

The Acts of the
Apostles
From Chapter 15
Onwards
&
Joshua 1-6 & 24

Bible Notes
July – September
2026

July 1st

Acts 15 vv 1&2

There are elections for the General Synod of the Church of England this year. Nominations will open on 14 Aug 2026 and voting will run from 21 Sept to 13 October 2026. Any lay person on the electoral roll of any parish may stand for election. Do you feel called by God to stand? I mention this because there are several important issues on the agenda and it is important that wise people open to the leading of the Holy Spirit are prepared to stand and are elected. Among those issues are what we should do about same sex relationships & how the Church of England may best serve the nation – by supporting & strengthening the parishes or by a more business like centralised command & control approach to mission. You can guess what I think, but it is not my personal preferences or yours that matter. What we are seeking to discern is what God wants. We are promised that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth, but we need to be open to His prompting, treating one another with love and respect, reading the Bible & meditating on Christian tradition humbly, rationally & prayerfully, learning from what God is teaching us in the world today. Whether or not you are prepared to stand for election (or to perform any role in God's Church), please pray for those who do stand and for those who are elected.

There were differences of opinion in God's Church right from the start. The Church is the Body of Christ. The Church is One. His commandment is that we love one another, His prayer is that we may be one as He & the Father are one – we in Him & He in us. So, whatever our differences, we must not cease to love one another; we must do everything possible to avoid schism (division of the Church).

Like a mighty army
Moves the Church of God;
Brothers, we are treading
Where the saints have trod;
We are not divided,
All one body we,
One in hope & doctrine,
One in charity.
Onward, Christian soldiers,
Marching as to war,
With the Cross of Jesus
Going on before.

July 2nd

Acts 15 vv 3-5

In the Old Testament, the Jews are the chosen people. Intrinsic to God's covenant with Abraham is the circumcision of all the male Israelites. Hundreds of years after Abraham, following the Exodus from Egypt, Moses ascends Mt Sinai where God gives him many more laws for the chosen people to observe. Some of these, including the Ten Commandments, are what you might call moral, some are about ritual & ceremonial, some are for the governance of the nation of Israel as it was in those days. Clearly the Law, Torah, is given by God to His people – that they may be holy as He is holy, that He may be their God & He is people.

Jesus comes into the world – *a light to lighten the gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel*. There is a new covenant, a new testament. People of all races, nations and tongues are invited to join the people of God. Jesus commands His Church to proclaim the Gospel to the whole world. Those who believe and are baptised are saved. But what of the Law of Moses, the Law which God revealed on Mt Sinai? Much later in his Epistle to the Romans (7¹²) St Paul will affirm that *the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good*. So did Gentile converts have to be circumcised and follow all the precepts of Torah – ritual as well as moral? It would be very hard for Jewish Christians brought up to revere Torah to accept that Gentile Christians need not keep the rules it lays down. On the other hand, having to be circumcised and give up eating pork, etc. might put off potential converts to Christ. Also, it might give the impression that we are saved by works of the Law (by being good), whereas we are in fact, whether we are Jews or Gentiles, saved by the grace of God.

July 3rd

Acts 15 vv 6-12

In many ways, the Council of Jerusalem is a model for how we ought to go about settling our differences in the Church. They meet together. They share their experiences of what God is doing in the world. They listen to one another attentively & respectfully. Peter had been with Jesus since our Lord's own Baptism and was a witness to all that Jesus had said & done. Peter was an old stalwart. Paul & Barnabas were relative newcomers to the faith. Old & new both had their own contributions.

July 4th

Acts 15 vv 13-18

James, by this time, was the leader of the Church in Jerusalem. He had confidence in his own authority, the authority which God had given him. James' authority was respected & accepted by the Church. God has appointed certain people to positions of leadership within the Church (including bishops & clergy). They can and should have a humble confidence in the authority which God has given them. They ought to be respected by the Church.

On the other hand, they are not infallible. They have no call to be arrogant. Their calling is not to lord it over the people of God, but to serve them (Mark 10⁴²⁻⁴⁵). Before coming to his own judgment, James listened respectfully to what the others had to say. He interpreted what was going on in the Church of his day in the light of what Scripture teaches (Amos 9¹¹⁻¹⁵) understood in the light of what Jesus accomplished on the Cross. So our bishops, so our synod members, are called to exercise the power God has given them to His glory & for good of His Church & her mission to the world, humbly, respectfully & in the light of what the Bible teaches.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who alone workest great marvels; Send down upon our Bishops, and Curates, and all Congregations committed to their charge, the healthful Spirit of thy grace; and that they may truly please thee, pour upon them the continual dew of thy blessing. Grant this, O Lord, for the honour of our Advocate and Mediator, Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

July 5th (Trinity 5)

Acts 15 vv 19-21

We readily understand why Gentile Christians should abstain from idolatry (or participating in feasts dedicated to false gods) and fornication. We'd say the same today. But why were they to avoid eating what had been strangled (eg chicken) or blood (ie what had not been killed in a kosher manner, in which the blood is drained out of the carcass)? The principle behind these rules is that the life is in the blood. Whenever we kill for food, we should think of it as a sacrifice. The life blood is offered back to God. If we kill an animal for food, we must do so with respect for its life which is God's gift. This prohibition on blood does not seem to have lasted & may only have been to avoid giving offence to Jews with whom Gentile Christians might dine.

The principle does remind us, however, that if we eat meat, the animals should be looked after properly & killed humanely and that meat should not be wasted. If an animal has died to provide us with a meal, we shouldn't let it get past its *use by date* and bin it. It is always wrong to waste food, as well because food waste is a big problem for waste disposal as for the obvious reasons, but wasting meat is particularly egregious. I understand why some people are vegetarians, though I haven't adopted that way of life myself.

GRANT, O Lord, we beseech thee, that the course of this world may be so peaceably ordered by thy governance, that thy Church may joyfully serve thee in all godly quietness; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

July 6th

Acts 15 vv 22-27

I bought a house round about 30 years ago. Two years ago I sold it & bought the house I am living in now. I was horrified by how much more difficult the process of buying & selling houses had become in that time. The ID checks, the checks to detect any money-laundering, the questions about the property and possible legal complications, the queries before the bank would release to me my own money. I was very impatient of the time-consuming bureaucracy & I resented being distrusted. I think I am an honest man. Besides *innocent till proved guilty* used to be the assumption. A gentleman's word was his bond. These assumptions seem to have been turned upside down. We no longer trust one another & the authorities certainly don't trust us. I have to admit, however, that much of this legislation and many of these protocols have been brought in because some people are cheats & thieves & liars. I don't know where the balance should be struck. We can't live without being willing to trust one another, but there is a limit to how much we can afford to lose to fraudsters.

The Jerusalem apostles here are very careful to authenticate the message they are sending to the Church at Antioch. They write it down. They back up Paul & Barnabas' account of the meeting by sending along two respected members of the Jerusalem Church – Judas Barsabas & Silas. I have to concede however reluctantly that even the Church needs a certain amount of bureaucracy in order to ensure the integrity of its processes.

July 7th

Acts 16 v28

For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us.

Under what circumstances would we dare to say that? Could we ever be as confident as they were that our decisions exactly coincided with the intentions of the Spirit of God? Could they be so confident because several of them were apostles, who had known Jesus in the flesh and witnessed His Resurrection? Were they so confident because they had discerned God's Will in Scripture? Could it simply be that they trusted that Christ's promise to be among us wherever two or three are gathered together in His Name somehow makes us – in some circumstances – infallible? Do Bishops always get it right? Is the pope – the Bishop of Rome – infallible, albeit in seriously limited circumstances? Are the decisions of PCCs and General Synod always what would seem good to the Holy Ghost? Are General Councils (councils of the whole worldwide Church like the Council of Nicaea which gave us the Nicene Creed) infallible. The Church of England (part of the worldwide Church thinks not).

Article XXI. Of the authority of General Councils.

GENERAL Councils may not be gathered together without the commandment and will of princes. And when they be gathered together, forasmuch as they be an assembly of men, whereof all be not governed with the Spirit and word of God, they may err and sometime have erred, even in things pertaining to God. Wherefore things ordained by them as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they be taken out of Holy Scripture.

I don't think that we can ever be absolutely sure that our decisions as individuals or in councils and synods of the Church are exactly what would seem good to the Holy Ghost. But if we humbly, prayerfully & rationally consider the facts in the light of Scripture we may grow closer to understanding what God is saying to us.

The day I wrote these notes I heard a Roman Catholic bishop say on the radio that he and millions of other RCs were confident that the conclave had correctly recognised God's choice in Pope Leo XIV. Similarly, we hope that we are in line with God's choices when we appoint any ministers in the Church. But we do trust God, that, when we make a mistake, and choose the wrong candidate, He nevertheless works through that person for the good of the Church & the world.

Article XXVI. *Of the unworthiness of the Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacraments.*

ALTHOUGH in the visible Church the evil be ever mingled with the good, and sometime the evil have chief authority in the ministration of the word and sacraments; yet forasmuch as they do not the same in their own name, but in Christ's, and do minister by His commission and authority, we may use their ministry both in hearing the word of God and in the receiving of the sacraments. Neither is the effect of Christ's ordinance taken away by their wickedness, nor the grace of God's gifts diminished from such as by faith and rightly do receive the sacraments ministered unto them, which be effectual because of Christ's institution and promise, although they be ministered by evil men.

Nevertheless it appertaineth to the discipline of the Church that inquiry be made of evil ministers, and that they be accused by those that have knowledge of their offences; and finally, being found guilty by just judgement, be deposed.

July 8th

Acts 15 vv 28-35

The unity of the Church was preserved. The Church in Jerusalem recognised the work of the Holy Spirit in Antioch. The leaders in Jerusalem gave the Antiochene Church their blessing. They extended the hand of fellowship & gave helpful guidance and support to what you might call this *fresh expression of Church*.

