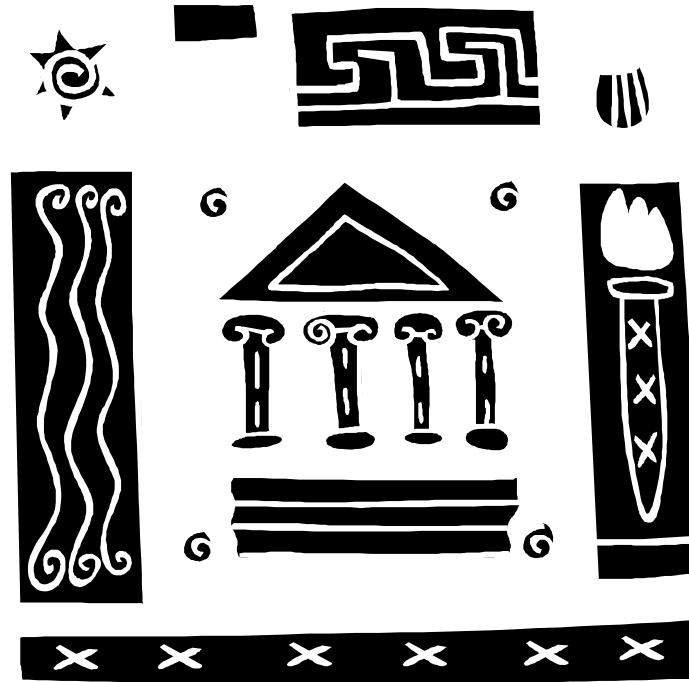


Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians



Bible Notes
October December 2009

50p

October 1st

Colossians 1 vv 1&2

I thought it would be fun to have another look at letters to the young churches this quarter. We will read Colossians and Ephesians and bits of Philippians. The Christians of those days are our brothers and sisters in the communion of saints. One day, if we share their faith, we shall be with them in heaven, sharing in the Beatific Vision of the Eternal Trinity. These young churches were very like us in lots of ways. Many of our problems were their problems. They also had to settle for all generations some of the problems which arose from their new found faith.

Colossae is in the part of the world we now know as Turkey. Traditionally, this epistle is believed to have been written by St Paul. There is no evidence that Paul ever visited Colossae or founded the church there, but the Colossians were clearly part of the Pauline family of gentile Churches. Paul probably wrote this letter to the Colossians, while he was under house arrest in Rome in the years before his martyrdom.

October 2nd

Colossians 1 vv 1&2

Whenever we study epistles I always make a big thing of the greetings at the beginning. The greetings give away the true nature of the Church, of relationships within the Church, of the Church's relationship to God. The Christians at Colossae are saints. All Christians in the New Testament are saints. The word "saints" means "holy people" or "people set apart for God". We are not holy because we are virtuous. We are holy because we have been washed clean in the Blood of Christ. We have not set ourselves apart for God because we are righteous people. God has set us apart, because Christ died for us while we were still sinners. You and I are holy because we are baptised members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. The question is are we faithful to our Baptism? We are enabled to remain faithful by the grace and peace we receive from God. Amongst many other ways, we have access to that grace and peace through prayer – through praying ourselves and through the prayers people offer up for us.

October 3rd

Colossians 1 v3

Even the clergy moan sometimes! Surprisingly, it can be a frustrating job. People just don't seem to be very interested in the Gospel. And that doesn't always go only for those outside the Church! Sometimes clergy feel that church members can be the biggest obstacle to doing what needs doing to open up the Church to the parish at large. Admittedly we clergy can be arrogant. With our training, our enthusiasm, the grace of holy orders and the insights gained from having come from outside the parish, we can think we know it all. People who have lived in a place and worshipped at the parish church ought to be expected to have acquired wisdom. So the brash clergyman ought to hesitate before he imposes his latest ideas on the parish in the teeth of the opposition of the PCC. On the other hand, congregations can become inward looking and set in their ways, unwilling to be challenged by the Gospel, unwilling to open up to new people and new ways of doing things. After all we are only human and all this can lead to frustration both on the part of the clergy and of their congregations.

Paul, however, despite everything, thanks God as he prays for congregations everywhere. Being thankful for people is a good place to start in any relationship.

October 4th (Harvest Festival)

Colossians 1 vv 4&5

*Faith and hope and love we see
Joining hand and hand agree;
But the greatest of the three,
And the best is love.*

At Harvest we thank God for the things we grow and for the fact that He feeds us and clothes us and generally looks after us. Quite right too! Paul thanks God for the growth of the Church in Colossae. The Church grows because we have faith in Jesus, because we love one another and because we have the hope of heaven. Such virtues are contagious. The Church grows in stature and number. (I suspect it usually has to be that way round. A mature Church is more attractive than an immature Church, half-hearted in its love for God, doubtful of His promises and despairing of the coming of His kingdom.) In these virtues the Church grows towards the Harvest of Eternal Love – the Beatific Vision.

October 5th

Colossians 1 v6

The truth of the Gospel was spreading rapidly round the world in St Paul's days. It began at Jerusalem, where the Word was crucified and rose again. The Word was engrafted in the hearts of Christ's disciples when the Holy Spirit came. The Word was sown by apostles, missionaries and ordinary Christians as they shared the Good News with friends and neighbours, people they did business with, people they met on their travels, and people they encountered in consciously missionary activity, preaching indoors and out of doors, to the whole of creation. Some fell by the wayside; some among thorns and some on stony ground, but some fell on good ground and brought forth up to one hundred fold. So the Church grew in stature and number.

The Church will only grow today by the preaching of the Word. So pray for missionaries, preachers, teachers, clergy, etc. and consider how your life and the life of our parish church may be a witness to the love of Christ in the world.

October 6th

Colossians 1 vv 7&8

Epaphras was one of a number of people who worked with Paul, preaching the Gospel, acting as messengers, offering pastoral support, carrying out various administrative duties. It was Epaphras who told the Colossians about how the Church was growing throughout the region and it was Epaphras who informed Paul about how things were going at Colossae. Some people think that Epaphras founded the Colossian Church.

