to the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple. We can see the seeds of the dislike between Samaritans and Jews which we shall encounter in the New Testament in 500 years time.

According to Torah, the Jew must love his neighbour as himself. When Jesus was asked, then, who is my neighbour, he answered with the Parable of the Good Samaritan!

July 17th

Ezra 5 vv 1&2

I suppose it was prudent to abandon the work in view of this opposition. It is easy to give in and sometimes giving in is the right thing to do, but not when you are engaged in the work of the LORD. It is difficult to build the Church and there is a great deal of opposition. And I am not talking about the church building – with costs of materials and labour and the vagaries of English Heritage and the faculty jurisdiction. What I mean by building the Church is building the numbers by making new Christians and building up those who are Christians to the full stature of Christ. Think of body building. When you are young, your body grows bigger by the addition of millions of extra cells, but it also develops as the muscles you exercise grow stronger. The Body of Christ grows in the same way. It accrues millions of new members. These members develop into finely honed organs and tissues.

Anyway, doing nothing was not an option. God sends the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to gee up Zerubbabel and Jeshua. Maybe, the Church of England also needs geeing up since we seem so complacent in the face of decline.

July 18th

Ezra 5 vv 3-5

In bible classes we were always taught the power of names. Adam names the animals as a sign that God has given him dominion over them. Jesus demands the demons' name because He has power over them. In the playground, we were taught that *sticks and stones might brake my bones, but words could never hurt me*. It was only when I came here, I think, that I realised the power of names. During the rail link campaign, opponents of the link took photographs of some land surveyors working for the railway. That was enough to make them go away. There was, of course, no threat, but it was enough that they did not want to be identified. In my last church, a complaint was generally prefaced with *people are saying*. Being anonymous gave them power. Knowing their names would have given me power to answer and explain. In the past, officials tried to shelter behind anonymity. They still do not like being held personally responsible for their department's actions. Conversely, employers often force the lowliest employees to wear name badges or to give their Christian names when telephoning. It creates a bogus familiarity and bogus accountability, but of course they are not really accountable unless you also have the surname. It is wonderful that we have the Holy Name of Jesus through Whom to approach the God Whose Name was considered too holy to pronounce or to write in full.

July 19th

Ezra 5 vv 6-17

We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth.

This was the reply of the people who were rebuilding the Temple when they were asked who they were and what they were doing by the political authorities from Samaria. I read recently that there are probably 100,000,000 Chinese Christians and only 70,000,000 Chinese members of the Communist Party. This despite the fact that the Communists have ruled China ruthlessly more or less since the Second World War and made it their priority to extinguish religion. We might feel defeated. We face huge costs for buildings, as did the builders of the Temple. There is quite a lot of mild opposition in modern Britain to our efforts to build God's Church in modern Britain. But if we fail it is because we forget that we are the servants of the God of heaven and earth.

July 20th

Ezra 6 vv 1-12

Religious people have an ambiguous relationship with the authority of the state. Our first loyalty is always to God and, if loyalty to the state, conflicts with our loyalty to God, it is God Whom we have to obey. On the other hand, we recognise that all authority comes from God. We know that anarchy (an absence of authority) is good for no-one. So we generally obey the laws and encourage other people to do the same.

Sometimes, as here, even in a non-Christian country we can use the law to our advantage. The agents of a secular, atheistic or Moslem state may try to use the state's security apparatus against the Church, but often this can be shown to be unlawful. Most secular states have laws guaranteeing the freedom to practise one's religion. The Quran tells Moslems to respect Jews and Christians. We can often use the law of the land to protect our freedom to practise our faith and we should not hesitate to use, for example, the Human Rights Act when police, civil servants or council officers tell us not to display Christian emblems openly for reasons of political correctness.

Note also, however, the pagan King Darius asks the prayers of God's people. We may not always agree with the authorities in the country we live in, but we are still loyal citizens and we pray for all our rulers, Christian and otherwise.

July 21st

Ezra 6 vv 13-15

They prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo.

Prophesying is proclaiming the Word of God. God's Word effects what it proclaims. It is *quick and powerful and sharper than any two edged sword*. It is not that the main work of the builders is the physical process of construction with occasional breaks for worship and bible reading. The whole enterprise is an act of worship, sustained by confessing the Word of God. If we are not careful, we say a prayer at the beginning and end of a meeting or a meal, a social event or some building work on the Church and put our principal effort into talking, cooking or brick-laying. But that is not enough. Everything we do as a Church has to be based in the proclamation of the Word of God. The

whole meeting or meal or building project has to be an act of worship, sustained by the confession of Jesus, the Word of God.

July 22nd (St Mary Magdalene)

Ezra 6 vv 16-22

A Tale of Two Meetings.

Thousands of years ago, twelve tribes of nomads journeyed from Egypt to the Promised Land. The trek through the desert was harsh. In the end it would take them forty years and almost none of those who started the journey would finish it. Soon after setting out, their leader told them that God wanted them to build the Ark of the Covenant and a Tabernacle as a place where they would meet God and worship. There were to be wonderful vestments for the priesthood to wear, golden vessels, stone altars, finely carved woodwork, jewellery and beautiful embroidery. The people were asked to donate the materials and to offer their time and talents in the performance of the work. Very soon, Moses had so many offerings piling up that he was forced to order the people to stop giving. There was just too much.

A few weeks ago, another meeting took place in a Christian Church. These people had so much more to be thankful for. God had not merely set them free from Egyptian slavery to take them on a difficult journey to an earthly paradise. For these people, God had sent His Son to die a terrible death on a Cross so that they should be eternally free from sin and death and live for ever with God in Heaven. This meeting heard how there was a deficit in the Church's finances. It heard how there were not enough people to do the jobs that wanted doing. No-one could suggest anything to solve the problems even though they all half-wondered if their Church was dying.

Can you account for the difference in the two meetings? I wish I could!

July 23rd

Ezra 7 vv 1-10

We're entering a new phase. A good deal of the work has been done. Now we need a new priest, with the right credentials, to take over the leadership of building the Temple and offering the music and sacrifices – all part of their act of worship. The priest has the right lineage. He also prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD. We are all called

just as we are. Because we are Christians, we are members of Christ's royal priesthood and God has prepared for each one of us good works to do. He has made us the people we are, but we also need to develop our talents by using the means of grace He supplies – studying the Word, participating in Holy Communion, prayer and Christian fellowship.

July 24th

Ezra 7 vv 11-26

Ezra's task is made much easier because he has the King on his side. Artaxerxes is not a worshipper of YHWH (or certainly not in the pure sense required by the Torah) but he gives full support to Ezra in re-establishing the worship of YHWH in Jerusalem. Those who want to go up from Babylon are free to do so. The civic authorities will help in the supply of the materials they need for building and worship. Ezra is encouraged to teach (and enforce) the Law of God.