July 9th

Acts 15 vv 36-41

It is nasty when Christians fall out. Our calling is to love one another. But disagreements do arise. Compromise is not always possible. Personal feelings are not absent from the equation. For whatever reason (Acts 13¹³, where he is called John), Mark had gone straight home from Pamphylia when Paul, Barnabas & the rest of Paul's company continued their missionary journey. Paul felt that Mark could not be trusted on their next mission. Barnabas, who was Mark's uncle, wanted to take him. The apostles, having been fast friends, quarrelled. Probably, they both regarded Mark's coming or not coming as a matter of principle. These situations arise in churches & need a lot of prayer. The good news is that Paul and Mark were subsequently reconciled (II Timothy 4¹¹, Colossians 4¹⁰). Mark was also close to Peter who, tradition has it, provided Mark with the material for his Gospel. (I Peter 5¹³).

July 10th

Acts 16 vv 1-3

Timothy and Paul became very close. Timothy accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys. Later he was entrusted with a position of leadership within the Church, affirming sound doctrine, bringing discipline & order, He was the first Bishop of Ephesus.

Timothy had been brought up by his mother Eunice & his grandmother Lois to know the Scriptures (what we would call the Old Testament) from childhood. So he was well prepared to come to know Jesus and to minister effectively for Him in His Church. It is extremely important that children are brought up to know the Bible stories & to pray & to belong to God's Church.

July 11th

Acts 16 vv 4&5

Paul and his companions visited the churches they had founded on their first missionary journey & informed them of the decisions of the Council of Jerusalem in the last chapter. The Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. We are members of Christ. We are members of one another. We are united by the authority of the Holy Spirit Who works through the Scriptures, through the people whom He has called to lead His Church, through councils & synods, through the fellowship of the whole Church, in the hearts of individual Christians. Ephesians 4: ⁴ *There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;* ⁵ *One Lord, one faith, one baptism,* ⁶ *One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.*

Every congregation is the Church in the place where God has called it into existence – St Michael's, St John's, the United Reformed Church, the Baptist Church, for example, in Cuxton & Halling. But also every Church belongs to the whole Church.. We are one with our brothers & sisters in faith on earth & in heaven. We are in communion with Christ and with one another.

The Church's one foundation
is Jesus Christ her Lord;
she is his new creation,
by water and the word:
from heaven he came and

sought her
to be his holy bride;
with his own blood he bought
her,
and for her life he died.

Elect from every nation,
yet one o'er all the earth,
her charter of salvation,
one Lord, one faith, one birth;
one holy Name she blesses,
partakes one holy food,
and to one hope she presses,
with every grace endued.

Yet she on earth hath union
with God, the Three in one,
and mystic sweet communion
with those whose rest is won.
O happy ones and holy!
Lord, give us grace that we
like them, the meek and lowly,
on high may dwell with thee.

July 12th (Trinity 6)

Acts 16 vv 6-13

I remember telling this story in a school assembly at the time of the EU referendum. It doesn't say anything about whether or not the UK should be a member of the EU, but it is the story of how (so far as we know) the Gospel was first preached in Europe. Paul had his own plans – no doubt very good plans – to continue his mission in Asia. But, in God's plan, it was time to commence preaching in Europe. We may well be frustrated when we can't seem to make any progress in doing something which we believe to be right. Stop & pray about it. Maybe God has a better plan for you.

O GOD, who hast prepared for them that love thee such good things as pass man's understanding; Pour into our hearts such love toward thee, that wee, loving thee above all things, may obtain thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

July 13th

Acts 16 vv 14&15

Purple cloth was very expensive. So Lydia was probably quite a wealthy woman. The women met to pray on the Sabbath at the river side. It seems that there were not many Jews in Philippi and that there was no synagogue. Where were the Jewish men? Probably, they met separately. They would have sat separately in the synagogue had there been one. These faithful women listened to what Paul had to say about Jesus, the fulfilment of their faith. By God's grace, Lydia believed and was baptised. So was her household. Her family, her servants even would have followed her lead. The idea that every individual makes up his or her mind independently about everything is not typical human behaviour. It is not normal, but it comes in with the Christian religion when families may be divided by faith. (cf Luke 12⁴⁹⁻⁵³).

July 14th

Acts 16 vv 16-18

The phenomenon of demon possession is very hard to comprehend. It's in the New Testament. Jesus clearly believed in it & He Himself cast out demons. We might say that the people described as possessed in the Bible were mentally or physically ill. They were obviously in the grip of evil of some kind and needed deliverance and healing. A common New Testament word ($\Sigma\omega\zeta\omega$) meaning *heal* or *make whole* also means *save, rescue* or *deliver, keep safe for eternal life*. We have to be very careful. Some Christians are only too quick to ascribe any malady to the effect of demons. People presenting with any kind of sickness should not be discouraged from taking their medicine. Some self-styled exorcists perform theatrical rites which may involve doing great harm to the supposedly possessed person. It is always right to pray in all circumstances. It is always good to bless. But if there is real reason to believe that there is anything demonic, don't risk a do it yourself exorcism. Contact a minister of a recognised denomination of the Church. The Holy Spirit is more powerful than any other kind of spirit. So we don't have to fear demons – but we ought not to take risks with them either. (See Acts 19¹³⁻¹⁷.)

July 15th

Acts 16 vv 19-24

The wicked master of this afflicted slave girl had made some sort of exhibition of her. Perhaps she had dramatic seizures. Maybe she was believed to be able to tell fortunes. Anyway, her master was exploiting her suffering for his own personal gain. Paul set her free of her affliction and, instead of giving thanks to God for her deliverance, the man was furious with Paul and laid a complaint against him to the magistrates. Notice that he made his complaint much wider than the personal loss he had suffered. He appealed to anti-Semitic prejudice. He gave a distorted account of Paul's preaching. Paul certainly didn't preach rebellion against Rome – though it is of course true that if men & women put their faith in Jesus and obey His commandments, they will not indulge in some of the baser pursuits of the Roman Empire or of any other human society. Christians do turn the world upside down, not by bloody revolution, but by proclaiming a whole new way of living.

That it may please thee to bless and keep the Magistrates, giving them grace to execute justice, and to maintain truth; *We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.*

July 16th

Acts 16 vv 25-28

Paul & Silas had been severely beaten and they were confined in the stocks in the inner prison. Yet they prayed & sang hymns. There's an example for us in our troubles, which are mostly considerably less than theirs.

They chose not to take advantage of the earthquake and escape. The gaoler was ready to kill himself if they had escaped, presumably because he himself would have suffered a dreadful punishment. Is that why the prisoners stayed where they were in the gaol?

July 17th

Acts 16 vv 29-34

The demeanour of Paul & Silas made such an impression on the gaoler that he recognised the truth of that in which they believed. *What must I do to be saved?* (Σωζω), The answer is simple, *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved, and thy house*. It is the same answer to the same question today and whenever it is asked, wherever it is asked, by whomsoever it is asked. Just as in the case of Lydia, the whole household is included in this salvation. As human beings, we tend to be loyal to our families, our neighbours, our tribe or clan, our culture, to those in authority over us – the heads of our households, community leaders, government, kings & presidents. We share the same beliefs. We speak in the same accents. We, generally speaking, follow the rules & conventions of our people. So, as the Gospel spread, we read not only of individuals, but of households, tribes & even kingdoms espousing the Christian faith all together at one time. In some sense, the rest of the family is sanctified by the faith of one faithful member (I Corinthians 7¹⁴). They still all need to be instructed in the faith, however. (Acts 16³²).

Most human cultures & religions are like this. Everybody goes along with what everybody else believes. They look after one another. You scratch my back; I'll scratch yours. Where Christianity (and Islam) disrupt this normal pattern of human behaviour is that we expect individuals to be prepared to make up their own minds and, if necessary, to put loyalty to God before loyalty to family, community, tribe or nation.

July 18th

Acts 16 vv 35-40

Having made their point, the magistrates wanted to get rid of Paul & Silas. But Paul wasn't being got rid of so easily. He had certain rights as a Roman citizen, including the right not to be punished without being convicted in a fair trial. Of course everybody ought to have those rights but not everyone did. Not everyone does even today overseas and even in this country, where decisions are sometimes made by secretive elites about individuals' futures with no proper opportunity for the individuals concerned to respond to allegations made.

Paul did have those rights. Was he right to exercise them? Or should he have turned the other cheek and left Philippi quietly & without a fuss? I think he was right to exercise his rights because his doing so would have made the magistrates more careful to play by the rules in future cases. It is too easy for those who are entrusted with power to become blasé about exceeding that power because nobody ever challenges them.

July 19th (Trinity 7)

Acts 17 vv 1-4

In the synagogues, Paul, as he preached, was able to reason with the Jews from the Scriptures. They knew their Bible. Paul started from that point in order to demonstrate that Jesus is the fulfilment of God's promises, God's purpose for the redemption of the entire created order. Evangelists like Billy Graham and Nicky Gumbel (at least in the early days of the Alpha Course) were able to rely on the fact that most of the people who came to hear them had some knowledge of the Bible from growing up in a Christian country – even if they hadn't experienced its power as the Word of God in their own hearts. The question is how do we communicate the significance of Jesus to people who know little or nothing of what the Bible teaches. Later on in this chapter, we shall read about Paul doing just that. St Paul instructs Timothy: *Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.* (II Timothy 4²). We in the Church today have received the same commission & we must fulfil it.

LORD of all power and might, who art the author and giver of all good things; Graft in our hearts the love of thy Name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of thy great mercy keep us in the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

July 20th

Acts 17 v5

Why does the Gospel so often meet with violent resistance? It says here that the unconvinced Jews were jealous of Paul's success in persuading some of their number plus a multitude of Gentiles of the truth which is in Jesus Christ. The Salvation Army initially suffered abuse & violence on the streets when they went about preaching the Gospel and doing good works. Missionaries in all ages & climes have sometimes been met with violence & even martyrdom. Paul himself persecuted the Church before his own conversion. Maybe one answer lies in what Jesus said to Saul (as he then was) in that vision on the road to Damascus. *It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks* (Acts 26¹⁴). Deep down inside, human beings know that the Gospel is true. We are made in the image of God. But, if we admit the truth of the Gospel, we must repent of our sins & that's hard to do. Human beings enjoy breaking God's commandments. We don't trust God that, if we live morally good lives, we shall be happier people. So there is a tension between knowing deep down inside us what is true & rejecting the truth which threatens what we mistakenly regard as our freedom. People may take out that tension by turning on those who try to tell them the truth.

