

Acts

Whitsuntide



1. Ten days after the Ascension, as they were praying, the sound of a mighty rushing wind came from Heaven, and it seemed that tongues of flame rested on each of them.



Bible Notes

October - December

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25p

October 1st

Acts 1 vv 1&2

Most people believe that Acts is the sequel to Luke. In the Gospel, Luke tells the story of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity incarnate in human form, and then, in Acts, he begins the story of the work of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity at work in human beings. The Christian Church is the Body of Christ because it is made up of people who are filled with His Spirit. The point is that we, the Church, are witnesses of who Jesus is and the difference He makes. Two quotations to start us off – one from the Creed, one from the collect for the week I am writing this (Trinity 13).

*I believe in the Holy Ghost;
The holy Catholick Church;
The Communion of saints;
The forgiveness of sins;
The Resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting. Amen.*

*Almighty God, who called your
church to bear witness that you
were in Christ reconciling the
world to yourself: help us to
proclaim the good news of your
love, that all who hear it may be
drawn to you; through him who
was lifted up on the cross, and
reigns with you in the unity of
the Holy Spirit, one God, now
and for ever. Amen.*

October 2nd

Acts 1 vv 1-5

Luke is noted as a historian. It is important to get the story right and to pass on the facts. It appears that he was a witness of some of the events which take place in Acts, but probably not of the events related in the Gospel. He does, however, take the trouble to check with those who were there to make sure that he gets the story right. He then passes the tradition on to Theophilus and all his readers. We need to know our Bibles and the teaching of the Church, not only for our own spiritual well-being, but also so that we can pass it on confidently to our children and to other people. If we don't pass on the word about Jesus, who else will? Schools no longer teach Christianity; they teach about religion. Media, such as modern music, TV, radio, newspapers, etc, are more likely to mock faith than to support it. Hardly any children or young adults come to Church. Who will pass on the faith if we don't?

October 3rd

Acts 1 vv 6-12

I suppose the question is *What did Jesus come for?* His own preaching was *Get ready because the Kingdom of God is coming*. But what was or is this Kingdom of God? Maybe the apostles thought that God would throw the Romans out of the Holy Land and install a king descended from David to rule in Jerusalem. If they thought that, they had missed the point of Jesus. One day He will reign over the whole world. He will return *in like manner*. But that is not to be yet and when, He does come, things will be entirely different from the way they are now. Heaven and earth will pass away. There shall be new heavens and a new earth. This isn't the kingdoms of this world given a lick of paint. This is a transformation of everything that is. Meanwhile the Church is to bear witness of Jesus, starting locally and reaching out to the whole world. That is a very daunting task. However, the Church (like Bob the Builder and Barack Obama) can do it because, in the case of the Church, we are inspired with the Holy Spirit, the power from on high.

October 4th

Acts 1 vv 13 & 14

The stained glass at the front of St Michael's depicts our Lord's Ascension. Among those *gazing into heaven* is the figure of a woman, which surprises me as I had always imagined that only the eleven apostles were witnesses of the Ascension. However, it appears from these verses that the apostles met regularly in fellowship with Mary (who I am sure is the woman represented in our window) and other women. It does not clearly say one way or the other, but Mary (and others who were not apostles) might have been present at the Ascension. What we do know is that those who loved Jesus were united with one another in fellowship and prayer and that they met together. The apostolic church is not a collection of individuals who happen to believe in Jesus and meet if they feel like it. The apostolic Church is the Body of Christ and its members depend on one another for their own spiritual well-being and all of them are necessary if the Church is to fulfil its apostolic mission. Belonging to the Church is not an optional extra for Christians.

October 5th

Acts 1 vv 15-20

The fate of Judas is a problem for many Christians. Some have gloated because he got what he deserved as the one who betrayed the Lord we love. Others try to excuse what Judas did and to sympathise rather than to condemn. Judas, as the one who betrayed Christ, is an archetypal example of a bad person. On the one hand, most human societies believe that we need Law to protect us from wrong-doing, to enforce justice. One aspect of Law is that the wrong-doer must be punished: as a deterrent; as a warning to others; in the hope of reforming the criminal; and, in a sense, in order to maintain the moral balance of the universe. On the other hand, many modern Western societies (influenced by 2,000 years of Christianity) try to understand the wrong-doer, hesitate to condemn, still more to punish, and question whether in fact there are any moral absolutes at all. Both these approaches must be wrong. There are moral absolutes and they must be enforced. If we insist that people cannot help themselves when they do wrong, we take away their dignity as people. Punishment has to be available to deal with wrong-doers. Yet Christians cannot believe that anyone, how ever wicked, is outside the reach of God's love and beyond redemption. I'm not saying that I know where the balance falls between understanding and condemnation, between letting off offenders and punishment, but it is a balance we cannot give up trying to find if we really are Christians.

October 6th

Acts 1 vv 21-26

It is an odd fact that, at the beginning of Acts, it is vitally important that there are twelve apostles, yet we never hear of most of these names again. Paul, who is not one of the twelve, is much more prominent in the gentile mission and the Jerusalem Church is led by James, the brother of the Lord, again not one of the apostles. Initially the point is that the mission rests on the testimony of men who have known Jesus throughout the three years of His ministry, but I think the more important point is symbolic. The Church of God is the people of God, just like Israel in the Old Testament. There are twelve apostles because there are twelve tribes of Israel. We are all members of the apostolic Church and so we all share in the apostolic mission to bear witness of Jesus to the world.

October 7th

Acts 2 vv 1-4

*I believe in the Holy
Ghost;
The holy Catholick
Church;
The Communion of
saints;
The forgiveness of sins;
The Resurrection of the
body,
And the life everlasting.
Amen.*

I'm quoting these words of the Creed again because everything that follows *I believe in the Holy Ghost* depends on the Holy Ghost if it means anything at all. Jesus constitutes the apostolic Church when He calls the twelve. He gives it its mission – to continue and complete the work which God the Father gave Him to do, to bring in the Kingdom of God. This would be quite impossible for us were it not for the gift of the Holy Ghost.

October 8th

Acts 2 vv 5-13

Three times a year, Jewish people were supposed to go to Jerusalem for the great pilgrim feasts. Literally millions packed the city on these occasions, not only Jews from within the Holy Land, but Jews scattered in other countries all around the Mediterranean Sea and even beyond the eastern boundaries of the Roman Empire. Seven weeks previously, when Jerusalem heaved with the Passover crowds, they had arrested and crucified Jesus. A few hundred faithful people now knew from personal experience that God had raised Him from the dead. They also knew that they had to tell the world about Jesus. Where would they start? When would they start? A risk assessment might have indicated that they should lie low till the feast was over and things had quietened down a bit. Whatever they thought, God filled them with His Holy Spirit and they just had to tell the world and, what is more, God made it possible for the world to receive the message.

I often feel that I'm preaching to a diminishing number of the converted. I try to communicate the Gospel by the written word in these notes and through the parish magazine. There is a lot of Christian teaching on the parish website. But people don't listen to the spoken word and won't read the written word. I don't think it's just me that feels like this. It's the general experience of the Church in England. No matter what we do, no matter how we present the faith, people just aren't interested. Perhaps, as a first step, we need to start again with

prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to make us better communicators or to help the world outside to be more open to what we have to communicate. Even so, there would be some who mocked (v13) but many might believe and be saved (v41).

October 9th

Acts 2 vv 14 & 15

Having persuaded themselves that the apostles were drunk, the mockers in the crowd had a perfect excuse for not taking them seriously. They also had ammunition they could use to stop other people listening to them. So people today write off the Church. Christians, they mock, are boring, killjoys, hypocrites, naïve, credulous, old fashioned, intolerant, mainly elderly, a joke, not cool and dying out. Having derided us as figures of fun or branded us as a sinister influence, a threat to modern multicultural, tolerant, diverse Britain, not only can they ignore us themselves; they can belittle us to other people. Peter defends the apostles against the charge of drunkenness. We should defend ourselves against misconceptions and false allegations. We should also be aware when the charges are justified. And we shouldn't be afraid to be different. An organisation which welcomes elderly members, can enjoy itself without drugs, sex and rock and roll, and devotes a great deal of its energy to helping other people is much more worthwhile than a *yoof culture* which despises the elderly and those younger people who aren't cool, looks to drink and drugs for its kicks, and puts personal fulfilment before public service. There are plenty of things about the Church that we should not be ashamed of!