It is good to have news of other Christian communities, how they are faring, what they are doing, what problems they face. We are all one in the Lord. We can learn from one another. We pray for one another. Sometimes we can support one another in other ways. We are encouraged by one another. It is good to keep abreast of things going on in the Medway Towns in all the churches – in the deanery and diocese, the Anglican Communion and the worldwide Church of every denomination, and national and international bodies such as Mothers' Union and the Church Mission Society. Don't be insular and parochial!

October 7th

Colossians 1 v9

This is such an incredible prayer. It is not a prayer for some sort of super Christian – for hermits or for monks and nuns. It is not a prayer only for the clergy. It is Paul's prayer for every individual Christian – *that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding*. If you think about it, probably the only way God could fully answer that prayer would be to take us to Heaven here and now. Such insight into God is surely only possible when we leave this earth behind us. Yet it is possible to aspire to something of the sense of Heaven while we are still on earth. God does make Himself known insofar as we are able to know Him without being annihilated by His Holiness. I think that how much He makes Himself known to us will very often (but perhaps not always) depend on how willing we are to open ourselves to Him.

I'm not sure what I think of this following prayer. What do you think? (It is the Common Worship Post Communion for Trinity 3).

O God, whose beauty is beyond our imagining and whose power we cannot comprehend: show us your glory as far as we can grasp it, and shield us from knowing more than we can bear until we may look upon you without fear; through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

October 8th

Colossians 1 v10

Walk worthy of the Lord. This is one of my favourite New Testament ideas. You and I are called to *walk worthy of the Lord*. It is an awe-inspiring thought.

Thankfully, it does not depend on our own strength. It is Paul's prayer that we may *walk worthy of the Lord*. We rely on God to enable us to fulfil our vocation. As you and I fulfil our Christian vocation, obviously we will do good works, but we will also increase in the knowledge of God. To be a Christian is to pray. To pray is to commune with God. To commune with Him is to grow to know Him better and to know Him is to have eternal life.

October 9th

Colossians 1 v11

This takes some thinking about. It is the power of God working in us that makes it possible for us to be Christians, to fulfil our vocation as human beings. This power is the Holy Spirit. Being filled with the Holy Spirit, we are full of joy. We are patient. We endure. We are strong. Our spirit co-operates with the Holy Spirit when we open ourselves to Him through prayer, through meditating on the Bible, through sharing in the Sacraments. These things are not optional extras in our busy lives, to be abandoned when we've got something "more important" to do. There is nothing more important than our relationship with God and it is this relationship which will empower us to face all life's challenges with both patience and joy.

October 10th

Colossians 1 vv 12&13

Maybe it's the lack of contrast. The Colossians had mainly been pagans. Maybe some of them had hung about on the fringes of the synagogue impressed by the religion of the Old Testament, but unwilling to commit to it. Some of the Colossian Christians were, perhaps, Jews, but Judaism had not fulfilled them. Most would have been pagans without any clear insight into God or hope of redemption. Then, at the preaching of the Word, it was like somebody had switched on the light. They put their faith in Jesus, and the Holy Spirit filled them with joy. They had new insights, new power. They were new people. They were utterly different and it was clear that the only response was to thank God for the hope of glory in their hearts. If there is such a thing as a half-Christian society, we British dwell in it. Instead of recognising two kingdoms – the power of darkness and the Kingdom of the Son of God – we recognise only one kingdom, the Kingdom of Grey. People are not either children of light or children of darkness; they are children of varying shades of grey. Perhaps those of us in the churches are a slightly paler shade of grey than those outside, but is the difference sufficient that anyone would notice? People drift in and out of church – more out than in – and it makes hardly any difference to their lives. Or does Church make a difference and we are just too British to let it show? I am sure that, if the Church is to have a future in this land, we have to appreciate the difference it makes, that people are dark or light, not shades of grey.

October 11th

Colossians 1 v14

All this needs earthing. We can be very “spiritual”, very theoretical and theological about all this. But the Word became flesh. All these wonderful things about dwelling in God and He in us, divine power and fullness of joy, eternal life in the Beatific Vision, all these things are true because of the stark fact that Jesus died on the Cross.

October 12th

Colossians 1 v15

It isn't hard to believe that a man died on a cross. The Romans crucified thousands of people. It is a horrible thought, but, in itself, by no means a mysterious one. Crucifixion is a straightforward, very painful way to die and far too many people have died that death.

So it is easy enough to believe that Jesus of Nazareth died on the Cross. A Jew could believe that. A pagan could believe it. An atheist could believe it.

What Christians believe is that Jesus was and is the image of the invisible God. There are at least two degrees of astonishment here. The first is that Jesus is like Adam and Adam is like every human being in that he is made in the image of God. All human beings are made in the image of God. Our bodies are animal bodies. We are of the earth, earthy. Scientists can classify us as a kind of ape if they want to without any incongruity. Yet we are also made in the image of God. That is astonishing in itself, but it is of the essence of the Christian religion. It is why we care so much about people - other, individual people.

The infinitely greater degree of astonishment is that Jesus is the image of God in the sense that He is identical with the Father and the Holy Spirit – *the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son: and such is the Holy Ghost.* That astonishing truth is also of the essence of the Christian religion.

October 13th

Colossians 1 vv 15-17

Christ has the pre-eminence. He is there at the Creation. God is eternally Trinity. God simply is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There was never a time when the Son was not. Father, Son and Holy Spirit act as one in creation, redemption and sanctification. Everything comes to exist through Jesus because He is the Wisdom of God. Not only our physical universe (with its time and space; stars, suns and planets; plants and animals; human beings; etc.) exists through Him, but also the heavenly realms of angels and archangels. Everything is created through Jesus and for Jesus, because He is the Son of God.

He has the primacy in Creation. He is also the first to open the doors of Heaven so that we all may have a home there eternally.

October 14th

Colossians 1 v18

One way of looking at all this is that there are two sides to creation – redeemed creation and unredeemed creation. There is the Kingdom of God's Son, the Kingdom of Light, and there is the power of darkness, the kingdom of Satan. Redeemed creation is also known as the Christian Church. Jesus is the firstborn of all creation – redeemed and unredeemed. Adam signifies all of humanity – redeemed and unredeemed – and Adam is made in the image of God. But more wonderfully still, Jesus is the firstfruits of the new creation, redeemed creation, the Church of God. Given that the Church is His Body, He is the Head.