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

July 21st

Acts 17 vv 6-9

These that have turned the world upside down have come hither also. What motivates people? What do human beings strive for? Power? Money? Sex? Security? Fame? Status? To the extent that motivations such as these dominate in the world, the Christian Gospel does indeed turn the world upside down.

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise;
Thou mine inheritance, now and always;
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart;
O King of glory, my treasure Thou art.

July 22nd (St Mary Magdalene)

1 Magdalene, thy
grief and gladness
voice and heart in
concert sing,
telling how the
risen Saviour
called thee from
thy sorrowing,
tidings of his
resurrection
to his chosen flock
to bring.

2 She beheld him,
yet she knew not
in the gardener's
seeming guise
Christ, who in her
heart was sowing
seed of heavenly
mysteries,
till his voice, her
name
pronouncing,
bade her see and
recognize.

Acts 17 vv 10-15

3 Weep not, Mary,
weep no longer!
Now thy seeking
heart may rest;
Christ the
heavenly gardener
soweth
light and joy
within thy breast:
in the glowing cry
'Rabboni!'
be thy gratitude
confest.

Mary Magdalene was one of the women who first found our Lord's tomb empty on Easter morning. She & they were the first to tell the apostles. Mary was the first to meet the Risen Christ. (See John 20¹⁻¹⁸.) Jesus had delivered Mary from tremendous evil (Luke 8²) and she was one of those women who supported Him in His ministry. Her encounter with her Risen Lord in the garden is a wonderful story. Knowing Jesus enables us to become the people we are meant to be. It is incumbent upon us to share the Good News with all & sundry – from the apostles to the hostile Thessalonians and the more receptive Bereans, everyone, as the Sower scatters the Word of God on all kinds of ground. (Luke 8⁴⁻¹⁵).

July 23rd

Acts 17 16-21

Paul was sent to Athens for his own safety & to allow things to calm down in Thessalonica. He took the opportunity to preach the Gospel to the Athenians. Paul exhorts Timothy (II Timothy 4²): *Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season.* S Peter (I Peter 3¹⁵): exhorts all Christians: *But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to any man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.* I can think of reasons why I might be too meek and fearful to preach the Gospel out of season (when people are hostile or indifferent, when religion isn't conventionally mentioned in polite society). I'm sure you can too, but these great apostles tell us to share the Good News. Our meekness & fear might be the first step, giving us the humility before God & man which we need.

July 24th

Acts 17 vv 22-25

There was a synagogue at Athens and presumably preached to the Jews there much as he preached to the Jews in other places, showing them how Christ fulfils the Law & the Prophets. But, when he had attracted the interest of the pagan philosophers, the intellectuals of their day, he reasoned with them in way which they could appreciate. He appealed to their common sense. The gods of Greece & Rome were obviously mythical, human beings writ large, the inventions of human minds. The real God was unknown to them. They instinctively reached out for Him. Most human cultures are religious & those which are not have made a religion of atheism. God can only be known insofar as He makes Himself known, which He does through Creation, by the Law & the Prophets (the Books of Nature & Revelation) and supremely in Jesus Christ (the Word made flesh). He doesn't need anything from us, because everything we have is His gift to us.

*Accept the gifts we offer for all Thy love imparts,
And what Thou most desirest, our humble, thankful hearts.*

July 25th (St James)

Acts 17 vv 26-31

James was a fisherman, brother of the apostle John, son of Zebedee, and partner with Andrew & Peter. They were all Jews & knew better than to think that God was any kind of idol. They knew that in Him we live & move and have our being. They knew that God is our judge. They would come to know Who God truly is in Jesus Christ. He called them to follow Him & to become fishers of men, preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. They would come to know that this Good News is for all nations, not just for the Jews. James would die the death of a martyr. The apostles knew to be obedient without delay to Christ's calling & the necessity of following Him, forsaking all worldly & carnal affections. This most of the Athenian philosophers would not do. Possibly they could not let go & let God because they felt they had too much to lose – power, prestige, their place in respectable society.

GRANT, O merciful God, that as thine holy Apostle Saint James, leaving his father and all that he had, without delay was obedient unto the calling of thy Son Jesus Christ, and followed him; so we, forsaking all worldly and carnal affections, may be evermore ready to follow thy holy commandments; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

July 26th (Trinity 8)

Acts 17 vv 32-34

Many of the Athenian philosophers wrote off the Resurrection as impossible. *Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?* God can do anything. He created all life. He gave us our lives and sustains us. He requires our lives of us when His good time comes. *Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?* Many of the philosophers dismissed Paul. Their blindness to the possibility of resurrection enabled them to dismiss the challenge to take up their cross & follow Christ, through Whose Death is the only Way to eternal life. Some were more open-minded. A few believed and were saved.

O GOD, whose never-failing providence ordereth all things both in heaven and earth; We humbly beseech thee to put away from us all hurtful things, and to give us those things which be profitable for us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

July 27th

Acts 18 vv 1&2

Anti-Semitism existed even in those days. Indeed it goes back centuries before that. See the Book of Esther. Why is that? Is it because Jews were different? They kept themselves to themselves & followed their own customs. Were others jealous because the Jews regarded themselves as the chosen people? Were people jealous of the Jews because they were often successful relative to their Gentile neighbours? They took care of one another. They were blessed by having received the Law of God. This provided them with moral principles to regulate their own culture & the honesty, wisdom, integrity & sense of duty which it inculcates gave them a good reputation & some success in business & politics. See the Book of Daniel. In the early days, as we have seen, some of the Jews who did not accept that Jesus is the Messiah persecuted the Church. The Pharisees & Sadducees (the Jewish leadership) mainly opposed Jesus. Christians would come to blame the Jews for Christ's Crucifixion – though we are all responsible for that. He died for the sins of the whole human race, not just the Jews. The Bible forbids usury & Christians were forbidden for centuries to lend or borrow commercially. The Jews would not lend at interest to one another, but they would lend to Christians. So Christians who wanted to borrow money had to turn to Jewish moneylenders. The creditor/debtor relationship is always fraught.

July 28th

Acts 18 v3

Anti-Semitism is always wrong, as is every kind of prejudice & persecution. Anyway, the Emperor Claudius' prejudice resulted in Aquila & Priscilla living in Corinth where they were able to help Paul with accommodation & gainful employment and to share in his task of building God's Church. Although Paul recognised the right of Christian ministers to be supported by the Church, he thought that it was important to his own ministry that he supported himself. He was anxious that the success of his preaching should not be undermined by the suspicion that he was in it for the money. He did not want to be a burden to the Churches he founded – often made up of poor people, even slaves.

Note that they were doing manual work. There is no snobbishness about getting their hands dirty. There's no need for God's ministers to belong to a professional class. Yet the Church of England, in this Year of our Lord 2026, is still considering what to do about the fact that too many working class candidates for priesthood are made to feel that they wouldn't fit in the ranks of the C of E's ministers.

Also, given that it is legitimate to expect the Church to support her ministers (freeing them up to work full time as priests, preachers & pastors), what standard of life is it reasonable for them to expect? I've been rather shocked this year to learn about the new guidelines for parsonages & how cosseted the clergy are now expected to be. My generation hardly knew hardship, but now what we had is no longer considered good enough!

July 29th

Acts 18 vv 4-6

Paul's ministry in Corinth began in much the same as it generally did in other cities. He spoke of Christ in the synagogue to both Jews & Gentiles. Some believed. Some of those who didn't accept his message then turned on Paul. He warns them that there are consequences to rejecting the Gospel. We are given a choice between life and death (just as the Israelites were on the eve of their entry into the Promised Land.) It is our choice. *Therefore choose life and live.* There is only one other possibility. You're either dead or alive.

July 30th

Acts 18 vv 7-11

Paul didn't usually stay so long in one place. He did what he had come to do – preached the Gospel, established the local Christian community – and moved on. He continued to care for them. He might write to them, send them ministers or visit them himself again. This is one model of mission & ministry. Another is the one with which we are more familiar in this country. The minister commits himself to the service of a particular local Church for a longer period. He is their priest, preacher & pastor. On the Pauline model, the continuing local ministry might be supplied by deacons, elders or presbyters, overseers or bishops, ordained from within the congregation. On the other model, the minister is likely to be someone who did not grow up in the local Church but is appointed to it from elsewhere, in the Church of England a priest called to be a rector or vicar. These models are not hard and fast. There is plenty of overlap. It matters, however, that the Church is both local (of its community) and also very definitely part of the *whole state of Christ's Church militant here in earth*. We are the Church in this place. We are one with the worldwide Church – and indeed with Christians in Heaven.

July 31st

Acts 18 vv 12-17

And Gallio cared for none of those things.

When Paul arrived in Corinth, Crispus was the ruler of the synagogue. He was converted to the Christian faith and joined Paul. Sosthenes took Crispus' place as ruler of the synagogue for those Jews who had not accepted Christ. Taking advantage of the appointment of a new Roman deputy, the unbelieving Jews tried to make trouble for Paul & the Christians. Gallio wasn't interested and the Greeks turned on the Jews. I hope that there were no Christians among those Greeks who beat Sosthenes. Jesus teaches us to pray for those who persecuted, not to fight evil with evil, but with good. Gallio was wise not to involve himself in a dispute about religion. The Romans could be quite relaxed about religions so long as they were not a threat to their rule. But Gallio was quite wrong to be indifferent to the violence.

Sometimes it seems as if the authorities in this country fail to deal with crime. This is not good enough. Those in law enforcement need our prayers.

August 1st (Lammas)

Acts 18 vv 18-23

Lammas is the English equivalent of the Feast of First Fruits.

Traditionally, it is the beginning of the wheat harvest. Bread from the new crop is used for the celebration of Holy Communion. Lammas is Loaf Mass. The theme is thanksgiving for what God has given us and consecration of the fruits of our labour to Him & His service. *All things come of thee & of thine own have we given thee* (I Chronicles 29¹⁴).