October 10th

Acts 2 vv 16-21

A world without God is arid. Nothing really satisfies a human being except a relationship with God. Without God, there is neither point nor purpose in life. There is no meaning, no moral basis for law, no social cohesion. Human life is empty without faith. In fact there is no true life without God and those people who have no faith are effectively zombies – walking dead. So those of us who know God at all long for the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life. When the Spirit comes, He brings judgment. Those open to receive Him blossom and flourish. But those who refuse Him are certified dead. *Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*

October 11th

Acts 2 vv 22-24

What effects this consummation? How does God reach out to a humanity which rejects Him? The answer is Jesus and the extraordinary thing is that it is humanity's ultimate rejection of God, the fact that we crucified His Son, which effects our redemption. It is because of the Crucifixion of Jesus that the Holy Spirit is poured out on all flesh.

October 12th

Acts 2 vv 25-31

The great 2nd century Christian Tertullian wrote, *Certum est quia impossibile est*, which means, *It is certain because it is impossible*. The famous C21 atheist Richard Dawkins quotes (or rather misquotes) Tertullian in order to demonstrate that Christianity is a load of rubbish, which no even moderately intelligent person could seriously believe. It does take some believing that a man rose from the dead. It takes a great deal more to believe that this particular man is also the Creator of the universe and the Lord of all. It is asking a lot more of us to believe that the death and resurrection of this God-man effected a change to the eternal destiny not only of the human race but also of the whole created order. Dawkins' common sense or Tertullian's subtlety? It is an incontrovertible fact that many millions of ordinary people have shared Tertullian's faith, far more I am sure, than the numbers who have shared Dawkins' atheism. Atheism is harder creed than any religion for the reasons we discussed two days ago.

Peter helps these people towards faith in Jesus by working with what they do understand. Herod had just done up what was supposed to be the tomb of King David (who had died hundreds of years previously). It was something of a tourist attraction and definite evidence that King David was in fact dead. But Peter's hearers knew that the psalms were inspired by God and (at least some of them) were meant to be the words of David. So, since the psalms speak of the king's resurrection, there must be a resurrection, and as they cannot mean that David is raised from the dead, because he plainly isn't, then it must mean another king, greater than David will rise from the dead. Peter explains that this is Jesus. We need to understand where people in the world are coming from when try to explain to them Who Jesus is and what He is all about.

October 13th

Acts 2 vv 32-36

Peter's hearers were helped to understand Jesus by the fact that they knew the Bible. It is worth making the effort to teach children the Bible! Even those young people who don't know the Bible are often interested in things like spirituality and spiritualism or non-Christian religions or paganism. We can start with the spiritual awareness they have as we bear witness to God's authentic revelation of Himself in Jesus. A lot of films, books and even computer games are about the conflict between good and evil or tackle important moral issues. There is an awareness there of good and evil and how evil is to be dealt with. Young people may be open to discussing how God deals with evil through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Those young people who see the world in scientific terms can be encouraged to see that, behind the wonders of the world which science discovers, there is the Creator's guiding Hand. There are opportunities, if we take them, to relate the way modern people think to Jesus Who is, in fact, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

October 14th

Acts 2 vv 37-40

Some people might take my remarks yesterday on working with modern culture(s) to mean that people could just sort of drift into faith, adding a veneer of Christianity to their secular lives. That would be wrong. We need to recognise that we fall far short of the glory of God and to repent. That means that our lives are completely turned around and offered up to God as a living sacrifice. We can certainly use everything that we learnt before we became Christians. Saul was a very gifted and highly educated Pharisee and, when he became Paul the Christian, he put those talents to a new and very good use, but it was a new use. His life had entirely changed direction. The promise is there, however. If we are prepared to turn our lives around to face God, our sins are forgiven and we do receive the Holy Spirit. This is God's work. So it is guaranteed. And it depends on Him, not on us. God is calling those who are being saved. So the first step in encouraging someone to faith is to pray for him or her. Finally, there is the warning against too much enculturation. We need to be saved from this *untoward generation*.

October 15th

Acts 2 vv 41 - 47

When you read this account of life in the new born Church, what do you think? Do you think that this is how church life ought to be today or do you think that we live in a very different Church in a very different world and that the way they lived then would be both impossible and undesirable for us?

October 16th

Acts 3 vv 1-11

On the *Alpha* tapes there is a story about a mediaeval pope, surrounded by the treasures of the Vatican and claiming the authority of St Peter, boasting to a visitor that the successors of the apostles no longer had to cry, *Silver and gold have I none*. The visitor apparently replied, but neither can you any longer say, *In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk*.

Was the Church meant to remain poor? Were frequent miracles only for the early Church or ought we to be able to expect miracles in every age? Is it possible that a Church which has accrued worldly wealth and come to depend on it has forfeited the right to expect miracles?

To be honest, I don't have the answers to these questions, but they are certainly worth asking!

October 17th

Acts 3 v 12

We look to our own resources to solve our problems. We honour people who are prominent in Christian work. And we find our resources ever more strained and we put unbearable pressures on our leaders and the few who are willing to roll up their sleeves and do what needs doing. Isn't it the fact, however, that it is God Who sustains the Church and makes its mission possible? If we believe this, prayer will be our first recourse when there is work to be done or problems to be overcome.

October 18th (St Luke)

Acts 3 vv 13-16

St Luke was a doctor. On this day we may well pray for doctors and nurses and all who care for the sick. We can thank God for the "miracles" of modern medicine. Yet some Christians think that they

should not make use of scientific medicine, but rely on faith in the Name of Jesus, while some atheists believe that faith makes no difference and prayer was simply a way to fool yourself that there might be hope in the days before effective medical treatments were invented. I cannot resist mentioning the *alternative medicine* brigade who seem to put their faith in various “cures” without any reason at all. Their efficacy cannot be scientifically demonstrated and what they are supposed to do seems to be more about a belief in magic than faith in God.

We should pray for the sick. The Bible tells us to. They may be cured simply because our bodies are extremely good at repairing themselves. That is how God made us. They may be cured by the drugs and skills which God has created and made available to the medical profession. Sometimes they may be cured miraculously (in other words contrary to what we would have expected given our current scientific knowledge). It may be that God will be with them in their sufferings, but not take them away, and our prayers will be part of the process of bringing them to that final healing which means leaving behind this physical body with all its frailty. What we should not do is to treat the body as though it were a machine, scientifically putting its faults right but losing sight of our significance as people; nor should we reject God’s gift of medicine, putting our faith in our own faith instead of in God; neither should we resort to magic, thinking that we can be in control, rather than trusting God to look after us.

October 19th

Acts 3 vv 17-26

Whether or not miracles would be much more common today if we had more faith and less worldly baggage, in biblical times they were signs of Who Jesus is and what God is doing in the world. This man was cured of his lameness as a sign that God has raised Jesus from the dead and that in Jesus God will restore all things. These Jews had the first opportunity to respond. God will forgive their sins, even the crucifixion of His Son. They only have to repent and believe. This offer will very soon be extended to people all over the world. We have a stark choice. God is bringing in His Kingdom in Jesus. Are we for Him or against Him? It is the most important decision we will ever make.

October 20th

Acts 4 v 1-4

The early Church was controversial. It stirred up powerful opposition, but it was also effective. 5,000 believed. We go out of our way not to offend anyone. We are not persecuted, but does anyone take any notice of us at all? If we blandly avoid confronting the world we live in, what use are to people who realise that this world is essentially unsatisfactory for them? I am not saying that we should court controversy or make trouble, but I do believe that we should faithfully and fearlessly bear witness to what we believe whether other people like it or not!

October 21st

Acts 4 vv 5-10

This must have been a frightening experience for the apostles. Have you ever had to appear in court or been sent to the headmaster when you were at school? Have you been warned by some public official or reprimanded by a boss? Were you afraid, defiant, resentful? None of these experiences would be pleasant, but here are these Galilean fishermen dragged before people with a great deal more power than any of the bodies mentioned above. They don't seem to be afraid, resentful or defiant. They are not ashamed of what they have done, nor boastful. They simply state the facts confidently. A Christian cannot deny Christ and the blessings that go with being faithful far outweigh any suffering that the powers of this world may inflict.