October 15th

Colossians 1 v19

I don't know how swine flu will have developed by the time you are reading this. Maybe we shall all be dead. Maybe we shall have decided that it was all a lot of fuss about nothing. Anyway, we were recommended to reduce the risk of infection by giving up sharing the chalice at Communion and I assured you all that, although the symbolism of the common cup is very important, in fact it was sufficient to receive Communion in one kind, just the bread. I promised you that you would receive the fulness of the Godhead bodily. That is because in Christ the fullness of God dwells eternally and we receive Christ in both the Bread and the Wine at Holy Communion.

October 16th

Colossians 1 v20

The Cross has a vertical beam and a cross beam. The Cross joins heaven and earth and unites the whole of creation in the fulness of God. God's holiness is such that nothing created is worthy to approach Him – not even the angels and archangels – but the whole of creation, heavenly and earthly, is drawn up into the love of God by the Cross of Jesus.

October 17th

Colossians 1 vv 21&22

The Colossians could see the contrast. They knew what their lives had been without Christ. They had been alienated from God. They didn't know God. They had not experienced the Holy Spirit. They lived by a purely secular morality. They had dwelt under the power of darkness. And God had reconciled humanity to Himself through Jesus, the God-man, dying the death that we all deserve, so that through Him we might live the eternal life, which is God's free gift. The Colossians knew the difference. They knew that they had been translated from the power of darkness into the Kingdom of God's dear Son. Do we know that?

October 18th (St Luke)

Colossians 1 v23

The Gospel is preached to the whole of Creation. All the wonders of the world reflect the glory of God. Human beings bear witness by lives lived in the love of God and by putting these truths, this Truth, into words. Our fellowship in the Holy Spirit enables us to continue in the faith.

Almighty God, who calledst Luke the Physician, whose praise is in the Gospel, to be an Evangelist, and Physician of the soul: May it please thee, that, by the wholesome medicines of the doctrine delivered by him, all the diseases of our souls may be healed; through the merits of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

October 19th

Colossians 1 vv 23&24

Jesus was a minister – which means servant. He says that He *came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many*. (Mark 10 v45). All Christians are therefore ministers because we are in Christ and He in us. We are the Body of Christ. So you and I are ministers of God, ministers of the Church and ministers of the world. To put it another way, we are called to serve. There are many different ministries and Paul's ministry was very special as an apostle.

All this is clear enough when you think about it. What is harder is when Paul speaks about his own sufferings somehow filling up that which is behind of the sufferings of Christ. This cannot mean that the sufferings of Christ were anything less than *a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world*. What I think it means is that Christian people are so closely identified with Christ that our sufferings are His sufferings and, as His Body, the Church, faces persecution or martyrdom, we suffer in Christ and He in us and it all becomes part of His redemptive plan for the whole of creation. That being so, maybe we should be more sensible of the sufferings of fellow Christians who are, after all, members of the same Body of Christ.

October 20th

Colossians 1 vv 25-27

A guy called Marcion thought the Old Testament was a load of rubbish and that the God it describes was something much less than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and quite unworthy of worship. There have been plenty of people like Marcion down through the ages. Less drastic, there are plenty of Christians who believe that the New Testament somehow replaces the Old. Whereas, presumably, Jewish people believe that the New Testament is an aberration and that what we call the Old Testament says all that can be said with scriptural authority.

Paul and mainstream Christians do not accept any of these three positions. The Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ. The promises of God are all there in the OT. The coming of Jesus and the mission to the gentiles are God's eternal plan and the OT bears witness to that plan.

This is the mystery which God makes known to Paul and others like him in the first few decades after Jesus' Ascension. Paul is a minister to the Gentiles because he is quicker than most to recognise that Jesus is God's plan for the whole human race, not just for the Jews. And Paul's proclamation of this mystery results in what Graham Kendrick still celebrates.

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Christ is in you, the hope of glory in your hearts.
He lives! He lives! His breath is in you, arise a mighty army, we arise.*

October 21st

Colossians 1 vv 28&29

The aim of the Christian minister is to present every Christian perfect in Christ Jesus, indeed to present every man (and woman) in Christ Jesus because we always hope that those who are not yet Christians will become Christians.

Perhaps here is one of those sources of ministerial frustration. Many unbelievers are not interested in becoming Christians. Many Christians are content to be "ordinary" and have no special desire to become perfect. The less than perfect minister (We are all far short of perfect!) is easily diverted into other tasks such as providing the pastoral care the people want, improving the buildings, liturgy and music for their own sake, fund-raising, administration, etc. But it does not have to be thus. Our labour (yours and mine) *is according to his (Christ's) working which worketh in me mightily*. (The Greek words Paul uses for God working in us mightily are the words which give us the English words *energy* and *dynamite* - possibly worth pondering if your faith is too bland!)

October 22nd

Colossians 2 vv 1-3

Paul's great agony is surely caused by the problems of the Churches in Laodicea and Colossae. You can deduce from these verses that these two Churches are experiencing differences of opinion, leading to disunity and a failure of charity. They are getting lost as they speculate about doctrine and the Church is being damaged by it all. We could take time at this point to pray for the unity of the Anglican Communion in all its disputes and threatened schisms.

October 23rd

Colossians 2 vv 4-7

There are various theories as to what was troubling the Colossians. Some people believed that Christians ought to observe some or all of the Jewish Law. Practitioners of the mystery religions believed that it was necessary to know certain mysteries in order to be saved. These mysteries were only disclosed to initiates. Gnostics were not dissimilar. They claimed an arcane knowledge (Gnosis, γνῶσις is Greek for “knowledge”) about how the ineffable God related to a necessarily corrupt creation through a whole series of intermediate beings. All these divine and semi-divine beings might be referred to all together as the *fulness*. You can see traces of all three ideas in what seems to have troubled the Colossian Church.