I cannot help wondering what is the proper attitude of the modern British state towards religion? Should the state support the Christian Church (because Jesus Christ is the authentic revelation of the one true God)? Should the state support all religions because religion is very important to peoples and cultures and generally benign so that supporting their religion is a way of demonstrating our respect for them? Should the state be indifferent to religion (if that is possible)? Or should the state demand our absolute loyalty and relegate religion to a private matter between each individual, family of community and God as they understand Him?

July 25th

Ezra 7 vv 27&28

We are insufficiently thankful. Prayer is far too often a list of the things we want from God or the complaints we have. There is too little thanksgiving and too little praise. And this diminishes us as people. We shrink as we obsess about ourselves and what we want. Obviously, it is better to pray for other people than to pray for ourselves, to focus on others, rather than on me me me. It is healthier still, however, to focus on God – to praise and give thanks. Then everything else comes into its proper focus – our sincere love for other people and our proper regard for ourselves. Ezra is strengthened as he blesses God.

July 26th

Ezra 8 vv 1-20

As we said before, it was important to keep records of people. Who owned what? Who was entitled to what? Who was responsible for what? Hence these lists of names and families, with their concern for hereditary property rights and hereditary offices. The sacred ministry was passed down from father to son in the Old Testament and it seems that there was a shortage of Levites willing to come forward to take their part in the Temple worship. The priests were the main ministers offering the sacrifices, but the Levites supplied other functions such as assisting with the sacrifices, singing, teaching etc. The whole enterprise of rebuilding the Jewish nation would, however, collapse unless the worship was restored. It is worship, our relationship with God, which informs and inspires everything else we do. So it was a priority to find Levites so that the worship could go ahead.

All Christians are priests and full time ministers. We do, however, have a ministerial priesthood, men who are set apart to worship and to lead worship. No understanding of the “priesthood of all believers” or of “lay ministry” or of “every member ministry” can be allowed to detract from the primacy of worship. However we organise it, the principal activity of the Church is worship. The Sunday Eucharist, the daily prayer, the daily public readings of the Scriptures are not optional extras. They are not even three activities among many, competing for the Church’s attention along with meetings and fund-raising, buildings maintenance, pastoral care and evangelism. Worship, prayer and the confession of the Word are the bedrock of the Christian enterprise and some or all of us absolutely must set aside a major part of our lives to the maintenance of (preferably public) worship.

July 27th

Ezra 8 vv 21-23

Ezra is very grateful to God that Artaxerxes has told them that they may return to the Holy Land and that he has made provision for materials, safe passage etc. He does not, however, think it right that the returning exiles should rely on the pagan soldiery for their protection. Ezra thinks this would imply a lack of trust in God. I’m not sure where the line is to be drawn, but there is obviously a limit to how much the Church can depend on the world without losing its integrity.

July 28th

Ezra 8 vv 24-30

Ancient temples and mediaeval churches were extremely expensive. You can make a good case that, if people really wanted to honour God, they would have done better to use all this treasure to feed the hungry and to care for the sick or to build better houses for the peasants. Yet hardly anyone ever seems to say so (except Judas Iscariot and his sincerity is doubtful!). Worship is the most valuable thing we do as human beings. So maybe you can justify spending so much on places of worship. The crowds in Jerusalem and the mediaeval peasants were not only offered a splendid place in which to worship; they also experienced great art and architecture and music, such that they would never have seen or heard anywhere else. Would their lives have been better if they had been provided with a council flat each instead of a place of worship shared by the whole community? I hope we are humble enough not to answer too quickly on their behalf.

We still spend a lot of money on church buildings, but, nowadays, if we are talking about modern churches, the money gets spent on the comfort of the worshippers, heating, multimedia displays etc., and, if we are talking about ancient churches, the money gets spent on “preserving our heritage”. Surely the focus ought to be on glorifying God. If the focus is on God, we will spend unstintingly, but we’ll decide what to spend the money on in the light of what we believe to be His Will.

July 29th

Ezra 8 vv 31-36

They weighed the gold when they got to Jerusalem! This showed that none had been lost or purloined. Personally I dislike checking up on people, especially in the Church. It seems to imply we don’t trust them. We have to be realistic, however. We are not made perfect till the general resurrection and some church members have been known to betray their trust – horrible as it is that they have let down their Christian brothers and sisters as well as their heavenly Father. Checking does help with mistakes as well as questions of honesty. I’m quite grateful to have people check my addition on a bill or an account! Checking is also a defence if something is found to be wrong. You can prove it wasn’t you who lost it. So prudent accounting in an atmosphere of trust and all taking place in the context of worship.

July 30th

Ezra 9 vv 1-15

I guess it is mainly older readers who will remember their own experience or the experience of friends who were told that they could not marry unless they converted to their fiancés' faith or he converted to theirs. There are very few churches that strictly take this line now. The Brethren do. The Roman Catholics do more or less strictly depending on the parish priest. The rest of us generally don't and, to be honest, most young people confronted with a choice between "love" and faith would not even consider siding with faith. In reality most young people brought up in the Church, even if they are still going to church when they marry, soon stop, not because their spouses' particularly oppose their going, but because public worship gets crowded out of their busy lives. God can't compete with career, home-building or even their social lives. And this is just the problem. People don't often decide no longer to believe. They just lapse. They don't commune much with God. They don't share with Christian friends. Most of their relationships are in the world and outside the community of faith. They don't have time to tell their children the stories of Jesus. They do not have time to pray with them. Their children play sport or go swimming or take part in Scouting activities on Sunday mornings and hardly ever experience public worship. They don't know the music we sing, the prayers we say, the stories we tell or the reason why the Breaking of Bread is the sacred centre of our week. So in a couple of generations a country in which nearly everyone once called him or herself Christian forgets about God – not because people consciously ceased to believe, but because their faith never mattered enough to them for them to make a stand against the secularisation of society or the secularisation of their own lives.

July 31st

Ezra 10 vv 1-44

There were two choices on offer. The returning exiles could merge with the people already living in the Holy Land – those Israelites who had never gone into Exile and the pagan peoples who lived in the land – or they could keep themselves pure. If they had merged with the rest, they would probably have finished up like the Samaritans, following a debased form of religion. Maybe the Jewish faith would not have survived until the time of Jesus. The ideal of loving God with all one's

heart and one's neighbour as one's self would have been lost as the faith was diluted with the ways of the world over and over until faith no longer mattered at all. They chose purity which meant harsh choices. They can rightly be accused of intolerance. Families were broken up. What happened to all those women who were summarily divorced for belonging to the wrong race and religion? I wonder if they had the option to convert to the Jewish faith and stay married? After all, that is what Ruth the Moabitess did when she married an ancestor of David. We are very aware of the horrors perpetrated by the religiously intolerant. We should also be aware that religion is fatally wounded by an "anything goes" attitude. So we need to think about how far we should stand out against the world and how much we should endeavour to live in harmony with the world.