October 22nd

Acts 4 vv 11 & 12

The stone rejected by the builders that became the cornerstone is a quotation from Psalm 118. It comes up several times in the New testament as a way of understanding Jesus. Master builders would obviously choose carefully the stone to be the cornerstone at the top of the arch. It has to look good and to be strong enough to take the entire weight of the structure. Jesus is the Rock. He is the foundation stone of the Kingdom of God. He is the keystone of the Temple. So the religious authorities in Israel, commissioned to build the Kingdom of God, ought to have recognised Him and built their own lives and the life of the nation on Him. Instead, they failed to recognise that He and He alone can fulfil this role and they rejected Him. They handed Him over to the Romans to be crucified. Nevertheless God raised Him up and will bring in His Kingdom through Him, not only for the Jews, but

for the whole world. All human beings have to decide whether they want to participate.

October 23rd

Acts 4 vv 13-17

This is one of the oddest passages in the Bible. The religious authorities acknowledge that a miracle has taken place, but they still refuse to believe. Not only that, they decide to instruct the apostles to say no more about it in the hope that it will all be forgotten. A lot of people imagine that everybody would believe if only they could see miracles, incontrovertible evidence that God is at work in the world. *If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.* Miracles are signs, but they are not proof. Faith doesn't come because the truths of religion are proved to people's personal satisfaction. Faith is the gift of God to a willing heart. All we can do with our witness, our "proofs" and our demonstrations is to prepare the way for a personal acceptance of Jesus.

October 24th

Acts 4 vv 18-22

In the end, you just have to do what you believe to be right in the sight of God. You may face threats. You may make yourself unpopular. You may be flying in the face of public opinion. Your family and friends may try to discourage you. You may come under all sorts of pressures, but in the end you just have to do what you believe to be right in the sight of God.

October 25th

Acts 4 vv 23-30

The threats of the authorities don't make the apostles or the Jerusalem Church in general give up. They praise God. *Joy in the Lord shall be your strength*, as the prophet says. They praise God Who made Heaven and earth and therefore can presumably manage a little thing like preserving the Jerusalem Church. They turn to Scripture for encouragement and find that everything that God is doing in Christ is foretold and is therefore part of God's eternal plan. They pray to God that He will continue to act as they continue to obey Christ's command to tell the Good News to the whole earth. There's the secret of a successful Church. It is based on praise. It is based in Scripture. It is based on prayer.

October 26th

Acts 4 v 31

This prayer meeting had a pretty dramatic sense of the presence of God. I doubt that many of us have been in a place where the walls have shaken in a demonstration of the divine power, but I think it highly likely that most of us have had times of awareness of the divine presence. We are probably reluctant to speak about them, but where does the religious impulse come from, if people generally don't have spiritual experiences? Why do we all love the hymn *How Great thou Art*? We do experience God in creation, in prayer, in Christian fellowship, in human love and in many more ways. We know what awe and wonder and even fear mean. I get irritated with people blathering on about their spirituality. Too often they are seeking spiritual experiences, but unwilling to buckle down and accept the discipline of a Christian life. True spirituality is always reticent for fear of the sins of pride and idolatry. Nevertheless, while our sense of the divine presence may be something about which we feel unable to say much (Ineffable means beyond speech.), we must not diminish its importance so that our public worship becomes a dialogue between the minister(s) and the people, rather than a conversation with God, and we discuss freely and at length the unblocking of the church drains and gutters, but say nothing to assist people to open their hearts to the divine love.

October 27th

Acts 4 vv 32-37

We have another description of what it was like to belong to the Jerusalem Church at the very beginning of her existence. It is not dissimilar to the account in Acts 2 v 41ff. So, again that question, ought our Church to be like this today? I do believe firmly that the life of the parish should be grounded in worship – the preaching of the Word and the Breaking of the Bread. Lives inspired and sustained by worship are necessarily lives overflowing with love, lives that long for fellowship with other lives, with God Himself, with other Christians, with humanity at large. Lives inspired by worship are generous with their time, talents and money. Lives grounded in worship necessarily bear witness to the love of Jesus. So, to that extent, yes, our churches today ought to be more like the Church at the beginning of Acts.

October 28th (Ss Simon & Jude)

Acts 5 vv 1-11

In the house where my father grew up there was no mains electricity. The living room was heated by a coal fired stove on which also the cooking was done. There were tiny bedroom fireplaces, which were only lit if someone was ill. Washing was done in a copper heated by a solid fuel fire. An oil lamp gave light in the main room, and candles were used in the bedrooms. Electrification wrought a transformation. Life suddenly became so much easier and more comfortable. Electricity is power and mains electricity is generated by a dynamo – which comes from the Greek word often used in the New Testament for power - δυνάμις, dynamis. Electrification transforms our lives, but electricity is also dangerous. Electrocuting is quite often fatal. You have to treat electricity with respect. Ananias and Sapphira fail to treat the dynamic of the Church, the Holy Spirit, with respect and suffer the spiritual equivalent of electrocution. You're not in much danger of electrocution from a fading torch battery, but a fading torch battery doesn't give much light and isn't going to last long. On the other hand, you could well be electrocuted by your domestic lighting circuit, but that will give as much light as you need for so long as the National Grid endures. Do you think our churches ought to be more dangerous places?

O Almighty God, who hast built thy Church upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the head corner-stone: Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their doctrine, that we may be made an holy temple acceptable unto thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

October 29th

Acts 5 vv 12-16

I remember the same grandmother, who lived in the house without electricity, telling me about a Bible study on Acts conducted by the new rector's wife. *Acts is exciting* was the basic message. The Book of Acts is dynamic. Outsiders are afraid to get close to the Jerusalem Church because it is fizzing with power, yet they are drawn to come near because this power is the power to heal. The Church has the answer to their yearning. In contrast, we find ourselves almost begging people to come and too many do not feel drawn because they cannot

even imagine that the Church might meet their needs. Maybe we are trying too hard, but in the wrong ways. If we allowed ourselves to be the Church, the Church described in Acts - grounded in worship, Word and Sacrament, fellowship, prayer, generosity and witness – we might find that outsiders would be fascinated.

October 30th

Acts 5 vv 17-20

One aspect of the excitement of Acts is the miracles. The dynamic is in signs and wonders wrought by God. The authorities lock up the apostles and God sends an angel to let them out and they are told to return to the Temple and tell the people *all the words of this life!* Part of me would like to see miracles in our church. Suppose the sick instantly recovered when we laid hands on them with prayer. Suppose God immediately let out of prison those unjustly locked up. Suppose those threatened with martyrdom were released instantly. Suppose, in answer to our prayers, God gave us exactly the weather we needed to make the crops grow and the Summer fête a success. But what sort of a world would that be? Would there be any room for faith or fortitude? How could we be sure of anything if God altered the weather, the progress of a disease, the outcome of a court case, arbitrarily, whimsically or just because some Christians asked Him nicely? I think we have to be more mature in our prayers, seeking to align our desires to God's good Will for the world, rather than trying to bend His Will to ours for what we see as the good of the world. On balance, I am sure we can be thankful for miracles, but I think we should also be grateful that they are not too common.

October 31st

Acts 5 vv 21-32

This is becoming a familiar pattern. The authorities recognise the power of the Gospel, but they are afraid of what it will lead to. The Gospel transforms lives, but we don't always want our lives changed. We are quite happy with them the way they are. (One old lady allegedly had the electric light installed but only turned it on briefly so that she could find the matches to light her candles!) So they try to stop the apostles preaching. But the apostles just can't contain themselves; they are overflowing with the Good News and the Good News is for everyone even for those who crucified Him.

November 1st (All Saints Day)

Acts 5 vv 33-42

God doesn't use a miraculous intervention to save the apostles this time. I don't think that He usually does. Gamaliel was a greatly respected Jewish teacher. In fact Paul was one of Gamaliel's pupils before his conversion. Gamaliel was a good and wise man and it was his sensible and generous counsel which saved the apostles from execution. God did not, however, save them from a beating. We don't always escape the dire consequences of taking on the forces of evil. Amazingly, they rejoiced to suffer for Jesus and they continued preaching and teaching daily in public and in private.

O Almighty God, who hast knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of thy Son Christ our Lord; Grant us grace so to follow thy blessed Saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those unspeakable joys, which thou hast prepared for them that unfeignedly love thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

November 2nd

Acts 6 v 1

The incident with Ananias and Sapphira was the first indication that everything in the garden of the early Church was not rosy. This conflict about fair shares of the alms handed out is the second. I'm rather glad that we have these indications. Otherwise we might depress ourselves thinking that in those days everything was perfect and now things are hopeless and we are pretty poor Christians because we are not more like them. Obviously, we can learn a lot from the early Church. That is why we are reading this. However, one of the lessons we learn is that the Church will not be perfect until we all get to Heaven. The early Church had its failures and its conflicts. It survived them. Otherwise we shouldn't be here reading the story. Archbishop George Carey reminded us that the Church is only ever one generation from extinction. Every generation of the Church has had its troubles, come through them somehow and passed the faith on to those who came after.