Paul establishes that they are basically sound and warns them not to be diverted. They have learned Christ. They are not now to be deflected by strange ideas from outside.

This is where we need to pray for guidance. New ideas challenge what a lot of us were brought up to believe. Do we close our minds to new ideas and risk failing to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches today? Or are we so open to every passing fad that we are in danger of losing the faith once committed to the saints? I am sure that the Bible is the foundation of what we must believe and how we must act and that it is normally best interpreted as the Church has interpreted it down through the ages. If there are to be changes in what we believe or how we act, I think these changes have to be approached humbly and seeking consensus in unity, rather than arrogantly insisting that only we and people like us really know what the Church ought to believe and practise.

October 24th

Colossians 2 vv 8-10

You could see here Paul’s answer to the Gnostics or the mystery religions or maybe to Jewish Gnostics! The people disturbing the Colossians are speculating, maybe speculating based on the OT. Maybe they think that there must be a whole array of beings to separate and connect the infinitely holy God to an infinitely corrupt world. Paul maintains, in opposition to this, that Christ is wholly sufficient.

October 25th

Colossians 2 vv 11-14

This is where the Jewish influence comes in. Gnostics may have believed that Christ alone could not reconcile man to God. Jewish Christians (or those influenced by them) may have thought that, in order to belong to the people of God, men would need to be circumcised. Paul says that circumcision is beside the point. We are the children of God, we belong to His holy people, solely because Christ has washed away our sins by the shedding of His Blood on the Cross. We participate in this redemption by faith and through Baptism. Circumcision is unnecessary and, if Christian men choose to be circumcised for religious reasons, they confuse the issue. We are members of the people of God solely because we are baptised in faith. The baptised share and participate in the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. Nothing else is necessary.

October 26th

Colossians 2 v 15

When the Senate wanted to honour successful Roman generals, they allowed them a triumph. They processed through Rome with their soldiers and with their booty and prisoners of war. The victorious troops were feted. The prisoners were shamed and would be killed, forced to fight as gladiators or sold into slavery. Paul uses this rather gruesome analogy to illustrate the triumph of Christ over the forces of evil. Jesus won the decisive victory by sacrificing Himself in love, not by force of arms. Jesus prayed for His tormentors. He did not rub their noses in their defeat. Jesus' victory was of absolute and eternal significance, infinitely more important than any Roman victory, potentially salvation for the whole world. The Cross is a complete contrast to the battlefield but what was won there is infinitely more valuable.

*Triumphant in his glory now
To him all power is given
To him in one Communion bow
All saints in earth and heaven.*

October 27th

Colossians 2 v 16

Should Christians keep the Sabbath? Traditionally, the Christian view of the Jewish Law has been that its ethical demands are binding on everybody for ever, whereas its ceremonial provisions (sacrifices, temple worship, the distinction between clean and unclean, circumcision, etc.) were only for the Jews and only until the time of Jesus. Jesus fulfils every demand for sacrifice. In Him all things are clean. Worship is offered anywhere and everywhere in spirit and in truth. We belong to God's covenant people through faith, not through the performance of any ritual.

But which is the Sabbath? Is it an ethical commandment, binding on everybody for ever or is it part of the ceremonial law, no longer necessary now that we have Jesus? It is not easy to answer this question. Keeping the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments, which suggests to me that it is pretty important. You can also make a good case for the ethical usefulness of the Sabbath. You have to give your servants or employees at least one day off each week. You yourself surely ought not to be working all the time. You need time for rest and recreation. The Sabbath (if everybody keeps to the same day off) is a time for families to be together and friends to meet up. The Old Testament also requires you to allow your beasts of burden a day off on the Sabbath. Every seventh year the land was supposed to lie fallow. [Many of our present environmental problems arise from the opposite principle – that agriculture and industry screw every possible profit out of creation.] The Old Testament even provided that after seven Sabbath years (the 50th year or Year of Jubilee), debts should be cancelled, slaves set free and family land restored to its original owners so that no-one should be a pauper as a result of their misfortune or foolishness.

The Sabbath also gives your life a sacred rhythm and, how ever busy you are, sets aside a time when you can worship – when you can be in communion with the God Who made you.

On the other hand, everybody recognises that some people have to work on Sundays e.g. doctors and nurses and the emergency services. We

would not much like it if power stations, telephone exchanges and public transport systems all closed down on the Sabbath. Some industrial processes (like paper making) are very uneconomical to switch on and off. A certain amount of work is necessary on Sundays. Everybody agrees that, but how do you define “necessary”.

Another point, which Charles Dickens made 150 years ago, is that there is little point in giving hard-working people a day off if, on that day, all the leisure activities they enjoy are closed. So it is hard to say that people in the leisure industry (which possibly includes shopping) ought not to work on Sundays.

Finally, we have to address the question of life in a multicultural society. If Christians keep Sunday as a day of rest and worship, can they expect the rest of society (atheists, agnostics and people of other faiths) to do the same? If society as a whole does not keep Sunday special, what ought Christians to do – to cut themselves off from society and observe Sunday as a Sabbath whatever anybody else does or do we join in with the rest of the world, compromising our principles for the sake of friendship and community?

Maybe, we should after all, regard the Sabbath as a ceremony which we no longer have to observe. Isn't that what St Paul is saying here, writing 2,000 years ago? Every day is sacred to God – not just Sundays. If it is wrong to do something on a Sunday, it is wrong to do it any day. If it is OK on a weekday, it must be OK on a Sunday, we might argue.

I would strongly support the notion that all our lives ought to be holy, that everything we do ought to be an act of worship, that we should acknowledge God's presence every hour of every day. That might seem to make a Sabbath unnecessary. My problem with that, however, is that, if you look around you, you don't see that people who don't keep Sunday generally consecrate all seven days to God. What you do see is that a society which abandons Sunday apparently forgets about God altogether.

October 28th (St Simon & St Jude)

Colossians 2 v17

Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.

Three degrees of perception: the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Age to Come. The Old Testament foreshadows the New. The New Testament foreshadows the actual experience of Heaven. Binding altogether is the fact that all things consist in Christ and that we are complete in Him.