August 1st

Nehemiah 1 vv 1-3

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah both deal with the return from Exile. They overlap in the periods of their narrative, but do not seem to show any awareness the one of the other. Ezra was, of course, a priest and scribe. Nehemiah was in a high place (cupbearer) in the court of the Persian King Artaxerxes and he became the governor of the fledgling Jewish state. Jeremiah the prophet had told the exiles to make for themselves homes in Exile and to co-operate with the Babylonian state. This continued when the Medes and Persians took control of the empire from the Babylonians. Some of them rose to positions of importance like Nehemiah and Daniel.

August 2nd

Nehemiah 1 vv 4-11

Nehemiah recognises that things have gone so wrong because the Israelite nation failed to keep God's Law of Love. This is what is wrong generally in the world. The world is in the state it is because we do not follow the Maker's instructions. We do not love Him with all our hearts. Neither do we love our neighbours as ourselves. So Nehemiah confesses the people's sins. An honest assessment of what we have done to get ourselves into this mess is always a good start. He then throws himself and the nation on God's mercy, knowing that God's promises are to be trusted. So we repent in hope!

August 3rd

Nehemiah 2 vv 1-8

It seems that Nehemiah was quite a favourite with the Royal Family. Nevertheless, these people had the power of life and death over their servants. They were autocrats and they expected to be surrounded by smiling, if deferential, faces. They did not expect to be troubled with their servants' troubles!

So Nehemiah is running a huge risk by appearing mournful in their presence and asking this enormous favour. So he prays. And so should we. Whatever we have to face, whomever we have to face, we should pray. I guess Nehemiah's prayer was what some people call an "arrow prayer". He was standing there before the king. Without any outward sign that he was praying, he just said a prayer quickly in his heart, and received the grace to do what he had to do.

August 4th

Nehemiah 2 vv 9-16

The same pattern is repeated that we found in Ezra. The imperial power in the capital supports the reconstruction of Jerusalem, but locally powerful figures are against the project. They see a threat to their own power and influence. Nehemiah decides to carry out a reconnaissance before he confronts the opposition or raises the hopes of the Jewish people. It is always good to have the facts at your fingertips when you are starting an undertaking. Any minister ideally has the support of the congregation, but how to get that support? Are they to be included in discussion of the plans right at the beginning? If so, they might not fully understand. They might be discouraged. They might ask the minister questions he cannot yet answer and these unanswered questions could then be used as ammunition to scupper the new idea. On the other hand, if the congregation is consulted later in the day when the minister has thoroughly researched all the possibilities, they might feel that they are not really being consulted. They are only being asked to give their support to what other people have already decided. They might then not cooperate. The difficulty perhaps is that the minister is called or sent to a congregation from outside in order to bring gifts which the congregation does not already have, but unless he is quickly accepted as an insider, he is likely to be resented by the existing community.

August 5th

Nehemiah 2 vv 17-20

Nehemiah's inspection establishes that the city is in a very poor state. He does not therefore, however, give up. He entuses the Jews in Jerusalem to rebuild. The opposition mock, but Nehemiah says they have no part in the future. Have they disqualified themselves by their negativity? Nehemiah's confidence is in God. If it is God's Work, it cannot fail. If it is not God's Work, it cannot succeed, no matter how much effort human beings put into it.

Why are Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem excluded? At first sight, they are excluded on the grounds of race. They are not Jews and are therefore not entitled to a share in Jerusalem, the Holy City. A lot of Jews (some even today) would accept this obvious interpretation. But the Old Testament does allow for the possibility that gentiles will convert to the faith of Israel and, if they do, they become full Israelites with all the privileges and responsibilities this implies. Tobiah's name in fact suggests that his family worshipped Yahweh in at least some sense. (It means the LORD is good.) Perhaps he was brought up as a slave in a Jewish household and this might account for his present antagonism. In Christ, it will become clear that people of all races are to be included as the people of God if only they repent and believe. So might it have been open to Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem to join the work after all, if they had been willing to do so on God's terms, rather than their own?

August 6th (The Transfiguration)

Nehemiah 3 vv 1-32

The people who did the work are honoured and their names are recorded – what each person did. There are amusing personal notes like the nobles who thought they were too good for manual work and the family whose daughters seem to have been included. It is good to be able to look back at something you have done, a good job, and to say *I did that*. It is good when the whole community recognises the contributions people make. We each have our part to play in God's Work and we can be justly pleased when, by His grace, we have done our bit.

August 7th

Nehemiah 4 vv 1-6

Nehemiah is written in a very personal way. It does seem to be the personal account of the man himself. You can sense his triumphs and his frustrations. The opposition mock what the Jews are trying to do and Nehemiah prays for their downfall. In a way, you can't blame him, although we feel that he should, like Stephen, have followed the example of Jesus and asked God to forgive his enemies. I think one of the reasons why the Church finds it so hard to deal with conflict is that, on the one hand, we have very strong principles which we cannot compromise, but, on the other hand, we know that we have to remain in a loving relationship with those with whom we have to disagree.

August 8th

Nehemiah 4 vv 7-23

Having failed to discourage the Jews by mockery, Sanballat and the rest resort to physical force. The Jews respond by mounting their own guard on the work and the workmen. When not working, they are watching – though Nehemiah is careful to point out that they do undress at least to wash! Most churches have tales of times when some major work was under way and people stayed all night to keep things secure. These times are often remembered with affection. You couldn't keep it up all the time, but there is a great deal of satisfaction in being part of something where you all work hard and you all work together and there is something really worthwhile to show for it at the end.

August 9th

Nehemiah 5 vv 1-5

The Church is a wonderful organisation. We can put on sublime acts of worship. Congregations may be very caring for one another. They may run also sorts of socially useful projects in the community – from savings clubs to youth clubs. They may be very effective in evangelism. And yet still even a big successful Church with a highly successful ministry can let the side down horrendously. In its financial dealings, it may be no less unscrupulous than any commercial organisation. It may be uncaring towards those whose faces don't fit. It may be harsh in its dealings with those who step out of line. Its face may be disfigured with backbiting, gossip and disputes over trivia – parish politics in fact. 'Twas ever thus as we see from this bit of Nehemiah.