November 3rd

Acts 6 vv 2-4

Perhaps this is where the Church begins formally to recognise that different Christians have different gifts and different parts to play

within the Body of Christ. The apostles are gifted preachers. It would be quite wrong to tie them up in administration. Someone has to sort out how much each widow should receive, but surely that should be done by someone who was good at that sort of thing and perhaps less good at preaching or leading worship. I really do wonder about our priorities in the modern Church of England. We select men to be bishops, priests or deacons because we believe that God is calling them to a ministry of leading worship, preaching and teaching, pastoral care and evangelism. We train them up in these areas. At their ordination we pray for the spiritual gifts they will need for these tasks and we promise to support them in carrying them out. And then we ask them to chair PCCs and to attend synods. We burden them with paperwork. We involve them in parish politics and parish administration. It is hard to see how, given the present organisation of the Church, things could be any different, but are we really making the best use of the talents of our clergy?

November 4th

Acts 4 vv 5-8

The first interesting point is that these people called to serve tables are selected in the context of prayer by the faith community and commissioned for their task in what looks very like an ordination – the laying on of hands with prayer. It makes sense that administrators and bureaucrats, synod members, churchwardens and PCC members should think of their role in terms of vocation and Christian service, that they should be chosen prayerfully and supported in their task by the prayers of the Christian community. No less than the clergy, they are limbs of the Body of Christ and necessary for its function in the present context. Nevertheless, the second interesting point is that we hear no more about waiting at tables. This is not a subject of sufficient importance to require any further mention in the Book of Acts. Rather, the seven deacons (the people appointed to *wait at table*) themselves become preachers and, indeed, Stephen becomes the first martyr. The dynamic of the Holy Spirit bursts the bonds of early Church bureaucracy and these highly talented individuals become witnesses for Christ. In the modern Church, it often seems that the dynamic works the other way. Preachers are sucked into the mire of bureaucracy more often than bureaucrats escape to become preachers.

November 5th

Acts 6 vv 9-15

There were Jewish people all around the Eastern Mediterranean. Many still lived in the Holy Land, but many others lived in foreign countries – migrants, traders, refugees from various wars and upheavals. Jews living abroad like this were (and still are) called the Diaspora. While Jews in the Holy Land spoke Aramaic in every day speech, a lot of these “foreign” Jews would naturally speak Greek. Some of these Greek-speaking “foreign” Jews obviously returned to live in Jerusalem. As we saw at the beginning of the chapter, the early Church included native Aramaic speaking Jews and returning Greek-speaking Diaspora Jews and it was quarrelling between these that had led to the dispute about *serving tables*. Interestingly Stephen is a Greek name and perhaps he was a Diaspora Jew.

Anyway, when Stephen preaches Jesus, the opposition comes mainly from Diaspora Jews who have not converted to Christianity. Maybe they are touchier because they are less self-confident in their faith than Jews born in the Holy Land. They misrepresent what Stephen is saying, exaggerating points of conflict. This tactic makes Stephen look bad and also makes it hard from him to respond. If angry people refuse to listen to anything more than a sound bite response, he is stuck with, for example, either affirming that he is against the Temple and the Law or denying that the experience of Jesus requires us to reassess our Old Testament religion. I was once advised that, if you find yourself in an argument, you should assume that the other person is sincere and understand what he is saying in the most favourable light. You should not caricature his arguments and assume that he is only advancing them out of malice.

November 6th

Acts 7 vv 1-5

Stephen was a Jew, Greek-speaking or not, before he became a follower of Jesus, Who was also, of course, a Jew. Jesus is the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets (the Old Testament and the faith which produced it). Jesus is not the founder of a new religion. You cannot understand Jesus without the Old Testament background and it is a fatal mistake when churches fail to teach children the Old Testament and leave the OT out of the readings in church, the preaching and the adult education

programme. The New Testament simply does not make sense without the Old and churches which abandon the OT because it is too difficult, politically incorrect, too violent or just too old, find that, within a generation, they have lost the NT as well.

Stephen tells much of the OT story, starting with Abraham, who was called by God and given certain promises, but he never actually himself owned any of the Promised Land – an early hint that God's promises are about something much greater than the territory of Canaan or the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem.

November 7th

Acts 7 vv 6-10

Stephen's point here is that all these things recorded in the OT occurred as part of the divine plan. God always knew that Abraham's descendants would be enslaved in Egypt before they would take over the Promised Land. God is always in control. It was God Who protected Joseph from his older brothers and guided his life in Egypt so that he progressed from slave and prisoner to viceroy in order to preserve the Israelites through the seven years of famine. The patriarchs did wrong in selling their brother into slavery, but God used (as He had always planned to use) their wickedness to save His people, just as the Jerusalem authorities were wicked in crucifying Jesus, but this was nevertheless God's plan for the redemption of the whole world.

November 8th

Acts 7 vv 11-16

Abraham was the great founder. Jacob (later called Israel) was the eponymous ancestor, yet neither of them owned any part of the Promised Land, but a grave. God protected them on their journeyings, but He did not give them a lasting city on earth. The implication is that there was much more to the OT promises of God than that the Jews should live in Palestine!

November 9th

Acts 7 vv 17-29

Stephen is faithful to the OT in portraying everything that followed as in God's Hands. The Israelites multiplied in Egypt. The Egyptians turned against them and made them slaves. Moses should have been killed under the king's decree against the boy babies, but was saved

and, under the providence of God, brought up in the Egyptian court. Even so, when it might have looked as if he was about to begin a campaign for the freedom of his people, he was forced into exile. Deliverance will happen in God's time.

November 10th

Acts 7 vv 30-36

Moses apparently abandoned Egypt and the Hebrew slaves and became a humble shepherd in Midian, settling down and marrying the daughters of the Midianite priest. But God is in control. He appears to Moses at Mount Sinai – outside the Holy Land. This is a key moment of revelation when God reveals to Moses the Holy Name of YHWH, with all that implies, for what we may know of the very being of God. Yet this Moses, the bearer of God's revelation and the redeemer of Israel, is the one whom the people had rejected. Again, the parallel with Jesus – Moses' infinitely greater successor – is implicit.

November 11th

Acts 7 vv 37 & 38

Moses returned to Egypt after his encounter with God on Mount Sinai. When, eventually, the slaves were set free and headed out into the desert, Moses brought them back to Sinai, where he went up the mountain alone to receive the Law (Torah) from God. This was the foundation document of the covenant *I will be your God and you shall be my people*. Moses also promised that God would raise up spokesmen, prophets, specifically a prophet like Moses, to communicate the Word of God to future generations. We believe that all these promises are fulfilled in Jesus Who is the Word made flesh, Torah incarnate, prophet, priest and king. Stephen's point is that, if they really paid attention to the Law of Moses, the Jews would expect Jesus.

November 12th

Acts 7 vv 39 – 43

As a matter of fact, the first generation of redeemed Israelites had proved faithless. At the very time Moses was on the holy mountain receiving Torah from God, they were making a golden calf, an idol, to worship and asking Moses' brother Aaron to take them back to Egypt! Having turned to idols, they found themselves abandoned by the living God to idolatry and eventually lost the Holy Land again to become

exiles in Babylon. The Jews of Stephen's day cannot claim to be God's faithful people heirs to a long line of fidelity. The story is of God's love thrown back in His face by a faithless people, whom He continues inexplicably to care for. Not just the Jews, all the world's peoples have rejected God and it is because of His undeserved love that He calls all of us – Jews and gentiles – home through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

November 13th

Acts 7 vv 44 – 50

On Mount Sinai, Moses was shown by God a vision of Heaven, which was to inspire the construction of the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle, in which it was set up, as signs of the presence of God. The Ark and the Tabernacle were carried with the Israelites from place to place as they camped in the desert for 40 years. All this paraphernalia had several homes when they were first settled in Canaan. Solomon, however, replaced the Tabernacle with a stone temple in which the Ark was housed as a symbol of the presence of God with His people. The OT is well aware, however, that God cannot be confined in anything human beings construct, any more than He can be represented by any image we might make. In Stephen's time, Herod's Temple stood in Jerusalem – far more magnificent than Solomon's, but it would still be blasphemy to think that it could somehow contain God. Jesus would prove to be the temple – the one in Whom the Godhead dwells bodily, and also the High Priest and the Sacrifice and, indeed, the God Who is worshipped.