The Churches Paul visits are the fruits of his labour. It is God Who commissions us to preach the Gospel. It is He Who enables us to carry out His command. It is He Who gives those who hear the Gospel grace to respond to the Word. We thank God for His Church, our fellow Christians. We consecrate everything He has enabled us to achieve to Him & His service. More than one minister, more than one Christian may be used by God in the work, but it is His work and everything depends on him. Paul writes (I Corinthians 3⁶: *I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase*. Mission is rooted in prayer.

August 2nd (Trinity 9)

Acts 18 vv 24-28

You sometimes get enthusiastic people joining the Church. Praise God for them. But, sometimes, like Apollos here, they are not quite on top of things. This is one reason why novice Christians ought not to be ordained too quickly. Your new enthusiastic members may get carried away with their enthusiasm, full of new ideas, perhaps putting up the backs of the existing membership. You obviously don't want to crush their eagerness to serve God. Neither should we allow established members who perhaps have become stale to discourage new people with new ideas. On the other hand, if like Apollos, the new guys haven't got things quite right, as Priscilla & Aquila did, you have to put them right kindly, but firmly. Apollos seems to have left the Holy Spirit out of his teaching, concentrating only on the need for repentance and not knowing about the joy of being born anew in Christ.

GRANT to us, Lord, we beseech thee, the spirit to think and do always such things as be rightful; that we, who cannot do any thing that is good without thee, may by thee be enabled to live according to thy will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*.

August 3rd

Acts 19 vv 1-7

Being a Christian is a relationship with God. It is not merely trying to live a good life & regretting our failures to do so. It is not merely believing that God is the Creator of heaven and earth so that we thank Him for all the good things we have and pray to Him in all our troubles. It is not even merely having hope for life after death. Being a Christian is a relationship with God. The Holy Spirit dwells in us. We experience Jesus as our Lord & God as our Father. We do not merely know that God is. We know Him.

August 4th

Acts 19 vv 8-12

Paul had a very fruitful ministry in Ephesus. There was the usual schism between those who believed and those who did not. There are only two options: to follow Jesus in the narrow way which leads to life or to take the broad way which leads to everlasting destruction.

We might think that amazing miracles would convince people of the truth of the Gospel. Miracles do happen & they are a reason to be thankful, but, as we see here, miracles do not convert those whose hearts are hardened against Jesus.

August 5th

Acts 19 vv 13-20

I once knew a clergyman in a part of the country where a lot of people were afraid of evil spirits. He himself didn't believe in spirits, but he sometimes carried out blessings of the houses of parishioners who were troubled. Both he & his parishioners were wrong. There are such things as evil spirits. The Bible is quite clear on that point, but we're not told very much about them – only that God in Christ is more powerful than all the forces of evil combined. Our Lord's self sacrifice on the Cross, the perfect offering of goodness & love, is sufficient to overcome Satan & all his works. On the other hand, it is a mistake to obsess about evil spirits, to fear them and to blame spirits for everything which is wrong in the world. We can trust Jesus to look after us.

This story does warn us, however, about the dangers of presumption. It's dangerous to mess about with spirits. If there is a need for dealing with them, call in a minister recognised by a mainstream Church.

August 6th (The Transfiguration of our Lord)

Acts 19 vv 21-26

This is my beloved Son: hear him.

It is sometimes thought that early human beings did not believe in God or gods and that they invented religion as time went on – a prop, a form of social control, a means of promoting social cohesion, a pretext for believing that one’s own culture is superior to that of others’, a kind of magic which gives us the illusion that we can master the physical world, a hope for life beyond the grave.

This account of the development of religion is far from the truth. So far as we can make out from archaeology, anthropology, etc., for as long as humans have left records of themselves which we can interpret, human beings have been religious. This fact does not prove that God exists, but it is reasonable to suppose that there is some truth in religion, a Truth to which humanity has always aspired. Atheism, believing that there is definitely no God, is a comparatively late development & only appears to dominate in countries where it is enforced by law, like China, North Korea & the old Soviet Union. Even in these places, it is usually the case that many citizens retain their faith despite the persecution they face as a consequence. The concept of agnosticism, sitting determinedly on the fence, was really only invented in Victorian England. It sounds clever, but it is pretty pointless. See notes August 4th.

The Ephesians were “religious” in a big way. They worshipped the goddess Diana or Artemis, believing in an image which had come down from heaven (probably a meteorite). Human beings worship all kinds of idols and images, false gods, false descriptions of the one true God. There is only one authentic image of God – our Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

On one occasion, Jesus took the apostles John, James & Peter up a mountain to pray. He was transfigured before them. (See Luke 9²⁸⁻³⁶). Moses & Elijah spoke with Him – about His exodus, His crucifixion. A cloud, the glory of God, engulfed them all. The Voice of God spoke to the apostles &, through them, to us all.

This is my beloved Son: hear him.

August 7th

Acts 19 vv 27-29

It is too easy to exploit people's religious feelings in order to take their money off them. I am sorry to say that Christians are sometimes as guilty of this as pagans – any suggestion that you can earn merit with God by making donations to the Church or to a particular minister. God loves you because you are you. He blesses you gratis, freely, for nothing, just because He loves you. Of course, we donate to God's Church and her ministry, but we give back freely to God, reciprocating His freely given love to us, not in order to earn that love.

Freely ye have received, freely give. (Matthew 10⁸).

August 8th

Acts 19 vv 30-32

Discretion is sometimes the better part of valour. Paul's friends restrained him from entering the theatre where this over-excited mob had assembled. He would have been putting himself at risk and his appearance would have made the situation worse.

Crowds can be very powerful. They are unpredictable. People in crowds do things they would never do as individuals. It is exciting to be part of a crowd. People may be drawn in just because there is something exciting going on. They may leave their brains behind them and allow themselves to be carried away by the crowd's shared emotion.

This can happen even in Christian worship. Individuals get carried away by the sheer power of belonging to the crowd. That is not to say that enthusiasm in worship is wrong! It is wrong, however, to switch off our brains and allow ourselves to be led entirely by the heart. St Paul writes (I Corinthians 14¹⁵): *What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.*

August 9th (Trinity 10)

Acts 19 vv 33&34

Alexander was a Jew who had become a Christian. The early Church included many Jews. It was Paul's hope & prayer that all the Jews would come to know Jesus as our Saviour – *a light to lighten the Gentiles & the glory of thy people Israel.*

We note the anti-Semitic bias of the crowd and lament the fact that anti-Semitism continues to defile the world. So many people are prejudiced against the Jews which is so wrong.

The crowd is irrational. They refuse to listen to an alternative point of view. They mindlessly chant their slogan. That's behaviour we're only too familiar with too.

What can we do about it? We can seek God's grace for ourselves not to be prejudiced against other people for any reason. We can seek His gift of wisdom especially when our understanding is challenged. We can pray for the Church and the world that we all learn to respect one another and humbly together to seek the truth.

LET thy merciful ears, O Lord, be open to the prayers of thy humble servants; and that they may obtain their petitions make them to ask such things as shall please thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

August 10th

Acts 19 vv 35-41

The town clerk trod a difficult path. If the people of Ephesus became too riotous, the Romans would put them down with a heavy hand. It was not easy for him, however, to pacify the mob. He could point out, however, that St Paul & his companions had not behaved badly towards the pagans. They had boldly proclaimed the truth of God's Word, but they had not set out to cause trouble or to give any unnecessary offence. This is a model for mission today. As Christians, we ought not to be afraid to share God's Truth, but we must respect the people we're sharing with.

August 11th

Acts 20 vv 1-6

Paul & his companions moved around a lot & we are given something of their itinerary here. They would have preached the Gospel. They would have both enjoyed the hospitality of the Churches in these places and encouraged them in their life & mission. It was also sensible to avoid any unnecessary confrontations with danger. The implication of verse 6 is that the author of Acts, Luke, was present with Paul. It is good to think of the fellowship which they enjoyed.

August 12th

Acts 20 vv 7-12

The Christians at Troas met on the first day of the week (Sunday) to break bread. The Jewish day runs from evening to evening (as in Genesis *the evening and the morning were the first day*). This would be a form of Holy Communion, the service which Jesus commanded us to observe. Paul also preached (at great length). In Church on Sundays, we meet God in Christian fellowship, fellowship with one another, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. We meet Him in the consecrated Bread & Wine. We meet Him in His Word. We meet Him in prayer, Christ in us and we in Him. We confess our sins and receive absolution. We offer Him our praise & thanksgiving for all the blessings which He has poured upon us. We ask Him in faith to meet all our needs (spiritual & material). We enjoy a foretaste of heaven as we join in worship with angels & archangels and with all the company of heaven. We are not worthy but His property is always to have mercy. It was all too much for Eutychus! Thankfully, his fall wasn't permanently fatal!

August 13th

Acts 20 vv 13-16

I hadn't noticed this before, but, if Paul was at Troas a week or so after Easter & wanted to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost, he only had around five weeks to complete the journey. I wonder why he chose to walk the first part of the route? Maybe, he felt cooped up in the ship & needed the exercise. Perhaps, we wanted time to be alone & think. Exercise & time to think are both good reasons for taking a walk. Maybe there was a person or a community he wished to visit.

August 14th

Acts 20 vv 17-27

I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.

This is a very affecting scene. St Paul is saying his final farewells to the elders of the Ephesian Church. They must have been very close after two years of ministering together and they do not expect to meet again in this life. Paul speaks of what he has shared with them *with all humility of mind*. He has not served them by watering down the Gospel to make it more palatable to pagans or Jews. He has declared the full counsel of God – the words of eternal life, which is still the task of the Christian Church today.