August 10th (St Lawrence)

Nehemiah 5 vv 6-13

The two churches at Upper Halling were dedicated to St Lawrence and I am hoping to do something special at the Jubilee Hall on St Lawrence's Day this year. Check the parish magazine. Lawrence was a martyr. He gave up his life rather than compromise his faith. It appears that he refused to hand over the Church's treasures to the Roman state, preferring to care for the poor. Nehemiah is not asking the leaders of his community to go as far as Lawrence did. He is only asking them to act according to the Law and to behave with normal human decency. It seems extraordinary that the richer Jews could have bankrupted their less fortunate coreligionists simply to make themselves richer still. Unfortunately, religious people can and do behave like this – to our shame. *Love your neighbour as yourself*. In the Old Testament *neighbour* means *fellow member of the chosen race*. In the new Testament Jesus makes it clear that God chooses people of every race and that therefore people of all races and creeds are our neighbours. So our duty to treat other Christians decently extends to a duty to treat the whole human race decently. This is relevant to *Christians Aid* and *Fair Trade* as well as our dealings with the people in our own community.

August 11th

Nehemiah 5 vv 14-19

As governor, Nehemiah had the legal right to tax the people and to provide for his own establishment out of the revenue raised. He did not, however, take all that he was entitled to. Read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Law gives us certain rights. Good Law is based on justice. *Do good to those who are good to you. Repay the evil with what they deserve*. God, however, is greater than this. His Justice broadens to include mercy. He gives rain and sun to good and bad alike. The people of God do not restrict their giving to what the Law requires. They offer their souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice.

August 12th

Nehemiah 6 vv 1-4

The opposition have tried mockery and failed. They have tried physical violence and failed. Now they are trying guile. If Nehemiah had agreed to these meetings, either he would have been killed, or else they would have tried to trick him. We ought not to be too naïve. Jesus told His people to be gentle as doves – but also as wise serpents.

August 13th

Nehemiah 6 vv 5-9

Now Sanballat picks on what could have been a real cause for concern. If the Persian Emperor had really believed that Nehemiah was planning a rebellion, he would have put a stop to the work at once and probably have had Nehemiah executed. A new King of Israel would have been proclaimed by prophets. They would obviously have needed fortifications and an army. Nehemiah's work could plausibly be misrepresented as the beginnings of a rebellion. Look at the way Christians are misrepresented. Christians in TV dramas are usually harmless eccentrics or positively mad. Priests are paedophiles. Older churches like the C of E are portrayed as moribund. The newer "black" churches are portrayed as intolerant of modern life styles and their ministers as exploiting gullible people. A grain of truth lends these depictions verisimilitude. If we don't want to be misrepresented, we need to stand up and be counted, to wear our faith more publicly so that people can see what Christians are really like.

August 14th:

Read Psalm 127

August 15th (Blessed Virgin Mary)

Nehemiah 6 vv 10-14

Having failed in every other attempt to stop Nehemiah from completing the work, they try to make him fear for his own life and to force him to discredit himself by hiding in the Temple. He would appear to be a coward and it would have been regarded as a profanation of the Temple to use it as a hiding place. A new opponent, Noadiah the prophetess, is mentioned. Some people, obviously claiming to be the LORD's spokesmen (and woman!) were trying to undermine Nehemiah's confidence in his own God-given mission. We have to test the prophets by what we know of God from the Scriptures and from the teaching of the Church. What a contrast between the false Noadiah and Mary, who is obedient so that the Word of God is implanted in her, the One in Whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily – the only complete Temple, Prophet, Priest, King & Sacrifice.

August 16th

Nehemiah 6 vv 15-17

So, despite the obstacles, the wall was finished and Jerusalem was once again secure. It would be possible now to continue with rebuilding the city and re-establishing its commercial and social life. This Tobiah (whatever his origins) seems to have married well and to enjoy a good deal of influence because of his family connections. It is too easy to be

impressed by people's status in this world. What matters is their standing with God.

August 17th

Nehemiah 7 vv 1-4

Nehemiah puts deputies over the city administration. They begin the normal routines of an ancient city, locking the gates at night. There is, however, still a lot to be done. The city had been twice besieged and then sacked. Then there were decades of neglect. They started with the Temple. Then the wall, but there is a good deal still to be done. And there always is! We shall never finish God's Work. There will always be people to witness to, people to care for. We may have church projects and they can be part of the work. Sometimes a project will really unite and inspire a congregation as everyone works together on a building or restoration project, on establishing a choir or a youth group. But the work doesn't finish when the buildings open or when the choir puts on its debut concert. This is just the beginning of a new phase, putting the new buildings to good use, using the choir to build the Church.

August 18th

Nehemiah 7 vv 5-65

Part of sorting out the administration of the city was to identify who was who, who was entitled to what and who had what responsibilities. So the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah contain these long lists of names (which we find hard to pronounce.) We may not see the importance of these people after all these centuries and so far away, but they mattered to their friends and families and they matter to God. I expect we shall meet a lot of them in Heaven.

August 19th

Nehemiah 7 vv 66-73

We are back to this business of generous offerings. These relatively poor people gave huge quantities of treasure for the service of God. As we said earlier, you could argue that it would be better to give all this wealth to the poor. I don't think, however, you can argue for hanging on to it, for offering less in God's service than we spend on hobbies or fashion. Can you?

August 20th

Nehemiah 8 vv 1-8

Three points.

The people ask to hear the Law and are prepared to stand all day to hear it.

The Law is read to them in the context of worship.

The Law is read clearly and explained to them.

This sounds to me like a good model for our Bible reading in Church: a congregation enthusiastic to hear the Word of God; receiving the Word of God in the context of worship (which I will explain tomorrow); and the reader taking the trouble to read it clearly and the preacher explaining it properly as the sermon. (The sermon is not the preacher's opportunity to tell everyone his personal opinions. His task is to proclaim the Word of God, normally relating the lessons read in the service to what is going on in the world today, but always striving to proclaim God's eternal Word to this congregation now.)

August 21st

Nehemiah 8 vv 9-12

A few weeks ago, I attended a seminar at Rochester Cathedral. The speaker was a very well known New Testament scholar and her theme was that, in the last couple of hundred years, many people had lost their way when it comes to Bible study. Treating the books of the Bible like any other books, scholars and general readers come away with a lot of information about the text, its transmission and translation and its multiplicity of possible meanings. They have acquired a certain amount of information about the history and geography of the Ancient Near and Middle East. They have learned a lot about ancient history, myths and legends. They have tried to answer a lot of questions about authorship and intended readerships. All this is useful stuff, but it is only preliminary. If you stop there, you have missed the point of the Bible. Bible reading may well seem boring and not worth it. The Bible is, in fact however, the Word of God written. It bears witness to the Word of God made flesh, Jesus. That is why we stand and face the book at the Gospel. We read the Bible in the context of worship because it is God's Word to us. We know God through the Bible and to know God is to have eternal life. We read the Bible prayerfully. We read the Bible as an act of worship. Reading the Bible properly is exciting.