November 14th

Acts 7 vv 51-53

This is a common theme of the New Testament. Historically, the Israelites had not obeyed the Law or listened to the prophets. Indeed, they had persecuted many of the prophets. While they had had a privileged position as the chosen people insofar as God had given them a unique revelation of himself, they have forfeited any privilege by being no better than any other nation. However, the NT firmly believes, this too is part of God's plan. The failure of humanity in general and Israel in particular opens the way for God to save the world purely through grace. We do not and cannot deserve God's love. God's favour is not a reward for good behaviour. He just loves us.

November 15th

Acts 7 vv 54-60

Note the contrast between Stephen and his opponents. They close their ears. They don't want to hear his defence. They don't want to know what he is really saying. They are deaf to the Word of God, to Jesus. Stephen, however, is filled with love. He has a vision of Heaven, the place where he is going and, full of the Spirit of Jesus, he does what Jesus Himself did and prays for his murderers. Luke here introduces Saul, one of the leaders in rejecting Jesus, but, again in the providence of God, he will prove to be part of God's plan to bring salvation to the whole world.

November 16th

Acts 8 vv 1-4

So far, the story of the infant Church has been mainly success. Thousands have believed and been baptised. There have been many miracles. Church life is one long round of worship, sharing in the Word and the Breaking of Bread, listening to the apostles' teaching, evangelism and sharing whatever they had. Even when the Sanhedrin lock up the apostles, God sends an angel to let them out. Despite being beaten, they continue proclaiming the Good News of Jesus. But Stephen is martyred and then there is a terrific persecution of the Church. Surely now the Church might be wiped out and that will be the end of the Jesus movement. But, not so! In order to escape persecution, the Christians leave Jerusalem for the surrounding countryside. So they obey Christ's command to start in Jerusalem and pass on to Judaea without perhaps intending too or planning a campaign. God is in control, not the Church!

*And we, shall we be faithless?
Shall hearts fail, hands hang down?
Shall we evade the conflict,
And cast away our crown¹?
Not so: in God's deep counsels
Some better thing is stored;
We will maintain, unflinching,
One Church, one Faith, One Lord.*

¹ "Stephen" comes from the Greek for crown.

November 17th

Acts 8 vv 5-8

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. So said Jesus to His Church at the time of His Ascension. Now the message reaches Samaria through Philip, presumably the Philip who, with Stephen, was one of the seven chosen to *wait at tables!* Samaria is the capital of the old Northern Kingdom of Israel, which had been ransacked by the Assyrians, who had replaced part of the Israelite population with foreigners brought in from other conquered territories. These worshipped YHWH, but not in the way approved in Jerusalem. So Samaria was a first step to moving the Gospel on from the Jews alone to include the gentiles. There is the usual preaching and there are the usual miracles and again great crowds believe. What about extending our proclamation of the Gospel beyond our comfort zone, outside the circle of people who are much like us?

November 18th

Acts 8 vv 9-13

What I meant yesterday about our comfort zone was people like us. We all have friends who generally share our hobbies, interests and life style. Many of them will be people who were brought up in the Church even if they don't go now. At least they respect our faith and nobody would be very surprised if they joined us. It wouldn't be a huge dislocation to their lives.

But suppose we had a successful outreach to the youngsters who play football on Sunday mornings or the young adults who work Sundays or treat it as a day to catch up on the chores. Suppose we had a successful mission on a tough estate where too many people are into drugs or the sex trade. What if we converted a substantial number of the pupils and teachers at a *right on*, politically correct school, where, in pursuit of the government's diversity agenda, all pupils were expected to pray to the gods of all religions in assemblies and forced to adopt a non-judgmental attitude to such matters as abortion and homosexuality? We'd find ourselves in conflict with team coaches and parents in the first case, the Chamber of Commerce in the second, drug barons and pimps in the third and, quite possibly, the local council's diversity officer in the last.

There are influential people in every community who, like Simon, would not want to see their “clients” being liberated to become Christians.

November 19th

Acts 8 vv 14-25

Simon at first seems to accept Philip’s words and joins the mob in joining the Church. He is even baptised himself. Self-styled community leaders, people who seem to be the natural leaders in a community, may well sometimes feel the need to go with the tide, to appear to be leading where the mob is going anyway. But, when the apostles come, it becomes apparent that there is much more to this Christianity than Simon had realised. There is real power in faith. Simon misses the point and thinks that power is something to be grasped for its own sake. He tries to get this power using the means that worldly people are used to; he tries to buy it. Sometimes the Church is infiltrated by people who simply want power for its own sake, who want to be community leaders in an allegedly Christian world. But they are missing the point. The point is service and the power is power to serve. Church tradition has it that Simon’s repentance was hypocritical or, at any rate, short lived and that he went on to become a serious heretic and opponent of sound Christian teaching.

November 20th

Acts 8 vv 26-40

We’ve got as far as Samaria and now *unto the uttermost part of the earth*. This man is either a Jew or a gentile very interested in the Jewish faith. He had come all the way from Ethiopia and he was suffering from a disability which would normally have excluded him from taking a full part in the religious life of the community. So, for him to accept the Gospel and to be admitted to the Church by Baptism, is a major extension of the boundaries. All he needs to do is to be baptised in faith. That is all anyone needs to do. But he is brought to faith both by reading the Scriptures and by Philip sharing his faith with him. He must have been seeking or presumably he would not have travelled all the way to Jerusalem for the feast. So we have an open heart, the Bible and a faithful Christian willing to speak about Jesus. All these things combine to bring a new soul to membership of the Church, the people of God.

November 21st

Acts 9 vv 1&2

The Church is spreading out all over the Holy Land, becoming well-established in Samaria and even extending to Ethiopia, but what is happening back where it all began in Jerusalem? The anti-Christian forces are gathering and they don't like the way the Church is spreading. The Church has a habit of growing where she is persecuted. Look at modern China and many other parts of the world today. What kills the Church is not persecution, but apathy rooted in affluence. So Saul, the archenemy, gets permission to travel to Damascus to start a persecution there, incidentally providing us with evidence that the expanding Christian movement had already reached Syria.

November 22nd

Acts 9 vv 3-5

Three lessons from these verses.

1. God calls the most unlikely people. We should be very cautious about a targeted evangelism which only reaches out to the people we expect to reach. God is a God of surprises. The Good News is for everyone.
2. When we hurt Christian people, we hurt Christ.
3. Saul (and maybe many other archenemies of Christianity) was a torn individual. He had to fight within himself to maintain his antichristian stance. Conversion probably came as a huge relief.

November 23rd

Acts 9 v 6

A few chapters back, I had a go at self-seeking "spirituality", people who are trying to find themselves or a religion that suits themselves, people who want to feel fulfilled or to feel something at any rate, people who look at MY faith in terms of ME, ME, ME. Saul had a genuine conversion experience and his first words were, *Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?* Paradoxically, someone like Saul would definitely find personal fulfilment through the offering of self in Christ's service, whereas the person thinking to use Jesus or religion or "spirituality" to meet his own needs must always fail.

November 24th

Acts 9 vv 7-9

What happened to Saul wasn't all in his mind. You could come up with some explanation of his vision as being the result of an overwrought

conscience, conflicted between a strong sense that Jesus might after all be the truth of God and a terrific reluctance to admit that all those years of pharisaic certainty were wrong. However, his companions on the road experience something of the phenomenon, even though they cannot fully comprehend it. Part of the process of Saul's enlightenment is a period of actual physical blindness. He also fasts, maybe because he is too shocked to eat or maybe as a religious exercise in preparation for Baptism and the work he believes God is calling him to do. Religious progress is not always instantaneous, without suffering and without effort. Jacob wrestled with God and so, sometimes, do we.

November 25th

Acts 9 vv 10-16

Maybe Saul's blindness is as much about convincing Ananias as it is about enlightening Saul! There are the Christians at Damascus bracing themselves to face being imprisoned by Saul and Jesus appears to Ananias to tell him to cure Saul of his blindness and to baptise him. If it had been written at the time, Ananias' congregation would have sung *God moves in a mysterious way*. Are we open to the thought that God might do the totally unexpected? Our churches become increasingly bureaucratic and the one thing bureaucracy cannot cope with is the unexpected. There has to be a proper procedure for everything in a bureaucratic church, but maybe God acts without filling in the proper forms, conducting a risk assessment and putting it to the appropriate committees and maybe, while we are doing all those things, God's moment passes.