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

Colossians 2 vv 18&19

We'll come back to v19 on All Saints Day. The problem Paul is dealing with is that people will worship what is less than God. The Gnostics believed that God was so far beyond us, that the world could only relate to Him through a whole series of beings of increasing holiness. Even for more biblically inclined people, there is always the tendency to worship angels – even though angels in biblical visions always tell people to worship only God. It is unutterably astonishing that ordinary people like you and me can talk to God directly, but in fact we can!

October 30th

Colossians 2 vv 20-23

Christians are born again. We have made a new beginning. Our home is in Heaven. So why are we bound up with the things of this earth. Even in our public worship, we fuss over the worldly – what style of music we like, whether we prefer contemporary liturgy or traditional, whether we ought to sit, kneel or stand, cross ourselves, use incense, candles, vestments etc. I think all these things can be aids to worship, opening up our perception of God, uniting a congregation, bearing witness to outsiders, but, if we obsess about them, they can come between us and God, divide congregations and put off those who come to our churches sincerely seeking the knowledge of God.

October 31st

Colossians 3 v1

Hallowe'en will probably be more prominently celebrated than All Saints. I don't suppose All Saints will get much mention in schools or that the TV companies will go out of their way to show appropriate films. I'm not one of those Christians who gets unduly worried about a bit of fun with pointy hats, pumpkin lanterns and apple bobbing. I strongly dislike *trick or treat*, though not for theological reasons. Given original sin, I'm not sure that we can ever expect the truths of faith to be more popular than the delusions of popular culture, but I can't help wondering whether, if we were more saintly, we might make it easier for the sincere seekers to find.

November 1st (All Saints)

Colossians 2 v19

...the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God.

I've quoted today's verse in its traditional form to make clear the way in which the collect for today is based on it. Our prayer books and our best hymns are soundly based in Scripture. Authentic worship is in Jesus, the Word of God.

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 (All Souls)

Colossians 3 vv 2-4

Traditionally, this is a day when we remember all those who have died in the Lord. In a sense, however, Christians are already dead. When we repent and put our faith in Jesus, we are dead to sin. We are baptised into His Death. Death, therefore, has no more dominion over us and our lives are based on the sure and certain hope that we shall appear with Him in glory. St Paul exhorts to live up to what we believe. If we are dead to sin, we ought not to fall back into sin. If our hearts are in heaven, we ought not to obsess about worldly things, either in the world or in the Church. If we believe that the lives of Christians are hid with Christ in God, we are not sorry as men without hope for them that sleep in Him.

November 3rd

Colossians 3 vv 5-9

The consequences of Baptism ought to be clear. We know that God's Judgment falls on the wicked. Perhaps in the past we have all been wicked. Maybe we don't really believe that we were sinners. If we believe that, our standards are too low. We have all erred and needed the mercy of God to save us, without exception. We have been set free from sin, washed clean, through the shedding of Christ's Blood on the Cross. It follows that the life of baptised people ought to be Christ-like.

I never turn away people who are prepared to make the promises required in the Baptism service or children where godparents are prepared to make those promises on their behalf. It is not for me to judge other people, but sometimes I wonder how seriously those promises are taken, how far the recipients are ready to co-operate with the sacramental grace they receive in Baptism. It is part of our job as Christian to help all the baptised to grow in grace. Maybe this starts with the welcome we give them, unconditional love, but it does not stop there. There always remains a responsibility to bear witness to what Jesus means to everyone.

November 4th

Colossians 3 vv 10&11

I've stopped applying for a place in the London Marathon. They introduced a question about ethnicity on the application form. I insisted that the only race which matters on that day is the 26 miles from Blackheath to St James' Park. I can see why some people are keen on ethnic monitoring – to make sure that no one is being left behind on account of race. They even do it in the Church! But, whether or not ethnic monitoring can be used as a force for good in the short term, I am concerned about its long term consequences. To identify ourselves in terms of our race, to see ourselves as a member of this or that "community", and therefore not a full participant in the wider society, risks developing a ghetto mentality. The Christian vision is that we mortify such worldly character traits as racism, social class and status and find our unity as human beings in our unity with Christ Who unites humanity in the eternal love of the one God.

November 5th

Colossians 3 vv 13&14

Today we commemorate the Gunpowder Plot to blow up the King and Parliament. I'm told that so much gunpowder was used that, had it succeeded, there would have been thousands killed and a great deal of property destroyed beyond the intended target. It was a terrorist plot. In the light of today's two verses it is appalling that it was a plot devised by one kind of Christian (Roman Catholic) against another sort of Christian (Protestant). For many years the Prayer Book of the Church of England included a special service of Thanksgiving for Deliverance from the Gunpowder Plot. We are also aware of the savagery with which the Christian government of the day tortured and executed the plotters. Neither the Catholics nor the Protestants in the case could comfortably defend their conduct in the light of St Paul's words here.

So, is it wrong for us to pursue and punish terrorists? Is it always wrong to be a freedom fighter (the name we give to a terrorist fighting in a good cause)? You could make a good case for being a pacifist and refuse to use violence against anybody, no matter how evil their actions. If you do, however, you will not only offer up yourself for sacrifice, but potentially also the lives of many innocent people who will be the victims of a corrupt regime or a terrorist bomb. If, on the other hand, you believe that it is right to use force and, if necessary, to shed blood in a good cause, you will have to decide how far you can go while remaining true to your Christian principles.

This is one of the prayers from the said service.

Accept also, most gracious God, of our unfeigned thanks for filling our hearts again with joy and gladness, after the time that thou hast afflicted us, and putting a new song into our mouths, by bringing his late Majesty upon this Day, for the Deliverance of our Church and Nation from the Popish Tyranny and Arbitrary Power. We adore the wisdom and justice of thy Providence, which so timely interposed in our extreme danger, and disappointed all the designs of our enemies. We beseech thee give us such a lively and lasting sense of what thou didst then, and hast since that time done for us, that we may not grow secure and careless in our obedience, by presuming upon thy great and undeserved goodness; but that it may lead us to repentance, and move us to be the more diligent in all the duties of our Religion, which thou hast in a marvellous manner preserved to us. Let truth and justice, brotherly kindness and charity, devotion and piety, concord and unity, with all other

virtues, so flourish among us, that they may be the stability of our times, and make this Church a praise in the earth. All which we humbly beg for the sake of our blessed Lord and Saviour.