August 22nd

Nehemiah 8 vv 13-18

Passover is probably the best known Jewish Festival and corresponds to our Easter. The Blood of the Lamb protects from the Angel of Death. God's people are redeemed and set free. Seven weeks later is the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost, which Christians knew for many centuries as Whitsun. It is the beginning of the harvest when the Lord, the Giver of Life, brings in the first fruits. Then in the Autumn, there is Tabernacles, when Jewish people live briefly in tents each year as a reminder that nothing is permanent in this life and that we depend entirely on God to sustain us. This came to be a festival of reading the Torah – the Way of God, a meditation on what it means to be God's people. There is no direct taking over of Tabernacles as a Christian Feast, but some people think of the Incarnation of our Lord. Jesus, the Word, became flesh and dwelt among us. The Greek literally means that He pitched His tent among us. Jesus is the Way. It would not hurt us to remember that we are entirely dependent on God for everything and to meditate on what it means to live in Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

August 23rd

Nehemiah 9 vv 1-3

Normally the Day of Atonement comes before Tabernacles. Maybe, this year, they had not realised that they were supposed to observe the Day of Atonement because they had let slip their study of Torah while in exile. Or perhaps, because this was a special year, they did something extra.

In the Book of Common Prayer, confession and absolution begin the services of Morning and Evening Prayer. The new Communion service also prefers to put the confession at the beginning (though we usually stick with the option to have it after the intercessions as it is in the older rite). The point is that, such is the holiness of God, we are unworthy to come into His presence. We are sinners and the wages of sin is death. It is an amazing privilege to enter into the presence of God and we may only do so because our sins are forgiven. It is right to prepare for worship by asking forgiveness of our sins (which also means that we must forgive those who have sinned against us). Only as forgiven, made whole in Christ, dare we enter the presence of the Holy God.

Confession of our sins is also an appropriate response to hearing the Word of God and meditating how our lives match up to Jesus. So it is also appropriate to have the confession after the readings, sermon and creed and as a new start, a fresh beginning, before we come to the most sacred part of the service in which we shall receive Christ in the bread and wine.

August 24th (St Bartholomew)

Nehemiah 9 vv 4 & 5

These ministers are about to begin a recitation of what the Word of God teaches about the nature of God Himself, about what He has done for His people, about how His people have responded to His grace and about how He has responded to human failings. This recitation is in the context of worship and it will lead into prayer. This is not so very different from what we do in our public worship when we confess the Word of God as we sing His praises, marvel at His infinite goodness, examine our lives in the light of His love, pray in our needs as we recognise His faithfulness and our frailty, and celebrate the Holy Eucharist.

O Almighty and everlasting God, who didst give thine Apostle Bartholomew grace truly to believe and to preach thy Word; Grant, we beseech thee, unto thy Church, to love the Word which he believed, and both to preach and receive the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

August 25th

Nehemiah 9 v6

It is worth remembering Who God is – when you come to church, when you begin your daily prayers and just in the ordinary things of every day life.

August 26th

Nehemiah 9 vv 7-15

The formative event in the history of the chosen people in the Old Testament was the Exodus. Telling the story of the Exodus honours God; it moves God's people to praise; it gives them the reason to believe that they can always trust Him to care for them. The formative event in the story of the chosen people in the New Testament is the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. Telling His story honours God;

it moves Christians to prayer; it assures us of His favour and goodness towards us. We proclaim His Death in the Eucharist until He comes again. We celebrate Jesus, the Word made flesh, in the public reading of Scripture – especially in the context of public worship. What is so wrong with the present generation that we regard public worship as an optional extra in our own lives, water down the Gospel in our services, and fail to bring our children, our families and our friends to participate in our communal confession of the glory of God?

August 27th

Nehemiah 9 vv 16-18

Maybe, here is the answer. When we measure our lives against God's goodness, we fail to measure up. Every time we proclaim the Death of Jesus, surely we join Isaac Watts in the words, *Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all*. We cannot but be conscious of our failings; neither can we be unaware that our failings have consequences.

August 28th

Nehemiah 9 vv 19-25

The Devil would like you to give up. The Devil would like you to despair of ever being good enough for God. He might persuade you that God's demands on you are unreasonable. So you might as well give up trying to be a Christian. He might try to persuade you that you are an unredeemable sinner so that you spent your whole life in the grip of guilt. He might try to pretend that God does not demand so much after all, that an ordinary respectability is sufficient, that it doesn't really matter much whether or not you participate in public worship and pray daily, that the way you live is good enough if you are no worse than most people. If he can persuade you of this, he reduces your life to a pale reflection of what it could be in Christ and he robs the Church of someone who could have made a real difference.

But God forgives. He loves. He takes us as we are. He forgives us our sins. He pours out His blessings on us on account of His Love not on account of what we deserve. So there is no need to despair. There is no need to dumb down. *Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all*. It does indeed, but it doesn't reject us because we fail.

August 29th

Nehemiah 9 vv 26-31

Of course, says the Devil, God forgave you once in the past. Indeed, He has forgiven you many times, but will He go on forgiving you? God is indeed just and you have indeed failed Him many times. Can you really expect Him still to love you?

The Scriptures do indeed teach us that God's people do indeed let Him down time after time. This does provoke His Wrath. It does indeed have consequences. If we do not cooperate with God's plan for the world, everything we touch must inevitably go awry. But the Scriptures also teach that God always remains faithful. He never gives up on us, no matter how often we let Him down. You and I can always repent and come back to Him. Our Church, our nation could always repent and come back to Him and, if we did, we should be astonished at the blessings we would enjoy. You may think that the Church in England is in terminal decline. If it repents, however, and puts God before self, there will be an overwhelming revival.

August 30th

Nehemiah 9 vv 32-38

It is tempting to start our prayers with a list of what we want. Fair enough, when you are desperate. Never hold back from praying because you're not sure what words to use or how to say them. God is always with you. He knows what you are thinking. You only have to remember God's presence with you in order to convert your thoughts into prayers. Tell him what you are afraid of there and then!

On the other hand, when you have a bit more time, it is good to get your thoughts sorted out in prayer. These Levites have gone over all the foregoing about God and human nature and people's earlier experiences of how God operates. This puts their prayer – the thing they are worried about – into a proper perspective. They know why they can rely on God and what they have got to do.

And what is the prayer? It's not something wonderfully spiritual, but an ordinary problem of every day life. They can't afford to live because everything they earn is disappearing in taxes. You can (and should) pray about everything.

August 31st

Nehemiah 10 v1 (vv2-27) & vv 28&29

You can't make bargains with God and it's wrong to try. God answers prayer not as a reward for our being good, but simply because He loves us. However, if we want the world to go right, we have to do things God's Way. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the fulfilment of Torah, the Law of Love. If we want to co-operate with God, we have to commit ourselves to living in accordance with His Love. We committed ourselves to this at Baptism. Maybe we recommitted at Confirmation and on other occasions. We commit ourselves afresh every time we confess our sins, participate in Holy Communion or at any time we encounter God.