November 26th

Acts 9 vv 17-19

Ananias stopped thinking of reasons for not acting and arguing and did what Jesus told him. He baptised the person he hadn't trusted, the one who was still conveniently blind, and only then did Saul regain his sight and become filled with the Holy Spirit. Ananias (of whom we do not hear anything more) was a vital part of the story of Saul, who, as Paul the apostle, must have achieved more than anybody else ever in the service of Jesus. Maybe you and I have humble Ananias like roles, but, if we listen to Jesus and trust Him, we may play a part in things much bigger than we can imagine.

November 27th

Acts 9 vv 20-25

Do you know the book *The Cross and the Switchblade*? It is quite an old book now but it tells the story of how Nicky Cruz was converted from a life as a street gangster to a lively Christian faith in which he helped many others on the streets. One might expect that somebody converted from a particular milieu would have a special talent for reaching people like he was. To some extent that is true, but it is also true that the convert may be totally rejected by the people he used to be like and that seems to have been the fate of Saul with the Jews at Damascus. They were expecting someone to help them in their campaign against the Christians. That were very disappointed in Saul going over to the other side! Saul, as Paul, retains a strong yearning that his own people the Jews will be converted and he regularly preaches in synagogues. Where do we stand on reaching the people who seem least likely to become Christians or even to welcome the pastoral care of the Church?

November 28th

Acts 9 vv 26-30

The Jerusalem Church needed some convincing that Saul was to be trusted. After all, he had left them as a notorious persecutor. This is where Barnabas came in – the son of consolation. He recognised Saul's worth and mediated an acceptance into the Jerusalem Church. The new convert plunges into controversy with the sort of Diaspora Jews he had come from, but things get too hot for his own safety and they send him away to Tarsus. Things don't go smoothly. In fact Paul seems to leave this trip to Jerusalem out of his own account of his life and conversion in Galatians 1. Saul's time is not really yet, but the pieces are falling into place as God builds His Church.

November 29th

Acts 9 v 31

The churches were edified. I do like that word *edified*. It means that they were built up. Churches are built up in two ways. They are built up into the full stature of Christ. We grow more Christ-like. They grow in numbers. The Lord adds to our number those whom He is saving. The two sorts of building up are linked. A healthy Church grows both in number and stature. Christ-like Christians draw in other people. Other people in the Church build us up into Christ.

November 30th (Advent Sunday)

Acts 9 vv 32-35

Where the Church is present, Christ is present. *We are the Body of Christ.* So Peter did for Aeneas what Jesus would have done for Aeneas. Advent is about the coming of Jesus. He comes at Christmas and becomes one with us. He is present in His Church, working with us and in us and through us. He will come again on the last day in completion of God's purposes for the entire universe.

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious Majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen.

December 1st (St Andrew transferred)

Acts 9 vv 36-43

St Andrew's Day would normally be 30th November, but it is moved to today because Advent Sunday is even more important. Andrew was Peter's brother. They were both fishermen and Jesus called them both from their nets, promising to make them fishers of men. There followed three wonderful years in company with Jesus, then the experience of the Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost and the commencement of the worldwide mission of the Church. Here one of the brothers, by the power of Jesus, even raises the dead. And we are part of the same Body!

Almighty God, who didst give such grace unto thy holy Apostle Saint Andrew that he readily obeyed the calling of thy Son Jesus Christ, and followed him without delay; Grant us all, that we, being called by thy holy Word, may forthwith give up ourselves obediently to fulfil thy holy commandments; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

December 2nd

Acts 10 vv 1-8

If you read the whole of Acts, you'll see that the most important stories tend to get told three times. This is one of them. It is through Cornelius that Peter and, therefore, the infant Church finally realises that Jesus

meant exactly what He said when He said that the Good News was for all nations. (In Hebrew and NT Greek, *gentiles* = *nations*.) Cornelius is a good Roman! He fears God. He understands that the Jews have an important insight into God which the pagans and the philosophers lack. He tries to live a good life. He gives alms. Very likely, he attends the synagogue as a God fearer, an observer rather than a full participant. But he is seeking and he will find.

December 3rd

Acts 10 vv 9-18

As a gentile, Cornelius does not belong to the community of faith. He is not one of the chosen people. Indeed Peter would be rendered ritually unclean by having close fellowship with him, especially by eating with him. It would be like eating pork or pelican or one of the many other dishes forbidden to the Jews. As gentiles ourselves, we may well think the Jewish food laws unnecessary and we may resent being treated as outsiders – especially if words like *unclean* are used to describe us! Things like food laws, the rite of circumcision and the observance of the Sabbath, however, serve to define the Jewish community. We may not like being outsiders, but for insiders it is very comforting to belong. These differences create community cohesion and have no doubt helped the Jews to survive 2,000 years of persecution. Our nation is currently having a debate about Britishness. What is it that makes someone British? Who belongs here and who doesn't? Who isn't one of us? As soon as you say that someone is an outsider and doesn't belong because of where they were born, the language they speak, the colour of their skin, their religion or their culture, you begin to feel uncomfortable. How can we exclude anyone from the blessings God has given us? On the other hand, if there is no boundary, if everybody belongs, then there is nothing distinctive about us, perhaps, no community.

December 4th

Acts 10 vv 19 & 20

Cornelius has been told to send for Peter. He has been seeking. Now he will find, but he will find God through Peter and Peter isn't going to find that easy. For Peter, Cornelius doesn't belong. God has to show Peter otherwise. Could it be that we instinctively feel that some people, who may come to our church seeking God, don't really belong with us?

December 5th

Acts 10 vv 21 – 23

God has shown Peter that he ought to go to the house of Cornelius. It's not an easy journey, however. You can deduce that from the fact that Cornelius' messengers stay the night before returning. Peter doesn't merely have to be prepared to welcome Cornelius when Cornelius comes to him; he has to take the trouble to make a long journey to seek out Cornelius! We not only have to open our church doors to absolutely everybody; we also have to go looking for them!

December 6th

Acts 10 v 24

Cornelius really is interested. He is excited because Peter is coming to tell him about God. He sends for his friends and family. Now some people will engage you in endless conversations about religion, but they have no intention of listening. Maybe they are trying to belittle your faith. Maybe they are trying to justify to themselves their own failure to be practising Christians. We need to treat such people courteously, but must not allow them to waste our time. Where people really do want to know about Jesus, however, nothing should be too much trouble for us to tell them.

December 7th

Acts 10 vv 25 & 26

Cornelius worships Peter and Peter is acutely embarrassed. The only person we ought to worship is God. The only place I can think of in Christian writing where it is ever said to be appropriate to worship anything other than God is in the Prayer Book marriage service (and the Puritans objected to that and it got left out when the Prayer Book was eventually revised in C20). We may not worship angels or holy people. We may only worship God. To worship is to offer your whole life. To offer your life to anything less than God is to waste it. To fail to offer your life to God is to waste it, because if you are not living for God, you are living for something else and God is the only worth living for.

In the Prayer Book marriage service, the groom says to the bride, *With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship*. Surely the new service means the same, *all that I am I give you. Self-offering = true love = worship*. But we can only say this in the context of a Christian marriage, because, as Christians, we know that our human relationships are *within the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit*, (new service) and we make these commitments in His name (old service).

December 8th

Acts 10 vv 27-33

Peter, the Rock on whom Christ founded His Church, and Cornelius, who isn't even yet a Christian, learn together. It is a great mistake to think that we clergy (or indeed we Christians) know all the answers and that our task is to pass them on to a more or less grateful world. The mystery of God is infinitely beyond our comprehension and we are only granted glimpses. Hopefully we grow wiser (in the sense that *the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*) as we grow older, but God also reveals Himself and imparts wisdom (the same thing!) to all sorts of people (including the most unlikely) and, when we have fellowship in worship or Bible Study or, indeed, ordinary conversation, we can all learn and we can all grow – vicar as well as congregation, teacher as well as pupil, evangelist as well as convert.

December 9th

Acts 10 v 34

God is no respecter of persons.