August 15th (The Blessed Virgin Mary)

Acts 20 vv 28-38

In verse 17, these men are called elders or presbyters. In v28, they are called overseers or bishops. In English the word priest is often used for the Greek presbyter, which is somewhat confusing. Presbyterian Christians effectively believe in one order of ministry – elders or presbyters. RCs, Orthodox and Anglicans believe in three orders – bishops, priests (presbyters) and deacons. Sadly, this is one of the causes of division in the Church. Yet, in this chapter, the same men are described both as elders & as overseers. What happened was that the principal minister in a city Church came to be known as the overseer or bishop and he was ordained by an apostle or men who had themselves been ordained by the apostles. There were then the priests or elders who assisted the bishop & looked after the Churches in the suburbs and surrounding villages and the deacons who took care of the poor and the sick. All ordained ministers are deacons. Some of us deacons have subsequently been ordained to be priests. Some of the number of those who have been ordained first as deacons, then as priests, have been ordained to be bishops. Bishop, priest or deacon isn't a job, any more than being a husband is a job. A man becomes a husband by virtue of being married, whatever job he does if any. Similarly, one becomes a bishop, priest or deacon by virtue of being ordained, whatever job one does or does not do in the Church. You have to be a priest to do some jobs like rector or vicar. Today's verses are sometimes read at ordinations. Look at the responsibility which goes with being an ordained minister. The people we care for are so valuable to God that Christ died for them. We are called to preach & teach the faith, resisting heresy. Some clergy may go astray which is very grievous. We are responsible for making the Sacraments available, for offering to God the sacrifice of praise. We are responsible for the health & welfare of God's people. We are to promote the unity of the Body of Christ. We're not to seek personal gain for our ministry. *It is more blessed to give than to receive.* We pray for vocations.

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

August 16th (Trinity 11)

Acts 21 vv 1-14

Paul is determined to go to Jerusalem and he is not afraid of what probably awaits him there. He is prepared to die for Jesus. Remember. This is the Paul who consented to the death of Stephen, believing that the nascent Church ought to be exterminated as a bad influence, was subsequently converted & became convinced that the Death of the Lord Jesus brought about the salvation of the entire Creation (Colossians 1²⁰). Some of the Christians they met en route to Jerusalem also understood what awaited Paul in Jerusalem and tried to dissuade him from going there. Good sincere Christians may have different perceptions of what God's Will is in any situation. We have to respect one another's insights and pray for discernment in the light of what we know of God.

O GOD, who declarest thy almighty power most chiefly in shewing mercy and pity; Mercifully grant unto us such a measure of thy grace, that we, running the way of thy commandments, may obtain thy gracious promises, and be made partakers of thy heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

August 17th

Acts 21 vv 15-26

Back at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), the Church had agreed that Gentile converts to the Christian faith did not need to observe the ceremonial aspects of the Jewish Law. The men did not have to be circumcised. They only had to observe the food laws in a very limited way. But what about Jewish people who became Christians? Thousands of them put their faith in Jesus as their Saviour but considered themselves obliged to continue to practise Torah – to continue to follow (as best they could) all the precepts which God had given to Moses. Messianic Jews still do believe in Jesus and try to keep the Law of Moses. To these Jewish Christians, it would be a scandal if Paul had told his Jewish converts that they needn't bother with the Law. There is evidence that Paul was less strict even with regard to his own conduct than James (Galatians 1 vv 9-21). I doubt that he caused avoidable offence to Jews by disregarding the food laws, etc., but he would have stoutly maintained that he was saved by faith in Jesus, not by observance of the Law. So James and the other elders wanted Paul publicly to perform a Jewish rite in order to assuage the fears of his critics. This tactic appears to have gone wrong.

August 18th

Acts 21 vv 27-40

Only Jews were allowed to enter the inner courts of the Temple. The Gentiles were permitted only in the outer court – which was one reason for Jesus turning out the traders who congregated there selling beasts for sacrifice and changing money, spoiling the sanctity of that *place of prayer for all nations*. Wrongly thinking that Paul had brought a Gentile into the inner court, affronted Jews rioted. James' tactic to assuage the fears of Paul's critics had apparently gone badly wrong. But, in doing so, it had provided Paul with an opportunity to preach the Gospel to a large crowd. As Christians, we do our best to do the right thing, but, only too often, we get it wrong, yet God can still use even our mistakes to further his purposes.

ALMIGHTY God, the fountain of all wisdom, who knowest our necessities before we ask, and our ignorance in asking; We beseech thee to have compassion upon our infirmities; and those things, which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask, vouchsafe to give us, for the worthiness of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

August 19th

Acts 22 vv 1-5

Paul (or Saul as he then was) was a zealous Pharisee. The underlying philosophy of being a Pharisee was to know God's Law (Torah) thoroughly and to do your very best to live by it. Paul was a dedicated student of the Law and he had a great teacher in the Pharisee Gamaliel. This Gamaliel (Acts 5^{33et seq}) warned the chief priests to treat the apostles circumspectly. There is a tradition that Gamaliel later became a Christian, but other ancient sources record that he died a Jew. The Pharisees tried hard to be good but often come under condemnation in the New Testament. Some were self-righteous, some were hypocrites, both temptations into which religious people too easily fall. What Saul the Pharisee discovered was that it is impossible to keep the Law, to earn your salvation by your own efforts. Our salvation depends on God & on Him alone. Saul had thought that the followers of Jesus were undermining the Law. He did everything he could to wipe out the infant Church, as his hearers at Jerusalem well knew. On the Road to Damascus, it was revealed to Saul that Jesus is in fact the fulfilment of the Law. He has fulfilled all the Law's demands and set us free to keep His commandments without fear.

August 20th

Acts 22 vv 6-8

To persecute Christians, to persecute the Church is to persecute Jesus. We are His Body. He dwells in us & we dwell in Him. When He was nailed to the Cross, Jesus prayed, *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.* He prayed for His persecutors and He taught us to do the same.

That it may please thee to forgive our enemies, persecutors, and slanderers, and to turn their hearts;
We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.

August 21st

Acts 22 vv 9-16

God had a task for Paul to perform. No doubt, his life as a Pharisee, his understanding of the Scriptures, his experience of worship had helped to prepare him for what God wanted him to do. His status as a Roman citizen helped him on his travels. He was fluent in different languages. His status as an Israelite gave him some authority. All these advantages assisted him in his mission, but he didn't boast in any of them. It was not Saul's status, education, authority or ability that mattered. He writes (Philippians 3⁷⁻⁹): *⁷ But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. ⁸ Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, ⁹ And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith:*

We may have many gifts – status, respectability, education, wisdom, looks, wealth, power – but that's what they are gifts. God gives them to us so that we can serve Him, by doing the good works He has prepared for us to walk in. Our gifts are not given to us for our glory, but for His. Paradoxically, it is His service which is perfect freedom.

1. When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.
2. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

3. See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

4. Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

August 22nd

Acts 22 v16

Why Tarryest Thou?

Why indeed tarry? This is the last verse of yesterday's reading, but I thought it demanded more consideration. *Why tarryest thou?* Paul had come to know Jesus Christ. *Be baptised*, he is told, *and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord*. Get on with it. Paul has an entire life ahead of him in which to serve the Lord. There was no time like the present to commit himself, to consecrate himself in the Lord's service. How often though, for us as individuals and in church meetings, do we find that there is always a reason for delay? We shouldn't do what is proposed. We shouldn't do it yet. We need more time. Let's set up a committee to discuss it and then, when it eventually reports back, go over all the arguments again. We can't afford it. Someone might not like it. I'm not saying that issues should not be carefully considered nor that we should not prepare properly, but there does come a time when decisions have to be taken and acted on. As for following Jesus, there is no good reason whatever for not taking up your cross & following Him now.

August 23rd Trinity 12)

Acts 22 vv 17-21

Paul was eager to get on with things, but Jesus told him that he was going about it in the wrong way, even though it seemed to Paul the right way. An essential aspect of preparation for Christian service is prayer.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who art always more ready to hear than we are to pray, and art wont to give more than either we desire, or deserve; Pour down upon us the abundance of thy mercy; forgiving us those things whereof our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask, but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord. *Amen*.

August 24th (St Bartholomew)

Acts 22 vv 22&23

Like Paul, the apostle Bartholomew travelled widely preaching the Gospel & died a martyr's death – as did all the apostles except John. What is it about human beings that some of us so vehemently reject the Truth which Jesus came to bring? There is a perversion inside us – original sin – which rejects God & His grace. But Christ's death redeems us from the tyranny of sin and sets us free, through repentance & faith, to share His risen life. John 1^{11&12}): *He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.*

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

August 25th

Acts 22 vv 24-30

Roman citizens had certain privileges which others did not have. You could be a Roman citizen by virtue of belonging to a Roman family – the original meaning of citizenship – but, as the Empire grew, other people could gain citizenship by other means. Paul was born a citizen, which was more prestigious than having paid to become a citizen. It wasn't right that non-citizens could be subject to *cruel & unusual punishments*, which could not be imposed on Romans. Paul was ready to take advantage of his status as a citizen even though he would have deplored the fact that non-citizens could be subject to such ill treatment.

August 26th

Acts 23 vv 1-5

The underlying premise is that, even when subjected to humiliating & painful treatment, one should not reciprocate by showing the perpetrators disrespect, especially if they are authority figures. Jesus was silent before His accusers. Isaiah 53⁷: *He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.* He prayed for their forgiveness. Paul accepts that he ought not have reviled the high priest but says that he didn't

know that Ananias was the high priest. Why would that have been? Some people say that Paul had very poor eyesight and just didn't recognise Ananias. Another possibility is that he disputed whether Ananias was the authentic high priest. The straightforward descent of the high priests from Moses' brother Aaron had become confused & interfered with by the Romans, but Ananias did have a good claim to the position. Perhaps Paul meant that a high priest true to his vocation would not order a prisoner to be slapped. Perhaps Paul lost his temper as one tends to when hit in the mouth. Even apostles aren't perfect & we only follow even them insofar as they follow Christ.

August 27th

Acts 23 vv 6-8

The Sadducees were the priestly caste. They only accepted as authoritative the Torah – the first five books of the Bible. As we see here, there were sceptical of claims about the supernatural. It is noteworthy that in Mark 12¹⁸⁻²⁷, when the Sadducees challenge Jesus with regard to belief in life after death, our Lord refers them to the Torah (Exodus 3). The LORD is the God of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob. He is the God of the living. Abraham, Isaac & Jacob lived on earth hundreds of years before Moses, but they lived in heaven in Moses' time, as they still did when Jesus was on earth in bodily form & as they still do. The Gospel message runs throughout Scripture.