September 1st

Nehemiah 10 v 30

Part of their pledge to keep God's Law meant avoiding the customs of the pagans and half-Jews among whom they lived. We discussed the issue of mixed marriage when we were reading Ezra. For some reason, it usually seems to work out that when a Christian marries a non-Christian, it becomes a non-Christian household. The Christian stops going to Church, loses contact with Christian friends and gradually becomes assimilated in a secular life style. It seems heartless and cruel if we tell Christians not to marry people they love who are not Christians, but how can we resolve the difficult when the two most important things in a person's life pull in opposite directions?

September 2nd

Nehemiah 10 v31

Basically, we get laughed at and ignored if we try to maintain Sunday as a special day, when people don't normally work, shop or play sport. Yet the secularisation of Sunday has been a huge factor in accelerating the rate of decline of the Church in this country and the bringing up of a generation of children who do not know the Gospel story – not because their parents ever intended them to do so, but because there was never time to sit down and tell them! We look old fashioned and appear to be making a fuss over trivia if we observe the Christian Sabbath and try to persuade other people to do the same, but, if we don't, we stand back and watch as this country drifts away from its Christian heritage. There are some very good ideas for weekday services in church, café churches, after school clubs, mother and toddler services etc. held on

weekdays. We do some of these things ourselves and they do provide an opportunity for people who can't or won't make Sundays to enjoy Christian fellowship and to learn the Christian story. I don't think, however, that a semi-commitment to a non-threatening activity of the fringes of church life can replace a readiness to follow Him Who said, *Take up your cross and follow me.*

September 3rd

Nehemiah 10 vv 32-34

As part of living God's Way, the people commit themselves to maintaining public worship. They promise to supply the money and the materials for the Temple and its services. I have a lot of sympathy with those who question whether it is right to spend our money and efforts on splendid buildings and gorgeous vestments. I think you can argue both ways – for offering God the most magnificent (and expensive) we can manage in our music, architecture, decoration and everything we do in public worship – or for saying that we can worship simply in perfectly ordinary buildings, wearing our ordinary clothes, with simple or no decorations and straightforward or no music. The thing is to worship in spirit and in truth. However we do it, however, public worship is an essential part of community life. It is a sacred duty to worship God. It is essential to the worshippers that they worship in fellowship with other worshippers. It is a witness to the unbelievers in our community of what truly matters. Given that public worship must take place, it depends on us to maintain it – to provide the money and other materials, to offer our talents, and, perhaps most difficult of all in C21 UK, to offer our TIME.

September 4th

Nehemiah 10 v35

Daily work and religious commitment are not kept in two separate compartments of our lives. If we are religious, we offer our ordinary, every day work to God.

September 5th

Nehemiah 10 vv 36&37

Offering the first fruits consecrates the entire crop. By offering something of the fruits of our labour, we are acknowledging that everything we have comes from God and that everything we achieve, we achieve through the skills He gives us. We are also acknowledging

that everything we have is His. We offer it all back to the God from Whom it comes. The first born sons are specially significant because the Egyptian first born were killed at Passover. It is a terrible reminder that our lives are in the Hands of God. When we put money in the plate in Church, we are not offering God a bribe or a tip or even merely a thank-offering. Supporting the Church's finances or giving to the poor are not the main focus either. The point is that we are symbolically offering to God all that we have and all that we are.

September 6th

Nehemiah 10 vv 38&39

Tithes are something of a contentious point. In the OT, people were expected to give a tithe, basically 1/10, of their produce as an offering to God to sustain the ministers and the worship of the Temple. The NT does not set an amount, but assumes that we will offer ourselves as a living sacrifice to God. When we are asked to give, it is taken for granted that we give generously as God gives generously to us. Later on in English Christian history, tithes to the rector become formalised like a tax and, later still, to be resented by those who are not members of the Church of England. Meanwhile some evangelical and charismatic Churches revive the notion of a voluntary tithe as the natural offering of church members. If we think we should offer a tenth of our income to God, what does this mean in practice? Is it a tenth of our gross income or of our income after tax? Do we give it all to the church we belong to or share it out among various good causes? It would obviously be wrong to think that, when we had given a tenth, no more could be expected of us. *We offer him our souls and bodies!* So how do we decide what to offer to God? Do we respond to need, trying to support our church or missions or charities or individuals in need? If so, where do we stop? Do we aim to give a fixed amount each week? Do we act with spontaneous generosity? However we decide to give, it is something we need to do – because it is good for us!

September 7th

Nehemiah 11 vv 1&2 (3-36)

The city of Jerusalem cannot accommodate all these returning exiles. Those who live in the city will have to work very hard – albeit with the support of the Persian authorities. They draw lot for the honour/task.

September 8th (Mary's Birthday) Nehemiah 12 (vv1-26), vv 27-30

All these ministers were responsible for the worship as they dedicated the wall and all the building work in the city to God. They purified themselves for the task. Mary was accepted by God as a pure virgin to be the Mother of His Son – the Son upon Whom He would build His whole Church, the entire people of God.

September 9th Nehemiah 12 vv 31-43

The completion of the wall leads to a tremendous celebration, a religious celebration. It involves the religious ministers – the priests and Levites – and the princes and nobility of Judah. It is both a civic and a religious occasion. Indeed, there is no separation. God is Lord of Church and state. Nehemiah, the Governor, presides over both.

This was the understanding in England in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. This is reflected in the fact that the Coronation combines both civil and religious ceremonies – as indeed does a church wedding. The theory is that God underpins the whole nation and His Law is the foundation of the Law of the Realm. In the C21 we have back-pedalled on this. Indeed we have been back-peddalling since the C19. In Nehemiah's time the assumption is that the Jewish state is made up entirely of Orthodox Jews. Elizabeth I's England was supposedly made up of members of the Church of England. It is a very attractive polity, but what do you do with the dissenters, the Jews, Turks and Infidels? Do you persecute them? Do you deport them? Do you forcibly convert them? The unattractiveness of these options outweighs the attractiveness of a state based on one religion. But if we disestablish the Church, if our laws are secular and multiculturalism is respected, if not promoted, do we lose our focus as a nation? Is the next Coronation specifically Anglican, generally Christian, multi-religious or not religious at all? Do we derive the values which underlie our laws and our public policy from the Bible, from a variety of religious traditions, or from purely secular sources? Are we trying to impose a new conformity to the modern, secular, multicultural state? And, if so, how much coercion are we prepared to use against those who dissent on religious or other grounds?