To how much of this are you prepared to say, *Amen*?

November 6th

Colossians 3 v15

I don't know about you, but I'm too easily stirred up. I panic about PCC and every little dispute in the parish. I get cross about the Council, the Government and pretty well everything I read in the newspapers. I worry about little things and things that don't concern me more than I worry about what really matters. Thankfully, God keeps reminding me of the lesson of this verse. I am so glad that daily Morning and Evening Prayer and frequent Communion are part of the rhythm of my life as they bring me back daily on track.

November 7th

Colossians 3 v16

I've written elsewhere about the teenage youth club I belonged to years ago – with its loving fellowship, bible teaching and worship. When we left, we were each given a verse of Scripture to remember. This was mine. Not a bad verse for the individual Christian or for the Christian congregation as a whole.

November 8th

Colossians 3 v17

This verse too has associations for me. It very often formed part of the grace before meals at my theological college. Think about it. Whatever you do each day, do it in the Name of Jesus. Always be thankful to God. What people we would be if we lived up to this!

November 9th

Colossians 3 v18

I once sat at *Spring Harvest* while the speaker gave a very powerful address on what it means to be a Christian, basing his words on a chapter of the Bible. It wasn't this chapter, but it could have been. We've been exploring how St Paul's words, inspired by the Holy Spirit, teach us what it means to be a Christian. I noticed that the speaker at *Spring Harvest* stopped just short of where St Paul said that Christian women come under the authority of Christian men. I can see why he stopped there! But, to me, it isn't honest to do that. If we have regarded

St Paul's words so far in Colossians as the inspired Word of God, how can we suddenly say, when we get to 3 v18, that this verse is not the inspired Word of God? Are we saying that the Bible is only inspired when it agrees with us? If so, we might as well make up our own religion and burn our bibles. I accept that the eternal truth revealed in Scripture has to be interpreted and applied afresh in every generation. I can see that a lot might be said about the changing roles of both women and men down through the ages. But I do not think we can ignore what the Bible says about this subject any more than we can ignore what it says about money or justification by faith or murder. If you want to say that women and men should have the same opportunities in both church and state, I think you have to wrestle with what the Bible says, rather than just ignore it!

November 10th

Colossians 3 v19

In the debates about the place of women in the Church, the family and the wider world, both sides tend to stress the negatives about women. Religion (Islam in particular, but also Christianity) is portrayed as putting women down and giving men a licence to do as they please. I can't speak for Islam, but Christianity certainly treats women and men as equal, though different. Men and women have obligations to one another and the differences between men and women are complementary. That is why God made us male and female!

Here is a paradox for feminists. Left to their own devices, men and women seem to gravitate towards different careers and roles in the family. Society, feminists argue, is that much the poorer because there are not more women in say, politics, and men, say, in child care professions. Therefore it is necessary to take affirmative action in order to get more women into politics and men into child care. However to assert that women can bring something to politics that men can't and that men bring something to childcare that women don't is to accept that men and women are different and that discrimination may, therefore, sometimes be desirable!

November 11th (Remembrance)

Colossians 3 v20

This year we have seen the deaths of the last two men in Britain to have served in the First World War. It was a terrible conflict in which the nations' young manhood served in appalling conditions in the trenches and were mown down in their millions. Many people believed that men were acquiescent in their fate or even eager to fight because they had been brought up in societies in which authority enjoyed unquestioning obedience, from the husband and father as head of his household, up through the ranks of teachers and constabulary, magistrates and mill owners, politicians, squirarchy and aristocracy to the king on his throne, all of them owing their position and their power to God.

I think it is true to say that the Bible does reflect such a view of society. Without authority and structure, we have anarchy in which nothing can be organised properly or managed, and disputes are settled by violence. On the other hand, a hierarchy of authority only works if people at every subordinate level consider the implications of the fact that God is at the top. All human authority is answerable to Him. All human beings are part of His family and those with power and privilege owe a duty of care to those without. The Bible also bears witness to a powerful tradition of dissent – the right, the duty even, to speak up for what is right and against the abuse of power.

God of peace, whose Son Jesus Christ proclaimed the kingdom and restored the broken to wholeness of life: look with compassion on the anguish of the world, and by your healing power make whole both people and nations; through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

November 12th

Colossians 3 v21

This picks up the theme that those who have power whether as fathers, bosses, teachers, politicians, clergy or whatever have to use it responsibility to the glory of God and for the benefit of those entrusted to them.

November 13th

Colossians 3 vv 22-25

The word translated in my bible “servants” is the Greek word for slaves. People often criticise the New Testament for not coming out against the institution of slavery. Indeed passages like this were used in C18 in Britain and America in an attempt to justify the slave trade. The inference is that the Bible was wrong about slavery and therefore could be wrong about other things like homosexuality or the role of women.

How realistic, however, do you think it would have been to start an anti-slavery campaign in the Roman Empire? You’ve seen *Spartacus!* The people Paul is writing to are stuck with being slaves. It is right to carry out their duties simply because they are duties. They are to offer up their work to God, not toady to their owners or masters. By doing so, they will earn their masters’ respect and maintain their own self-respect. It is principle worth adopting whatever work you have to do.

November 14th

Colossians 4 v1

Quite a lot of early Christians were slaves. Rich men tended to find that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Some did, however. If they did become Christians, they were to treat any slaves they owned fairly, remembering that they were slaves of God, just as Jesus Himself took the form of a slave. Remember that if you are an employer, if you are dealing with shop workers or contractors working for you.

November 15th

Colossians 4 v2

*He lives! He lives! Christ Jesus lives today!
He walks with me and He talks with me along life’s narrow way.*

The art of living is to live life as a walk with God. In the Old Testament, good people walk with God. In the Book of Acts, Christians are described as the people of the Way. In John, Jesus tells us that He is Himself the Way, the Truth and the Life. If we walk with God, we keep open the channels of communication. We are always thankful for everything that He does for us and our whole lives are an offering of prayer. So we find peace.