BLESSED be the Lord God of Israel : for he hath visited and redeemed his people; And hath raised up a mighty salvation for us : in the house of his servant David; As he spake by the mouth of his holy Prophets : which have been since the world began; That we should be saved from our enemies : and from the hand of all that hate us. To perform the mercy promised to our forefathers : and to remember his holy Covenant; To perform the oath which he swore to our forefather Abraham : that he would give us; That we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies : might serve him without fear; In holiness and righteousness before him : all the days of our life. Luke 1^{68ff}.

August 28th

Acts 23 vv 10&11

Be still and know that I am God.

You've come to the end of a tumultuous day. It's time to rest, to go to bed & sleep, restoring your mind & body to face the morrow. But can you relax? Jesus is with you. He has plans for you. What He requires of you may not be easy, but His strength is sufficient for you.

August 29th

Acts 23 12-24

The would be assassins had to get Paul out of the safety of the castle. So they requested the help of the Sadducees, asking them to make out that they wanted to examine Paul further. The Sadducees were experts in the Law. They were responsible for upholding & teaching God's Law & for offering sacrifices for atonement for the sin of breaking God's Law. It should be shocking therefore that they were willing parties to this attempt to circumvent due legal process in order to facilitate the assassination of a prisoner. Horrifyingly, it is not altogether surprising that senior religious figures, very much part of the Establishment, would betray their principles in order to protect their position. It is what bishops were doing when they tried to hush up child abuse cases. It is one of the temptations of power, whether in the Church or in the state, to use that power to protect the powerful (who after all believe that they are good & talented bishops, ministers of state, CEOs or whatever) at the expense of betraying basic principles of right & wrong.

We beseech thee also to save and defend all Christian Kings, Princes, and Governours; and specially thy Servant *CHARLES* our King; that under him we may be godly and quietly governed: And grant unto his whole Council, and to all that are put in authority under him, that they may truly and impartially administer justice, to the punishment of wickedness and vice, and to the maintenance of thy true religion, and virtue. Give grace, O heavenly Father, to all Bishops and Curates, that they may both by their life and doctrine set forth thy true and lively Word, and rightly and duly administer thy holy Sacraments.

August 30th (Trinity 13)

Acts 23 vv 25-35

Claudius Lysias, the chief captain in Jerusalem, made sure that Paul got safely away & handed the problem of Paul over to the Governor Felix. The problem was that Paul hadn't broken any laws, but his very presence was enough to inflame the crowd. As Paul was a Roman citizen, he had certain civil rights which others, including Jesus, did not have. Pilate suffered Jesus to be crucified, but they had to be more careful with regard to Paul. But, if you were the governor, what would you do – protect the rights of a highly controversial figure with an unpopular message or risk a riot?

ALMIGHTY and merciful God, of whose only gift it cometh that thy faithful people do unto thee true and laudable service; Grant, we

beseech thee, that we may so faithfully serve thee in this life, that we fail not finally to attain thy heavenly promises; through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

August 31st

Acts 24 vv 1-9

There are parallels between the trial of our Lord & that of His Apostle to the Gentiles. In both cases, the charges were non-specific, making them very hard to answer. Both Jesus & Paul allegedly threatened the Roman Peace & the fairly comfortable accommodation which existed between the Jewish high priests, the Sadducees, and the Roman authorities. Both Jesus & Paul were supposed to be a threat to the Temple. Paul was falsely accused of desecrating the Temple by bringing Gentiles into the holy place. Jesus was accused of threatening to destroy the Temple and rebuild it after three days. (He meant His own Body, the complete dwelling place of God, which humanity would kill on the Cross and God would raise from the dead on the third day.) The Sadducees were even reduced to pleading with Pilate, *If he were not a malefactor, we would not have delivered him up unto thee.* A fair trial requires that the accused is informed in detail of what is alleged against him & given the opportunity to respond. It is not good enough just to make vague claims about someone being a *bad lot*, a threat to public morals or even to national security. This makes it very difficult when the authorities have good reason to suspect that a person is a threat to public safety but have no specific examples of wrong-doing on his part which they could bring before a court. Pray for wisdom for those police officers, members of the security services, etc., who have to take these decisions.

September 1st

Acts 24 vv 10-23

Paul points out that he has broken no laws and states that anyone who claims that he has should come & give evidence. He does acknowledge that his appeal to the Pharisees' openness to belief in resurrection as against the Sadducees had created disorder. He explains fully what he has actually been doing, preaching the Gospel which fulfils the Hebrew Scriptures, what Christians call the Old Testament & bringing the funds which the Gentile Churches had collected for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. Felix was left then not knowing what to about Paul – a bit of a nuisance to those in authority, but not a criminal.

September 2nd

Acts 24 vv 24-27

Drusilla, Felix' wife, was a Jew and she influenced her husband to listen to Paul. Six hundred years later the Christian Queen Bertha of Kent would influence her husband King Ethelred to give a hearing to St Augustine who had been sent by Pope Gregory the Great to bring the Christian faith to England. Marriage between Christians and non-Christians is strongly discouraged by Paul (II Corinthians 6^{14ff}), but, where it has happened, the believing spouse is in a position to sanctify the whole family (I Corinthians 7¹³⁻¹⁶).

To say the least, Felix' motives were mixed. He believed that there was truth in what Paul said. Similarly, Herod had been prepared to listen to St John the Baptist, though he subsequently allowed his wife and stepdaughter to push him into beheading John (Mark 6¹⁴⁻²⁹). Felix respected Paul & treated him well, but also hoped that he would be offered a bribe to secure Paul's release. Then he left Paul in custody when his own tenure in office came to an end in order to please the Jews who would be sending an "end of term" report to Rome regarding how Felix had performed as a governor.

I remember, as a young curate, casting doubt on the motives of some people who were doing the right thing but not obviously for the right reason. I was counselled to be less judgmental. We don't know what is in other people's hearts. We are not ourselves entirely pure in our motives, Moreover, people sometimes grow in understanding of what they are doing as they join the choir more because is a good place to meet friends than from love of singing to God or spend hours helping in the soup kitchen because they think it will look on their CV when they apply for a university place.

September 3rd

Acts 25 vv 1-5

In two years, Paul's case had got nowhere. The legal system can be like that! We ought to pray for the swift & just administration of justice. Delay is unfair to victims of crime, witnesses & innocent defendants, as well as delaying what ought to be the inevitable punishment of the guilty, thereby diminishing the power of the sentence to deter other offenders or to reduce the likelihood of reoffending.

September 4th

Acts 25 vv 6-12

It looked like things were going round in circles. Paul's opponents sought the opportunity to kill him extra-judicially. The Romans took care that that didn't happen. The Jewish leaders made their case in general terms. They thought that Paul was a thoroughly bad lot. Paul pointed out again that he hadn't broken any laws. Festus wanted to hand the problem to the Sadducees with a trial in Jerusalem. But Paul knew that he would get no justice there. So he appealed to Rome. As a Roman citizen, he had a right to Roman justice.

Paul had wanted for some time to go to Rome. This would get him there. Along with Peter, Paul would face a martyr's death in Rome.

In how many countries in the world today & how often in the course of human history have defendants been tried before courts or tribunals which are weighted in favour of the prosecution? Show trials, political cases, religious persecution, hearings in which individuals or small communities are pitched against powerful business or political interests, they are all a denial of justice. Yet look at the temptations to which the rich and powerful are subject. There is the dictator whose failings are shown up by dissidents, the absolute ruler whose decrees & policies are called into question by priests & prophets, the major company whose profits would be seriously reduced if they could no longer get away with using slave labour in foreign jurisdictions or polluting the environment. The temptations are huge. Even in this country, the political & legal systems too often protect themselves by refusing to acknowledge injustice in, for example, the Post Office Scandal, wrongful convictions such as that of Andrew Malkinson & the authorities' failure to deal with grooming gangs.

That it may please thee to bless and keep the Magistrates, giving them
grace to execute justice, and to maintain truth;

We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.

September 5th

Acts 25 vv 13-22

This Herod Agrippa is the son of the Herod Agrippa in Acts 12 who beheaded James & imprisoned Peter. He is therefore the great grandson of Herod the Great, who had the boy babies killed when Jesus was born. Pontius Pilate had sent Jesus to Herod Antipas (as far as I can make out the uncle of Agrippa II) with a view to unloading at least some of the responsibility for dealing with Jesus on him. Festus asked Herod Agrippa to help him out in the difficult matter of Paul. It is one thing to seek advice. It is another to attempt to evade responsibility. Pray for those who do bear heavy responsibilities. Pray that they may act with wisdom, courage & integrity.

September 6th (Trinity 14)

Acts 25 vv 23-27

Festus faced a real dilemma. The peace was just about preserved in the Holy Land because the religious leaders of the Jews had reached an accommodation with the Romans. The Romans, of course, had the military might to crush the Jews – and would do so eventually. It was in nobody's interest, however, to fight a bloody civil war. So the peace had to be preserved and that involved making compromises. Politics involves making compromises. Most human relationships depend on a preparedness to compromise. But there is a limit. We hold to some principles which we would not compromise. The execution of an innocent man is surely something which no judge or governor could countenance in any circumstances. But what if not executing him might lead to riots with the loss of many more lives & damage to trade & property? No wonder Festus turned to Herod for help.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, give unto us the increase of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain that which thou dost promise, make us to love that which thou dost command; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

September 7th

Acts 26 vv 1-18

Sometimes at Confirmations or mission services, individual Christians are called upon to give their testimonies. In some Churches, this is quite a regular part of the service. Who are you? How has life treated you? What are your strong points? What are your weaknesses? What difference does it make to our life that you are a Christian? How did you come to be a Christian? Your testimony might bring other people

to faith. It might strengthen the faith of others who already believe. You might have to testify of Jesus in a hostile environment. In any case, it is probably good for all of us to ask ourselves these questions and to be thankful to God for what He has done for us. I doubt if many of us have had as dramatic experiences as St Paul, but we each have our own story. You don't have to stand up & testify before a congregation, but you could speak quietly to the people you know about your faith. As Christians, our whole lives should be a testimony to the truth of the Gospel.