September 10th

Nehemiah 12 vv 44-47

Israel always was a religious nation. King David, the greatest of their kings, had brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, his new capital city in which he hoped to unite all the tribes under one king and one God. He not only governed wisely, conducted wars and promoted the nation's unity and prosperity, he also prepared for his son Solomon to build the Temple, providing the site and stockpiling the materials as well as organising the priests and other ministers including the musicians. Nehemiah sees himself as re-establishing what David had set up originally. His actions have the authority both of tradition and of renewal – two things which all human institutions (including the Church) need very much.

September 11th

Nehemiah 13 vv 1-3

The Ammonites and the Moabites originally lived in the mountain ranges east of the Holy Land. Centuries before Nehemiah, the Israelites, having escaped from Egypt and going round by way of Sinai to enter the Promised Land, found their way barred by these hostile tribes. The Israelites never forgot this and, at least in theory, were always at war with the Ammonites and the Moabites. In the British museum there is an extremely interesting artefact – the Moabite stone – on which the Moabites have inscribed an account of one of their battles with Israel from the Moabite point of view. In Nehemiah's time they have spread into Israel and some of the Jews are doing business with them and even marrying them. Purity or toleration? As always, the Jews in the period of Nehemiah opt for purity, separating themselves from the gentiles. The insights that God gave to the Jews would have been lost to the human race if the Jews had assimilated. On the other hand, God loves Moabites and Ammonites and surely they should be able to convert and join the covenant people. In the coming of Jesus, it becomes apparent that they can. But churches still have the same problem as the Jews in Nehemiah's day. Should we be pure and exclusive or should we be open to everybody and risk becoming so assimilated to the unbelieving world that we no longer bear witness to the Truth which is in Jesus? We ought to be able to have it both ways. Jesus did, but very few churches manage this balance.

September 12th

Nehemiah 13 vv 4-9

Tobiah is still on the scene. It seems that he and the priest Eliashib took advantage of Nehemiah's absence on a trip back to report to Artaxerxes to make themselves comfortable in the Temple. Using the buildings and offerings given for holy purposes for their own comfort was to profane them. This is the other reason why tithing has got a bad name. There are churches where hundreds of poor people faithfully send in their offerings and the minister uses them to keep himself and his family in luxury. Now I do not believe that it is right to expect the clergy to live in penury by contrast with their congregations – as some English congregations are wont to do – but neither do I believe that the clergy ought to live much better than their congregations on the offerings of those very same people. The offerings of the people ought to be used to the glory of God i.e.: to maintain the worship, to support missions and charitable work; to educate the faithful. In the same way, these offerings should not be wasted by careless administration or on excessive bureaucracy.

September 13th

Nehemiah 13 vv 10-14

The ministers hadn't been paid. So they had been forced to give up the ministry and to try to get a living on their farms. We do have non-stipendiary ministers, people who earn their living in a regular job and then do the work more typical of a Christian minister in their "spare time." This can be good. These ministers bring perspectives from the world of work into their preaching, pastoral care and evangelism. They may also have opportunities to exercise ministry in their places of work. On the other hand, there is a place for "full time" ministers, paid by the Church and it is something of a reproach to us if non-stipendiaries are used as a substitute for "full timers" either because Christians are too mean to pay a minister or because prospective ministers are not prepared to sacrifice a worldly career in order to serve Christ.

September 14th

Nehemiah 13 vv 15-22

Some of the Jews were breaking the Sabbath. Some were setting up stalls. A larger number were buying from stalls that other people had set up. Immigrants from Tyre were probably worshippers of Baal, not Yahweh, and had no compunction about Sabbath trading. The same

case could be made a few years ago in England. Some people, who put C of E on official forms but were not especially religious, were willing to trade on Sundays. Indeed they were glad to make a profit. Rather more religious people, who would not want to work on Sundays themselves, nevertheless were glad to find the shops open and started to use them. It was pointed out that immigrants of other faiths need have no reason to respect the Christian Sunday. So the Sunday Trading Laws were abolished and church-going and all things Christian in England went into accelerated decline. Nehemiah stopped Sabbath breaking by law and by force. I cannot say that I would want to see that here, but I am dismayed by the alternative, what has in fact happened.

September 15th

Nehemiah 13 vv 23-31

The Jews have compromised themselves by intermarriage with the Philistines and the eastern tribes. One high priest was son in law to Sanballat, who had tried to prevent the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Nehemiah is intolerant in order to preserve a national identity which is inextricably linked to faith in the LORD. Our difficulty is that our faith in the Lord teaches us not to be intolerant of other people, but at the same time, not to compromise our beliefs. It feels to me like a tightrope. We need to pray for ourselves in walking this tightrope and for our leaders in Church and state.

September 16th

II Timothy 3 vv 1-4

A complete change of mood now. We go back to complete our study of Paul's Letters to Timothy. Yet is it such a change? Paul's preaching has established Christian churches all around the Eastern Mediterranean. These are heady days. What God has done in Jesus Christ has utterly changed things for the whole human race. We are restored to what we have always been potentially, children of God, eternally living in Him. These new Christian communities – the churches – are manifestations of the Body of Christ, communities linked by devotion to Him, love for one another and a new moral purity made possible by the washing away of sin by Christ's Blood and the outpouring of His Holy Spirit, witnesses to the world of what God is doing. And yet the new people of God already compromise with the world.

September 17th

II Timothy 3 v5

Having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof.

This is what I have been trying to get at. We profess Christianity, but we do not fully cooperate with the Holy Spirit. We do not offer ourselves wholeheartedly as living sacrifices to Him and we therefore do not experience the power of self-sacrificial love.

September 18th

II Timothy 3 v6

We thought a few days ago about ministers who abuse their position by getting fat on the offerings of the faithful. There are plenty of ways in which we can abuse religious power. Some grow rich at others' expense. Some abuse sexually. Some go on power trips. We can dress it all up in biblical language. We can minister from fine buildings. We may appear to be very holy. In fact people may even assume that the reason for our apparent success is that God is blessing us for our own personal blessedness. Ministers may abuse their positions. So may church council members, group leaders, Sunday School teachers, anyone in fact who is entrusted with power. The only authentic leadership in the Church is leadership based on imitation of the King Who reigns from a cross.

September 19th

II Timothy 3 v7

There are people who are apparently very interested in the Christian faith. They attend church, maybe several churches. They go to study groups. They read widely. They know a lot about God in the sense that they would do very well in Scripture exams, but somehow they have missed the point. They are not willing to repent, to take up their Cross and follow Christ. They know all about Christianity, but they are not willing to let go of the world and to risk life with Jesus.

September 20th

II Timothy 3 vv 8&9

Jannes and Jambres are not mentioned by name in the OT, but tradition has it that they were two of the Egyptian magicians who tried to discredit Moses. They thought they had religious (or magic) power. They were not open to what God was really doing in the world – setting the slaves free. It is possible to become complacent in a position of religious leadership and to fail to see where the Holy Spirit is leading.