November 16th

Colossians 4 vv 3&4

Paul is apparently a prisoner at this time. Very likely, he is under house arrest in Rome, having completed his missionary journeys, travelled to Jerusalem and been arrested as one who *stirs up the people*. He was taken to Rome by ship and kept under house arrest, probably until his execution under the Emperor Nero. He needs the Colossians' prayers not only for his personal safety, but also so that he can carry on preaching the Gospel to his gaolers and his visitors. We need to pray for our leaders, to pray for those who are persecuted to the faith and to be faithful witnesses to the people around us, whatever the circumstances of our lives.

November 17th

Colossians 4 vv 5&6

Some churches absorb all the spare time of their members. There might be a couple of lengthy Sunday services, a number of weekday meetings and an active church social life. These tend to be strong churches which attract members and, having once joined, people don't leave easily. Even so, members of such churches usually have to go to work outside the Church. They have some social life with non-churchgoers! Maybe the Colossian Church was a bit like this. Essential to the life of the Church, however, is always mission. How ever successful the Church, how ever big, how ever rich, the Church's task is always to share the love of Jesus with the world. So our interactions with non-Christians matter profoundly.

I think that there is danger when churches become inward looking and absorb all their members' time and energy. Do they care about people outside the Church at all?

Some churches are much looser fellowships. People meet for worship, but not always very frequently, and otherwise don't meet much at all. In principle, this leaves us plenty of time to share our faith with the world, but it also creates a situation in which we might be more influenced by the world than the world by us. Our strength as Christians depends on our fellowship with one another.

November 18th

Colossians 4 vv 7-18

Even in those days, the Church was a trans-national fellowship. The people mentioned carried messages, supported individuals and congregations, brought sound teaching, discipline and pastoral care. They enabled the diverse churches of the Eastern Mediterranean to maintain their essential unity as the Christian Church and to carry out their mission to the world. We ought to pray for those who bind us together at deanery, diocesan, national and international levels, those who explore and promote unity with Christians of other denominations, those who provide us with pastoral and other support from outside the parish. All this costs money and we have to pay our parish share (quota) and to contribute to missionary societies, charities, etc. Onesimus had been a slave, but was apparently set free by his master Philemon and probably later became a bishop. Mark and the Luke are the people traditionally credited with writing two of the gospels.

November 19th

Ephesians 1 vv 1&2

Ephesians and Colossians form a pair and a puzzle for those who doubt the traditional view of authorship. In the New Testament, Romans, I & II Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians, Philippians, Ephesians, I&II Thessalonians, I&II Timothy, Titus & Philemon are all letters attributed to St Paul. Traditionally, it was generally believed that Paul also wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews. On grounds of style, likely date, etc., many modern scholars think that Paul probably did not write the letters to Timothy and Titus or II Thessalonians and almost certainly did not write Hebrews. Most scholars see no difficulty in attributing all the rest to Paul, except Colossians and Ephesians. Their problem is that Colossians and Ephesians are sufficiently alike that they are almost certainly by the same author, but Colossians is consistent enough with the letters definitely by Paul that it probably is his work, whereas Ephesians is sufficiently different that many scholars believe that it cannot be Paul's work. This is the kind of thing you probably ought to know, though I am not sure how much difference it makes. Whether by Paul or not, all these letters are sacred Scripture. Even if they are not by Paul, they are almost certainly written by people close to Paul, perhaps on his instructions. I find it most straightforward to treat them all (with the probable exception of Hebrews) as Paul's.

November 20th

Ephesians 1 vv 3-6

The whole of the first chapter of Ephesians is one sentence – which makes it quite hard to take in! These four verses praise God because He has made us his children. We were always meant to be His children. He has adopted us as His sons and daughters through the achievement of His son, Jesus.

November 21st

Ephesians 1 vv 7-11

God's eternal plan is that everything should be redeemed in Christ. He is not just the God of the Jews. He is not just the God of human beings. He is the God Who made heaven and earth. Nothing in all creation is worthy of Him, but everything is at one with Him in Jesus Christ the Word made flesh. Everything created has its end in Him.

Only human beings (and maybe angels, but I'm not sure) have the freedom to choose whether to accept or to reject His love. To accept His love is to live in Him in all eternity. To reject Him is to die eternally. Only we can choose to accept Him and we can only choose to accept Him because He has chosen us.

November 22nd

Ephesians 1 vv 12-14

Human beings accept the love of God by hearing the Word of God and putting their faith in Him. Faith is the gift of God. It is a gift to share and we share God's love by being witnesses for Christ to the people around us, by our words and our deeds and by what we are. Once the Word is engrafted in our hearts, we receive the Holy Spirit, Who is a foretaste and a guarantor of the heavenly life and Who also enables us to live Christ-like lives on earth.

November 23rd

Ephesians 1 vv 15&16

What Paul is going to ask for in the verses following is just so exciting that I think we should pause here. He ceases not to give thanks for the members of the Church because they have faith and love. Think about our congregations. Think about the Christians you know. What is there to give thanks for about them? How about thanking God unceasingly for them? Surely this is a natural consequence of belonging to a fellowship based on mutual love.

November 24th

Ephesians 1 vv 17-20

What it means to be a Christian. Paul prays that we will know what it means to be Christians – to have that wisdom, to be so enlightened that we can at least begin to understand what it means to be in Christ and He in us – to share in the death and resurrection of Jesus, to be filled with His Spirit, to dwell in His Spirit, and to be exalted with Him to God's Right Hand.

Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that like as we do believe thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens; so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with him continually dwell, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

November 25th

Ephesians 1 vv 21-23

These ideas are very much the ideas we were trying to grasp when we read Colossians. God made the world through Jesus and for Jesus. In Him all things consist. This divine person, the Son of God, coequal and coeternal with the Father, entered into the created realm, the realm which was created by and for Him. He gave it all up to become one of us. The eternal, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent Son of God became a human being, in circumstances which were humble even by human standards. He endured the terrible death of a criminal under a brutal regime. God is love and to die on Calvary was the supreme act of love. He earned the eternal worship of Heaven, which was, in any case, His right by inheritance. In so doing He wrought the atonement between the holy God and unholy creation, especially with sinful humanity, so that we too should come into our inheritance as children of God and share with Him in the eternal life of Heaven. What we have to do is to have faith.