The priest wears fine robes and stands in the sanctuary. The choir and other lay ministers wear slightly less fine robes and sit in the chancel. The mayor comes in his chain of office and is ushered to the front pew. In the not so distant past, those who could afford to pay, sat in the pews, and those who could not, had benches at the back. We are awed to be invited to Buckingham Palace. We want to know all about the lives of celebrities. We call people *officer* or *minister, sir, your worship, my Lord* or *your grace*. We listen carefully to what some people say at meetings and disregard others. We automatically adjust our conversation to match the way a stranger is dressed or the accent he speaks with. We even have special voices for the telephone. There are no doubt good reasons for all these distinctions we make between people. Indeed, it is hard to see how society could function without them. Even so, if we are Christians, we can never forget that *God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that feareth him and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.*

December 10th

Acts 10 vv 34-43

What shall I say? How do you talk to your children or grandchildren about God? What would you say to a friend, who asked you anything about your faith? What could you say to a neighbour or even a stranger

who was willing to listen or perhaps even asked you to explain? Peter finds himself in an unfamiliar situation here, preaching to gentiles. So he tells them the story of Jesus. You can tell people what your faith means to you, what you have experienced of God. If you feel smart enough, you can try to answer any intellectual or emotional objections someone has to faith. But don't forget to tell the story of Jesus. Jesus is what it is all about.

December 11th

Acts 10 vv 44-48

On whom can't the Holy Ghost come? The answer must be that there is no-one on whom the Holy Ghost cannot come. The Holy Ghost comes on Cornelius and his friends and family before they are even baptized. On this occasion, He comes with speaking in tongues, but the Holy Ghost can come on people in many ways, bringing faith and hope and love. Peter's Jewish Christian companions are astonished that these people can receive the Holy Spirit and, prepared by his vision, Peter says that there is no reason why they should not be baptized, no reason why they should not become full members of the Christian community, the Church. Is there anyone today who would forbid water (or whatever the modern equivalent is) in order to repel unlikely people from joining any particular church?

I have heard stories of good Christian churches in the USA in the 1950s telling black people who wanted to join them that they would be much more comfortable joining the "black church down the road". It makes you think!

December 12th

Acts 11 vv 1-18

This important story gets told for a second time. The Judaeans weren't there in Caesarea when Cornelius and the others received the Holy Spirit and were baptised in the Name of Jesus. And they are not happy with what Peter has done. Who gave him the authority to include gentiles in the Christian fellowship? It will be spoil the fellowship to admit people who are not like us. It will turn the Jews against us. It might well rile the Romans if we start converting non-Jews to what the Romans see as a Jewish sect. (The Romans tolerated the Jews following their own religion, but gentiles were expected to

conform to Roman state religion.) There were plenty of reasons why sensible people might say that gentiles should not be admitted to the infant Church or, at least, not yet. The Church needs central authority and order if she is to be protected from every eccentric who claims to have had a revelation from God, but she also needs to be open to the fact that God does surprise us. If we always stick with what we know to be dependable, we may miss the opportunity to be part of something very much bigger and better.

December 13th

Acts 11 vv 19-21

In many ways, Acts focuses on the missions of Peter and Paul and a few other big players. They made an enormous contribution to the spread of the Church. Within a couple of decades of the Crucifixion, there are Christian congregations all around the Eastern Mediterranean at least as far as Rome and also heading east towards Persia and south down into Africa. But it is not the big names alone. Ordinary Christians, whose names are not recorded in human history, were also part of this mission. Moreover, these ordinary people sharing their faith are refugees from persecution. Having had to flee from Jerusalem because they were followers of Jesus, we might have expected them to keep their heads down, but they didn't; they preached the Gospel wherever they found themselves. It appears that they took their own initiative in preaching to gentiles, not waiting for any OK from HQ. So Christian congregations in C20 in China have grown even while the outside world has heard little about them because they have been the victims of persecution. We ought to pray for the persecuted and to be strengthened by their fellowship.

December 14th

Acts 11 vv 22-26

The pope is trying to strengthen links with the Roman Catholic Church in China, which has become somewhat detached from the rest of the RC Church, partly as a result of persecution and partly because Chinese Christians are anxious not to lose their Chinese identity in a Western dominated Church. It is delicate, but it is also important. The Chinese Christians are right not to want to be dominated by Rome, but it is right also to long for fellowship. The whole Church – Christians all over the world, of every denomination – make up the Body of Christ. We are all

limbs or members. We need one another. The new Church in Antioch is a new initiative by local people, but Barnabas, son of consolation, recognises the need to maintain unity with Jerusalem and the rest of the Church. He also recognises that Saul has just the gifts the Antioch Church needs. We have considerable independence as a parish, but we are part of a diocese, a national Church and the worldwide Church. We need that fellowship; we need the gifts others can offer us and they need our contribution to the well-being of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

December 15th

Acts 11 vv 27-30

We recently had appeals from the Church in Harare in Zimbabwe for money. The Church there is very poor in material terms. In the same way, at a time of famine, there was poverty in the Church in Jerusalem. The wealthier Christians at Antioch, as part of the same Body, decided to send relief. It is natural for different churches across the world to help one another with whatever gifts they have – money and supplies, preachers and teachers, prayer support, etc. It is good for parishes to have links with missions and good for individuals to belong to missionary societies and to support Christian charities in this country and overseas. St Paul says, *While we have time, let us do good unto all men: and specially unto them that are of the household of faith.* We don't end our charity with the Church, but it does begin there. Other Christians are family. It is *one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.*

December 16th

Acts 12 vv 1 & 2

Peter (Simon) and Andrew, James and John were among the first to be called by Jesus. These were the *fishers of men*. John and James were nicknamed *sons of thunder*. They were all for calling down heavenly fire on those who obstructed Jesus. It was they who wanted to reign with Jesus, one His right and one on His left. With Peter (but not Andrew), they were present at the most sacred moments, the Transfiguration, the raising of Jairus daughter and Christ's Agony in Gethsemane. We read a lot about Peter in Acts and we was martyred with Paul at Rome under the emperor Nero. Tradition has Andrew going on to be a missionary and dying a martyr's death on a diagonal cross. John lived to be an old man in Ephesus. James is the first to die.

December 17th

Acts 12 vv 3-11

It is one of those mysteries. Why did God save Peter but not James? The Christians at Jerusalem were praying for Peter, but presumably they also prayed for James. We are back to the point that we would not want too many miracles. One of God's greatest gifts is that the universe obeys the Laws of Science. Too many exceptions would make it impossible to plan anything. James went to Heaven. His death was an inspiration to others and a witness to Herod and his court. Martyrdom is the ultimate witness. God did not abandon James and his life was not rendered pointless by his early death. But, presumably, there was more for Peter to do on earth and there was also a powerful witness to the Church and to the world in his miraculous deliverance.

December 18th

Acts 12 vv 12-17

This is a charming story. The Church was praying, but they obviously didn't expect that their prayers would set Peter free. They were incredulous when he turned up at the door. It is always right to pray. We should always pray *thy will be done*, but we don't always know what God's Will is and I am sure that it is right to pray naively for what we want, so long as we plausibly believe that what we want is good. We can trust God to answer our prayers the way He knows is best, even if that is different from what we think is best. If we've no idea at all how to pray, He promises that His Holy Spirit will pray on our behalf. But never give up praying. Naïve or sophisticated, sincere prayer is working with God for His Kingdom and it is a great privilege to take part.

December 19th

Acts 12 vv 18 & 19

The people I feel sorry for in this story are the soldiers. It wasn't their fault that Peter was incarcerated in the first place. They were only obeying orders. Neither was it their fault that God worked a miracle to let him out. Herod was hardly going to believe any supernatural story. Unlike James, they did not die in what Christians call *the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life*. We ought not to be unconcerned with the little people, the ordinary people who get into problems because of events beyond their control, the presidential bodyguard who is shot to save the president, the junior official who is

made to take the blame to spare the minister's embarrassment, the homeowner who loses his home because his creditors need their money back. I am sure that God, Who is no respecter of persons, does not forget them.

December 20th

Acts 12 vv 20-23

This account in Acts is supported in the writings of the Jewish Roman historian Josephus. This Herod is Agrippa, the grandson of the Herod who murdered the boy babies in Bethlehem. All the Herods were ruthless tyrants. There seems to have been some dispute with Tyre and Sidon, probably about taxes. This is the reconciliation, but the Tyrians, thinking no doubt to flatter, ascribe to Herod the powers of a God. Herod accepts their worship – with dire consequences. Only God is worthy of worship and human beings are playing with fire when they get above themselves and try to put themselves in His place. In the ancient world, it was not uncommon for kings and emperors to claim to be divine. I sometimes wonder about our own government. None of them would claim to be divine, but they do think they can sideline religion and substitute the Bible with secular principles in law-making. They are courting disaster.