September 21st (St Matthew)

II Timothy 3 v10

Paul always tried to live in such away that the Gospel was not compromised by the unworthiness of the minister. He was a non-stipendiary minister in that he earned his own living, making tents, rather than relying on the offerings of the faithful – though he certainly held that other ministers in other circumstances should be supported by the Church. Matthew of course had been a tax collector when Christ called him to a new life as an apostle. We all need money. The Church needs money. But we need money so that we can follow Christ. It defeats the object if our desire for funds compromises our faithfulness to Him.

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

September 22nd

II Timothy 3 vv 11&12

There seems to have been an expectation in Paul's churches that Christians would face persecution. Now, we naturally pray for those who are persecuted for their faith in other parts of the world and we rejoice that we live in a country where we are free to practise our faith, but are we sometimes too eager to avoid a fuss? Are there times when we ought to make a stand and don't because we don't want to argue or to be laughed at or criticised? Are we letting England drift away from Christ rather than risk something as un-English as a serious discussion about religion?

September 23rd

II Timothy 3 vv 13-15

We are warned that there will be opposition, sometimes opposition from the people whom we would have expected to be on our side. When this happens it is important that we are well grounded, that we have been well taught, that we know our Bibles, that we are secure in prayer and, if possible, that we are members of a supportive worshipping community. These are means of God's grace – by definition, freely given. But he does not force them on us. We have to open our lives to Him. We have to do our bit by reading the Bibles which are so freely available, by praying regularly as we are privileged to be able to do, by

being loyal members of our churches, listening to sermons, taking part in study groups, participating in the Sacraments.

September 24th

II Timothy 3 vv 16&17

Not so different from Ezra and Nehemiah, then! Scripture is still as important in the New Testament as it is in the Old. God reveals Himself to humanity in so many ways – in the marvels of creation, in personal prayer, in the experience of the community of faith, but supremely He reveals Himself in Jesus, God's Word made flesh, and it is the Scriptures, God's Word written, which, along with the Holy Spirit and the church, the Spirit-filled community, bear witness to Jesus.

September 25th

II Timothy 4 vv 1&2

This exhortation to preach the Word no matter what is not just for Timothy; it is for all preachers; it is for the whole Church. We have to bear witness to Jesus. We have to bear witness to the world that the world will be judged according to Christ's Law of love and that the world is redeemed through what He has accomplished on the Cross. We have to bear witness to the Church so that Christians stop compromising with the world (the flesh and the devil) and cooperate fully with the Holy Spirit in being built up into a Temple in the likeness of Christ in Whom all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily.

September 26th

II Timothy 4 vv 3&4

Over the last 2,000 years it has been very difficult to keep the Church to the Way Who is Christ. There have been persecutions and religious wars. There has been the aggregation of wealth and power. There have been heresy and schism. We need to be vigilant in every generation. The protestant reformers spoke of a church semper reformanda, a church always being and needing to be reformed. We have to be vigilant in each generation to make sure that we are being faithful to the Truth revealed in Christ, to Whom the Scriptures bear witness, the Christ Whom we know in public worship and private prayer, the Christ we encounter in the Sacraments and in the world. We have to be vigilant in our generation and our fellowship. But it is God's Church. We can trust Him not to let His people destroy it completely. Always a faithful remnant. Always a restoration.

September 27th

II Timothy 4 vv 5-7

We are part of something bigger. It can be very hard to hand on, to let someone else take over what we are doing, to retire, to know that one day we shall die and someone else will take over everything that we have achieved. But Paul knows that he is now near the end. He was old by this time. He quite possibly knew that his martyrdom was both likely and imminent. He is handing on the sacred trust to Timothy and other pastors of a younger generation. I know that we wonder whether there will be another generation. Our numbers decline. Our congregations age. The younger people who do join us have very busy lives and are not willing to commit to Christian service which requires them to come every week, to take responsibility, to organise others. Well maybe, the work has got to change. The work of worship, mission and pastoral care must go on, but maybe it will go on in different ways. We might not need so many committees. Computers might take over more of the paperwork. New materials might be easier to maintain and clean. Even with the structures we have, it may be that not every job needs doing in the way it always has been done. Sometimes new people are willing and we scare them off. We want to supervise and make sure they do things the way we would do them. We go on about how much better things were done when they were done by people who have now been dead many years. The harvest is God's and we have to trust Him to raise up labourers to get the harvest in. We might be able to help them to join the workforce, but how they respond to God's invitation is their responsibility. We have to be able to retire and die gracefully.

September 28th

II Timothy 4 vv 8-15

If, as many scholars believe, these letters are not personally written by Paul, why is there all this personal detail? Anyway, Paul knows that he is going to die soon and he is confident in the *sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life*. He is about to move on to a new and infinitely better phase of his life, of his relationship with God. Although he has this confidence, perhaps because he has this awareness of the divine love, he wants his friends with him at the end and can still feel hurt at having been let down by some of them. This is the communion of saints, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

September 29th (St Michael & All Angels)

II Timothy 4 vv 16-18

When Paul first had to answer the charges against him in Rome, he found himself alone. Maybe none of his friends was in the city. Maybe they were too scared to support him. Maybe the authorities contrived the hearing in such a way that it was difficult or impossible to put the case for the defence. Paul found himself standing alone. Only he was not alone. With him were Jesus and the whole heavenly host. We are never alone. God is always with us. Paul's trial, if that was what it was, became an opportunity to present the facts about the Christian faith to the authorities and to proclaim the Gospel to the nations. In God, things work out!

O everlasting God, who hast ordained and constituted the services of Angels and men in a wonderful order; mercifully grant, that as thy holy Angels always do thee service in heaven, so by thy appointment they may succour and defend us on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

September 30th

II Timothy 4 vv 19-22

And another list of names! They can be boring to read to yourself and embarrassing if you are reading the lesson in church – especially if you can't pronounce them! But they are all individuals. They all have their own stories, of which we catch a glimpse here. These people all had important roles in the early Church. We see names in our minute books and on our monuments. These are people who have had a role in the Church more recently. We may have known some of them. We may know the stories behind others, although they died or moved away before we arrived. Some perhaps, to us, are just names. So shall we be in a few decades time. But we are the Christian Church. Our life is eternal. This imperfect temporary fellowship we have now will soon be eternal and perfected. This life, which we find a struggle sometimes, this worship which is too often half-hearted, will be made whole. And we shall be in fellowship with Aquila and Onesiphorus and Ezra and Nehemiah and all those names from our minute books and monuments. We shall be reunited with those whom we love but (for now) see no more. We shall know then what it means to be one in Christ and to know as we are known.