September 8th

Acts 26 v19

Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. September 8th is celebrated as the birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary. On 8th September 2022 Queen Elizabeth II died and Prince Charles acceded to the throne. Three very different vocations! Everyone of us has a calling from God. He has made each one of us for a purpose. He has prepared for us good works to walk in. St Paul was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. The Blessed Virgin responded to the Archangel Gabriel by saying, *Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.* King Charles accepted the duty for which he had been prepared all his life. God may speak to us in different ways, but however He speaks to us, the only proper response is *Here I am Lord.*

September 9th

Acts 26 vv 20-23

Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day. As we've read through Acts, we've learned a lot about Paul: his background; his conversion; his journeys, sometimes difficult & dangerous; his preaching & teaching; his pastoral care; his friendships; his suffering persecution, stoning, beating & imprisonment; the way he supported himself; his collection for poor Christians in Jerusalem; his wisdom, intelligence & scholarship; his concern for unity; his love. We learn a lot more about him when we read his epistles.

How did he manage to do all those things? *Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day.* God supplied Paul with the grace he required in order to fulfil his vocation. God supplies us with the grace we need in order to fulfil His Will for our lives.

September 10th

Acts 26 vv 24-32

Paul's words were received very differently by Festus & by Herod Agrippa. Festus probably knew little of the Jewish religion, what God had revealed by Moses & the Prophets. The gods of the official Roman religion were human beings writ large. They were mighty, but capricious. They lusted. They murdered. Their cults were celebrated. Prayers & sacrifices were offered to them. The Romans were wary of offending the gods. The shared religion of the Roman Empire – especially the worship of the emperor – was a force for social cohesion. The Roman authorities didn't mind much if people also worshipped other gods such as Isis or Mithras, so long as they at least went through the motions of acknowledging the emperor as lord & god and didn't offend public decency by carrying out bizarre rites. The notion that there is *one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And of all things visible and invisible*: wouldn't have made sense to Festus. Neither would he understand that God is just & merciful, that He rules over all nations and all people and that we shall all have to give account to Him for our lives. Festus may well have been sceptical of the possibility of miracles in general & resurrection in particular. The Romans had literally shadowy ideas about any afterlife.. He respected Paul's intelligence, but thought he must be mad to believe what he preached about Jesus. The Gospel story only makes sense in the context of what God had already revealed of Himself in the Old Testament. Agrippa, on the other hand, did know the background story. He could see how the story of Jesus would make sense, that He could be understood as the fulfilment of the Law & the Prophets. So why didn't Herod Agrippa believe what Paul was saying, put his faith in Jesus & become a Christian? We can only speculate. Somehow the spark was missing. There would be a price to pay for Agrippa if he converted. Festus might think him mad too. The Sadducees would have turned against him. Imperial Rome would have regarded him with, at the very least, suspicion. His position would have probably become untenable & he would have had to give up much of his power, prestige & wealth. It can be very frustrating when you share your faith with someone who accepts the logic of your arguments, but still won't commit. Sometimes, however, you find out years later that they have

come to faith and you might have played a part in God's plan for their lives.

September 11th

Acts 27 vv 1-13

The author of Acts, Luke, was present with Paul during what follows. Apart from the spiritual significance of this journey, Luke's account gives us an idea of what travel was like in those days. Several prisoners were on the voyage, but the centurion had to negotiate a passage, including changing ships. Paul was evidently trusted. The sailors stuck close to the coast where possible. They expected to lay up for winter because they couldn't be confident of surviving storms. There were difficult judgments to make, like wintering in a possibly unsatisfactory harbour or taking a chance on being caught in a storm. Paul's judgment was better than that of the captain. But the captain & owner naturally prevailed & the sailed on. It strikes me how much time such a voyage would require.

September 12th

Acts 27 vv 14-32

They did encounter a terrible storm. Only Paul, it seems, kept his head. He was a man of prayer. God revealed to him that he would travel safely to Rome & that everybody else in the ship would be saved too. Only Paul seems to have sufficiently had his wits about him to prevent the sailors from deserting the ship.

Psalm 107: 23. They that go down to the sea in ships : and occupy their business in great waters; 24. These men see the works of the Lord : and his wonders in the deep. 25. For at his word the stormy wind ariseth : which lifteth up the waves thereof. 26. They are carried up to the heaven, and down again to the deep : their soul melteth away because of the trouble. 27. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man : and are at their wits' end. 28. So when they cry unto the Lord in their trouble : he delivereth them out of their distress. 29. For he maketh the storm to cease : so that the waves thereof are still. 30. Then are they glad, because they are at rest : and so he bringeth them unto the haven where they would be. 31. O that men would therefore praise the Lord for his goodness : and declare the wonders that he doeth for the children of men! 32. That they would exalt him also in the congregation of the people : and praise him in the seat of the elders!

September 13th (Trinity 15)

Acts 27 vv 33-44

Eating & drinking makes us feel a lot better, even though sometimes we don't feel like doing either. Our bodies need to be hydrated. They need fuel in the form of calories consumed & protein & fibre & minerals & vitamins in order to maintain health. Paul, keeping his head, was able to encourage the passengers & crew & to lead them in doing the right thing. Paul could keep his head because he trusted in God. I've sometimes wondered whether this meal was in any sense eucharistic. Paul took *bread*, gave thanks & broke it, just as Jesus did at the Last Supper & the celebrant does at Holy Communion. Then the crew & passengers, it says, took *food*. Maybe, the Christians on board were sustained by a eucharistic celebration and then everybody, pagans as well, had an ordinary meal. Certainly, Paul & the Christians would have been conscious that Christ crucified & risen from the dead was present with them & directing their lives towards salvation.

KEEP, we beseech thee, O Lord, thy Church with thy perpetual mercy: and, because the frailty of man without thee cannot but fall, keep us ever by thy help from all things hurtful, and lead us to all things profitable to our salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

September 14th (Holy Cross Day)

Acts 28 vv 1 & 2

When Michael Turnbull was Bishop of Rochester, he encouraged us to make a lot more of Holy Cross Day than we generally do. There were lapel crosses for all the Christians in the diocese which he encouraged us to wear as a witness to our faith. The kindness of the Maltese made me think of our Lord's words in Matthew 10: *He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me. He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.* Hospitality is commended in the Bible. We are reminded that some hospitable folk have entertained angels unawares (Genesis 18). The Cross proclaims the generosity of God. There is nothing more He could give us than the life of His Son. Christians are bound to be generous. *Freely ye have received, freely give.* Generosity is always to be honoured as it was when the Maltese cared for the shipwrecked.

September 15th

Acts 28 vv 3-6

Even after the ordeal of the storm & the shipwreck, Paul (the prisoner don't forget, not one of the seamen or soldiers) was still the man of action. He certainly was not a god! He would have deplored the fact that the Maltese took him for one.

Some people believe that St Mark's Gospel was intended to end at 16⁸ – an awesome mystery, leaving the reader in suspense as to what would follow. Other people believe that Mark originally had a different ending and that somehow the last page got torn off and lost. Either way our 16⁹⁻²⁰ are written in a different style from the rest of Mark and are not found in the most respected ancient manuscripts of the Gospel. The inference is that someone other than Mark wrote vv 9-20 and that these verses were added because ending at v8 was considered by some to be unsatisfactory.

For most of us, this makes no difference to the status of these verses as Holy Scripture (all of which was caused by God to be written for our learning). Some Christians, however, regard these verses as somehow less authoritative than the rest of the Bible and this enables them to write off v18 with its reference to believers being protected against poisonous serpents (and drinks). Given that there are weird cults in America which not only believe that God can save us from snakes but actually put Him to the test (contrary to Luke 4¹²) by fooling around with poisonous snakes (Not surprisingly, some of them get bitten!), one can understand why people want these verses taken out of the Bible.

However, everything in Mark 16⁹⁻²⁰ is replicated in the rest of the Bible & in the experience of the Church. Paul was protected from the viper!

September 16th

Acts 28 vv 7-10

In Mark 16, the Risen Christ speaks of signs following those who preach the Gospel throughout the world. Some Christians believe that there are always miraculously signs when the Gospel is authentically proclaimed. Others believe that the age of miracles is long past. Both are wrong. Miracles do occur when God so wills but it is not for us to demand them. What is required of us is faith in Him.

September 17th

Acts 28 vv 11-15

Deservedly, St Paul was treated with a lot of respect even by the troops whose task it was to deliver him to Caesar's justice. He was allowed to pray & socialise with fellow Christians on the journey. Christians may be mocked & persecuted as Jesus was (and as Paul was sometimes). It is an aspect of our vocation that we bear joyfully undeserved mistreatment. But, as in this last chapter of Acts, as with St Paul, lives founded on Christ earn respect & commend the Gospel to people who do not yet know Jesus.

September 18th

Acts 28 vv 16-31

This is the last we learn about St Paul in the Bible. The Romans obviously gave him a great deal of freedom. As throughout his ministry, Paul preached first to the Jews and, when they rejected his message, moved on to speak to the Gentiles about our common salvation. As always, he based his message on what God had already revealed to His people by Moses and the Prophets, Jesus the fulfilling of the Law. He finds too in the Bible (Isaiah 6) the reason why the message is so generally rejected. *The word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it* (Hebrews 4²). In our mission to proclaim the Gospel, we cannot succeed unless the Holy Spirit supplies our hearers with the grace to come to faith. Mission is always rooted in prayer. It is rooted in love for God and for the people with whom we seek to share our knowledge of Him. We should be very wary of missionary strategies which seem to be focused more on statistics & numbers than on actual men & women for whom Christ died.

September 19th

Joshua 1 v 1-9

The LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.

Just as the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was a fresh start for the Church, so the entry into the Promised Land was a new beginning for Israel. Moses died in the mountains east of Jordan. Some of us have visited the place where he died. From there you can see the whole land of Israel laid out. Moses was allowed to see the Promised Land, but not to enter because even he had not been constant in faith. Moses, knowing that he was going to die, laid hands on Joshua who received

the Spirit from Moses, just as Jesus imparted the Holy Spirit to His apostles and to all Christians so that we should be enabled to continue His work. Joshua was to have faith in God, to be strong & courageous, and to meditate on the Law, the Word of God. God would be with Him as Jesus promises to be with everyone of us. We each have our part to play in God's purposes for the Church & for the world. God supplies us with the resources we need in order to accomplish His work. We received His Holy Spirit at Baptism and continue to receive Him through all the means of grace – the Sacraments, prayer, Christian fellowship, the testimony of God's creation, His wonders, the marvels He has made, His Presence with us in this world & in all eternity. We have the Scriptures on which to meditate. We have no excuse.