December 21st

Acts 12 vv 24 & 25

Despite the famine and the persecution, the Word of God continues to grow. It will. It is like seed planted in a field. We don't know how it grows, but, in the power of God, it does. Barnabas had been the emissary of the Jerusalem Church to the new partly gentile Church at Antioch. He had been important in preserving unity and fellowship with Jerusalem and supplying what the Antiochene Christians needed in the person and gifts of Saul. The unity with Jerusalem and the leadership of Barnabas and Saul had been further cemented when they were trusted with the alms collected in Antioch to be taken to Jerusalem. Now they return to Antioch with another minister, Mark.

It was in Antioch that we were first called Christians – probably originally a term of abuse, but it stuck and millions have people consider themselves very privileged to be christened and to bear the Name of Christ.

December 22nd

Acts 13 vv 1-3

This is the real beginning of Paul's mission. The Antioch Church is at worship and God reveals that Barnabas and Saul are to be set apart for a special purpose. They are "ordained" after fasting, by the laying on of hands with prayer. This continues to be the ordination rite down to the present day – the separation of those whom we believe to have been called by God to a particular ministry within the Church by the laying on of hands with prayer.

William Temple (Archbishop of Canterbury during World War II) wrote: *People are always saying that conduct is supremely important, and that because prayer helps it, therefore prayer is good. That is true as far as it goes; still truer is that worship is of supreme importance and conduct tests it.* Do you see why it is important that it should be that way round – as indeed it was at Antioch?

December 23rd

Acts 13 vv 4 & 5

Paul is often called the apostle to the gentiles. It was how he described himself, but he did not reject the Jews, how ever much they rejected him and the Gospel. He normally began his mission in any city by preaching in the synagogue. Much later on in his life, he is still hoping and praying that the Jewish people will accept the Gospel. Anyway, the picture is that many of the cities in the Eastern Roman Empire had communities of Jews. Where there were ten or more Jews, there could be a synagogue. It might meet in a house, but, where possible, there would be a purpose built building. Men and women would sit separately and gentiles who wanted to know more could also attend, again sitting separately. The service would be somewhat like our Mattins or Evensong, with psalm singing and two Bible readings (one from the Law and one from the prophets.) There would usually be an address and visiting teachers or rabbis might be asked to give the address. This was Paul's opportunity. The usual pattern was that Paul would preach. Some of the Jews would believe or at least want to hear more. The majority of the Jews, however, would turn against Paul and then the gentile *hangers on* would be drawn to listen to what Paul had to say. Here was a way to get to know the God of Israel and to become one of His people without first becoming a Jew.

December 24th

Acts 13 vv 6 – 13

There was a good deal of superstition in the ancient world. There were bizarre pagan cults and oracles as well as the official Roman religion. There were weird offshoots of the Jewish faith as well as peculiar things going on in Samaria. Christ came in the fullness of time. People were desperate for the Truth. So, on the one hand, plenty of people were ready for the message of the Church, but, on the other hand, there were also plenty of competitors for people's allegiance. False beliefs enabled unscrupulous people to obtain power over and make money out of gullible people. The same is true today. What we see is that the Christian Gospel is reasonable. It is based in the Scriptures. And it is also more powerful than superstition and paganism. We don't coerce by frightening people with spooky stories or prey on their hopes by making false promises. We invite faith based on reason. But, where there is a conflict with spiritual forces, the sorcerers, pagan practitioners, witches and wizards of this credulous world soon find that they cannot stand against the power of God manifest in His Church.

December 25th (Christmas Day)

Acts 13 vv 14 – 43

Today is Christmas Day, Christmas being a time when you can get people to come to Church and to think about religion in a way that you can't at other times. So what is special about Jesus' birthday? What is special about Jesus? In a very different context, in the synagogue at Antioch, Paul endeavours to explain the significance of Jesus. He is the fulfilment of God's promises to the human race. He fulfils the Old Testament. He is the answer to all our prayers. He meets all our true aspirations. He is born of David's line, as prophesied. He brings forgiveness of the sins which divide us from God. He is eternal life. He pours out upon humanity and the whole Creation the Holy Spirit of God. He lives a perfect human life and, again as prophesied, is crucified by wicked humanity and raised by God from the dead. Now the Good News of Jesus is preached to the whole world, salvation to all who believe.

Almighty God, who hast given us thy only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and as at this time to be born of a pure Virgin; Grant that we being regenerate, and made thy children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by thy Holy Spirit; through the same our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

December 26th (St Stephen)

Acts 13 vv 44-52

Such is human nature that the Good News meets rejection, rejection by the very people who might have been expected to be the most ready to accept it. Probably, they didn't want to change their ways. They were quite happy the way they were. So Paul preached to the Gentiles. He moved on from the recalcitrant and made the Good News available to those who were prepared to listen, in Antioch and then in Iconium. The early Church was very far from depressed by this rejection. It says that *they were filled with joy and with the Holy Ghost*.

Grant, O Lord, that in all our sufferings here upon earth for the testimony of thy truth, we may steadfastly look up to heaven, and by faith behold the glory that shall be revealed; and, being filled with the holy Ghost, may learn to love and bless our persecutors by the example of thy first Martyr Saint Stephen, who prayed for his murderers to thee, O blessed Jesus, who standest at the right hand of God to succour all those who suffer for thee, our only Mediator and Advocate. Amen.

December 27th (St John the Evangelist)

Acts 14 vv 1-6

At Iconium, many Jews and gentiles believe and that is how it is meant to be. The Church is for everyone because the Good News of Jesus is for everyone. The apostles' work is fruitful. They are working with the Holy Spirit. There are signs and wonders and many enter into eternal life. Sadly, on earth there is always opposition and the Church's opponents stir up trouble. So the apostles leave Iconium, but they leave a Christian community, a Church, to keep the light burning.

Merciful Lord, we beseech thee to cast thy bright beams of light upon thy Church, that it being enlightened by the doctrine of thy blessed Apostle and Evangelist Saint John may so walk in the light of thy truth, that it may at length attain to the light of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

December 28th (Holy Innocents)

Acts 14 vv 7 – 18

Paul and Barnabas find themselves among pure pagans. The Lycaonians are not Jews or God-fearers subscribing to the Jewish monotheistic faith. They do not know the Bible. When they see a miracle, they think that Paul and Barnabas are gods and want to worship them. Paul and Barnabas are deeply shocked. They take the opportunity to explain about God, Who may be known, to some extent, from nature as well as from the Bible and give them the opportunity to repent of their paganism and to join the Christian community. Paul starts from where they are and leads them towards Christ.

December 29th

Acts 14 vv 19 – 28

The opponents of the faith in Antioch and Iconium follow the apostles. They are quite determined that the preaching of the Way shall cease. They almost kill Paul. But the apostles do not give up. They return to the places they have been driven out of, explain that there is tribulation even (perhaps especially) for Christians. They organise the Christian communities (Churches) with elders to guarantee unity, order and proper teaching and at last they return to the other Antioch from which they were originally commissioned.

December 30th

Acts 15 vv 1 – 5

Having been persecuted by unbelieving Jews and gentiles, Paul and Barnabas now face trouble in the Church. Some Christians think that all these gentile converts have got to become Jews (be circumcised) if they are going to be members of the Church. There is a lot of dispute in the Church in Antioch. So they go to Jerusalem, HQ of the other apostles, to get the matter sorted out. On the way, they tell the churches in the towns and villages about the conversion of so many gentiles and there is much joy and a lot of support for Paul.

December 31st

Acts 15 vv 6 – 35

The Jerusalem Church held a meeting. They listened to what Paul and Barnabas had to tell. Peter spoke of his experiences with the mission to Cornelius. James referred to the Scriptures. Open to the Holy Spirit, the Jerusalem Synod then enacted what it believed to be the Will of God. Gentiles were admitted to the Church on the same basis as Jews. We are all one in Christ. This Good News was sent to Antioch by letter and by reliable messengers and received with joy. The messengers took the opportunity to bless the Antioch Church with more encouragement. In summary, the message of Acts is to be found in these words of Peter.

But we believe that through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.