September 20th (Trinity 16)

Joshua 1 vv 10-18

Israel approached the Holy Land from the mountains east of the River Jordan. The Reubenites, the Gadites and the half tribe of Manasseh were allocated land on the east side of the river. This land is not part of the modern state of Israel. It is in the Kingdom of Jordan. One of the complications of the current strife in the Holy Land is that, while many Israelis simply want to defend the state of Israel within modern boundaries, there are others who wish to restore Israel to the boundaries laid down in the Bible. To do so would be to deny the Palestinians statehood indefinitely and, if they went the whole hog, to annex parts of what is now the Kingdom of Jordan. Some modern Christians believe that it is God's Will to restore Israel to what it was in the time of King Solomon. Historically, most Christians believed that the promises God made in the Old Testament to the Israelites about the land and the City of Jerusalem & the Temple have been subsumed into their much more comprehensive fulfilment in the life, death & resurrection of Jesus – promises to the whole human race of a home in heaven, a new Jerusalem where there is no need for a Temple because God is present there in all His fulness. Others hold a compromise position, believing that the Jews are entitled to a homeland but confined to modern boundaries which take into account the needs of their Arab neighbours. We pray for wisdom & sensitivity.

O LORD, we beseech thee, let thy continual pity cleanse and defend thy Church; and, because it cannot continue in safety without thy succour, preserve it evermore by thy help and goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

September 21st (St Matthew)

Joshua 2 vv 1-7

Matthew was a tax collector – a publican or public official. Jesus called him to follow Him, which Matthew did and joined the ranks of the apostles. Jesus was very much criticised for associating with publicans and sinners – which certainly included harlots. In St James' epistle (2²¹⁻²⁶), the harlot Rahab is set alongside the patriarch Abraham as an example of how a true faith is manifest in action. It was a woman of the street (Luke 7³⁷⁻⁵⁰) who washed our Lord's feet with her tears & anointed them, whereas Simon the Pharisee – the man who took a pride in his standing as a religious person – who not only criticised Jesus for accepting this woman's love but failed himself even to offer Jesus the basic courtesies of hospitality. We have to be very careful about judging other people as unworthy of respect.

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

Joshua 2 vv 8-24

So Rahab the harlot saved the Israelite spies. There is a mountain immediately above and behind Jericho. Presumably this is where the spies hid till the coast was clear. It is interesting that something red in the window was the sign of a harlot's house even then. Rahab survived and she is one of only four women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1), together with Tamar, Bathsheba & the Blessed Virgin Mary.

September 23rd

Joshua 3 vv 1-8

Ye have not passed this way heretofore.

The Israelites will now miraculously cross the Jordan as their fathers had miraculously crossed the Red Sea. Later on in the Bible, the prophet Elijah will divide the waters of the Jordan & cross over. He will be taken up to heaven. His mantle, signifying the Holy Spirit, will fall on Elisha who will divide the Jordan again & return to continue Elijah's ministry. We enter God's Kingdom through Baptism. We take up our cross to follow Jesus. We continue His work on earth. It is all new to us, but we follow Christ as the Israelites followed the Ark.

September 24th

Joshua 3 vv 9-17

The Church for which I was responsible at Ramsgate is dedicated to St Christopher. I asked one of my predecessors what he would suggest as a suitable Bible reading for the Patronal Festival. He directed me to Joshua 3. *The Golden Legend recounts that after converting to Christianity, St. Christopher devotes his life to carrying travellers across a river. One day he is asked to carry a young boy across a river. During the crossing the boy becomes increasingly heavy to the point that even the able-bodied Christopher is struggling to continue the journey, even more so since the water level of the river has also started to rise. After reaching the river shore, the boy reveals himself to be Jesus.* In Christ the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily. In the OT, the Ark of the Covenant was thought of as the dwelling place of God (though of course, God fills the earth & the heavens). In both stories, therefore, the dwelling place of God is carried across a river. We bear the Cross. We follow Christ. We are led & sustained on our journey by the Holy Spirit Who enables us to do God's work here on earth and finally to enter into our heavenly rest.

In Hebrews 4, there is a rather complicated explanation involving Psalm 95 of the fact that Joshua did not bring God's people to the final consummation. It follows (Hebrews 4⁹): *There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.* I find that very comforting.

September 25th

Joshua 4 vv 1-24

The spirit which was on Moses, the spirit of wisdom, had come to rest on Joshua. Joshua was now the leader of the people of Israel & it fell to Joshua to complete Moses' task of leading & settling the Israelites in the Promised Land. The River Jordan parts as the Red Sea had parted forty years before. As evidence of this miracle, the Israelites took twelve stones from the bed of the river, washed and polished by the flow of the current & set them on the shore. They also put twelve stones from the land a put them in the river.

Guide me, O Thou great
Redeemer
Pilgrim through this barren
land;
I am weak, but Thou art

mighty,
Hold me with Thy powerful
hand.
Bread of heaven, Bread of
heaven,

Feed me till I want no more;
When I tread the verge of
Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death and hell's
Destruction,

Land me safe on Canaan's side.
Songs of praises, songs of
praises,
I will ever give to Thee;

September 26th

Joshua 5 vv 1-12

I was tempted to leave out these verses, but all Scripture is for our learning & it is not for us to pick & choose. Forty years before this, the first generation of Israelites who had been delivered from Egyptian slavery had refused to enter the Promised Land because they were afraid of the existing inhabitants (Numbers 13&14), They even wanted to return to Egypt. God said that they would therefore wander for 40 years in the wilderness and never enter the Promised Land. The only men of their generation who would make it would be Joshua & Caleb who were the only two who had faith enough in God to press ahead. Apart from those two, only the children, the next generation, would make it to Canaan. I sometimes think of this story when people today in the Church come up with all sorts of objections to going forward in faith & discount the fact that God's power is limitless. If we don't trust God to fulfil His promises, we don't deserve to receive the blessing. This chapter is a new beginning. The wilderness years are over. Led by Joshua, the people of Israel now have the opportunity to do what their fathers failed to do.

September 27th (Trinity 17)

Joshua 5 vv 13-20

Joshua has a tremendous task before him. How can he possibly succeed? All those years ago, it was only he & Caleb who had urged the Israelites to trust God & to take the Promised Land and the two of them had failed to win over their compatriots. The Israelites had refused to listen and consequently failed to inherit the promises and died in the desert. God has commissioned Joshua to succeed this second time. He really does have God in his side.

Now we are confronted with a massive challenge. Millions of people in our country are indifferent or hostile to religion, as they are in much of

the western world. In too many parts of the world, the Church is actively persecuted by the state or by their non-Christian neighbours. A consequence of the widespread indifference to Christ in this country is that there are fewer numbers of active Christians available to sustain churches, to preach the Gospel & to care for local communities or to influence the whole nation to conduct its affairs in accordance with Christian values. We might go into maintenance mode, striving to preserve what we already have, or even retreat from some of the places where it is harder to make a measurable impact. Insofar as we are doing God's work, however, we can rely on Him to see it through in accordance with His purposes. I Samuel 14⁶: *There is no restraint to the LORD to save by many or by few.*

O LORD, we pray thee that thy grace may always prevent and follow us, and make us continually to be given to all good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

(Prevent in this context means go before.)

September 28th

Joshua 6 vv 1-16

The story of the destruction of Jericho is well known. To fail to capture & subdue it would have made the task of conquering the Land of Canaan much harder. The city would always have been a thorn in the side of the Israelites. It is, however, troubling to think of the fate of the people who already lived there. Of all of them, only Rahab's father's household survived. We're informed that the peoples of Canaan were wicked, but it's a struggle to reconcile Ezekiel's insight that God desireth not the death of a sinner with God's command to Joshua that Jericho must be utterly destroyed. I always come back to the consideration that very few people are total pacifists. Almost all of us would believe it to be right to fight in certain circumstances. If you fight, you wound & kill, you destroy property, disrupt trade, agriculture & industry. Wars spread disease. Nuclear war could annihilate all of us. If you fight, you fight to win. If you didn't the chances are that your undefeated enemy would attempt to restart the war and beat you. Moral philosophers, the Church, would say that we should only fight in a just cause and there are limitations (eg as set out in the Geneva Conventions) to how far we can go in the cause of victory. We don't know all the circumstances regarding the conquest of Canaan, but we do have to make judgments about twenty first century wars.

September 29th (St Michael & All Angels)

Joshua 6 vv 17-27

Jericho is in what is called the West Bank – which is one of the Palestinian territories. Thirty years ago, when I was cycling in the Holy Land, we crossed the River Jordan at the Allenby Bridge & we were conducted to Jericho by a marching band of Palestinian scouts. I have often wondered what has happened to those boys since then.

Aggressive Israeli settlers (in contravention of international law) have been seizing land farm by farm from the Palestinians, harassing them, damaging their property, using violence against them and even killing them, while Israeli police & soldiers turn blind eyes. Stealing land and property from the Palestinians provides an additional motive for attempting to expel the Arabs from a region some Israelis call by the biblical names of Samaria & Judaea. In Joshua's time the people who destroyed Jericho did not have the incentive of plunder – though they did get to keep the plunder from Ai, the next city which they destroyed. Does the incentive of plunder make war worse or is total destruction of the enemy's possessions a more severe kind of defeat? I can't come to any conclusion I'm comfortable with & prayer is the only resource which I can suggest in circumstances such as these.

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

Joshua 24 vv 14-25

As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

Skipping to the last chapter, the Children of Israel are established in the Promised Land & Joshua's life on earth is nearly over. The Israelites have a clear & vital choice. They could worship the gods of their ancestors. They could adopt the religion of the people they now live among. Or they can worship the LORD. When they say that they will worship the LORD, Joshua reminds them that they must worship Him whole-heartedly or else they are not worshipping the LORD at all – and in that event there will be consequences. We have the same choice. We can worship false gods. We can adopt the values of the world in which we live. Or we can worship the LORD. If we do so, we must do so wholeheartedly.