In Him the faithful comprise the Church, which is Christ's Body, the Body of Him Who is the *fullness of him that filleth all in all*. It takes some getting, but it is what we are if we believe in Him.

November 26th

Ephesians 2 vv 1-7

Without Christ we are lost. Without Christ we are sinners. Paul remembers a time when he was a very bad sinner. Before his conversion he had actually persecuted the Church of God, even consenting to the stoning of Stephen. Most of the Ephesian Christians had probably been pagans before they were converted. They were idolaters. They probably did not know and were not obedient to the moral demands of the Jewish Law. Through faith in Jesus, they had made a truly new beginning and that was obvious to them and to those around them.

Most of us were probably baptised as babies. As long as we can remember, we have believed in Jesus. We were brought up in a Christian family in a Christian country and we have always accepted Christian morality as the standard to which we aspire.

This may obscure our vision of the difference Christ makes. We can be too complacent. We are not very bad. We have always said our prayers. We may well have been regular in church attendance. But does this very familiarity obscure the wonder of the difference Christ really makes in human lives? If our vision of the greatness of God is too small, it is likely that our comprehension of the enormity of sin is also very limited. We cannot see what we are saved from or what we are saved for.

November 27th

Ephesians 2 vv 8-10

I can sing verses 8&9 if you ask me to. We learned them at Christian youth club. They are the very essence of our relationship with God. It is all of Him. He has done everything in Christ. All that we need is faith and even faith is God's gift to us. What follows is that we are God's workmanship, set free from slavery to sin, at liberty, therefore, to be the people we were made to be, to be fulfilled in doing the good works God has prepared for us to do.

November 28th

Ephesians 2 vv 11-18

In the Old Testament, it is clear that God made heaven and earth. Every human being, every son of Adam, was made in His image. The histories of all the nations are in His Hands. Yet the Jews are special. They are the chosen people, the people of God. What becomes clear in Jesus is that the reason the Jews were chosen was so that from them the Messiah would arise and set free people of all nations so that people of every race could be reconciled to God, join His Church and become the people of God. In the earliest days, sadly, Jews and Jewish Christians looked down on Gentiles. Then, when the Gentiles got the upper hand, they persecuted Jews. We are all the people of God. These things should not be. In breaking down what divides man from God – sin – Jesus breaks down the barriers between people. If we love God, we ought also to love one another! We are all one in Him!

November 29th (Advent Sunday)

Ephesians 2 vv 19-22

Advent is about the coming of Jesus. He comes to be born in this world at Christmas. He enters our hearts when we put our faith in Him. We meet Him in other people, the fellowship of the Church, the pages of the Bible, the Holy Sacraments, in private prayer, in the grandeur of nature, and in so many other ways. We shall meet Him when we die. We shall meet Him on the last day when heaven and earth are finished and He comes in glory to judge the living and the dead. The Temple is the dwelling place of God. Jesus therefore is the Temple. The Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church is the Temple. We pray the Lord to come swiftly to His Temple.

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.

November 30th (St Andrew)

Ephesians 3 v1

Paul was very much the apostle to the Gentiles – the nations. In a sense, however, Andrew was the first missionary. It was Andrew who brought his brother Simon Peter to Jesus at the very beginning, when John the Baptist pointed out Jesus as the Lamb of God. It was Andrew who accompanied Philip and brought some Greeks who wanted to see Jesus. Andrew was an ordinary fisherman, but his ears were open to the message. He listened to John. He listened to Jesus. And he wanted to serve Jesus and to share the Good News with other people.

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 unto 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 1st

Ephesians 3 vv 2-6

This mystery which Paul now understands is that God reaches out in love to include people of all nations as His people. (It is worth pointing out that the word “Gentiles” as used in the Bible generally means “nations”. The Israelites were the “people” {of God}. Other peoples were the “nations”.) What Paul has learnt through revelation that people of all nations are being drawn by the love of God to be numbered among His people.

The issue for us is whether we realise that God draws people of *all sorts and conditions* to be numbered among His people. *Birds of a feather flock together* and it is natural unconsciously to build a church of people like ourselves – the same age group and social class, people with similar tastes. We invite people who we think will enjoy what we enjoy. So two points. If we are true to the revelation which God gave Paul, we will welcome into our Church people who may be very different from us in terms of class, age, colour and personal tastes. Once they join, they will inevitably alter the Church to some extent. We may not like the changes, but would we want to exclude people rather than adapt? They might even have fresh ideas!

December 2nd

Ephesians 3 v7

To unpack this and translate it literally and with some licence. Paul has become a servant of the Gospel and of Jesus. This servanthood is the gift of God, freely given to Paul even though he does not deserve the privilege of serving God. God's gift is energy. It is God's own dynamite, blowing up all the barriers which divide human beings from God and from one another. The barriers are sin, the world and the devil. The dynamite is the Holy Spirit set free through the Death of Jesus. Once the barriers are down, what we have is a perfect and eternal communion of love between us and God and between us and one another. If you truly love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, then you inevitably love your neighbour as yourself. God's law is the law of liberty and His service is perfect freedom.

What is true of Paul is equally true of you and me if you, the reader, are a Christian. The only difference is that we serve God in different ways. If Paul is the wise master builder, you and I might be the bricklayers or the hod carriers, but we are all servants of God, privileged to serve, though we don't deserve it, experiencing considerable job satisfaction here and now, and anticipating the wages of eternal life, which we don't deserve either.

December 3rd

Ephesians 3 vv 8 & 9

Paul regards himself as the least of the Church because he has been a persecutor of Christians. It is probable that the revelation he speaks of was his experience on the Road to Damascus. It is divine irony that, just as Paul is on his way to arrest the Christians in Syria, God intervenes to teach him that God's Good News is for everyone of every race and that Paul will be a major messenger of that Good News. What Paul has from God he describes as *unsearchable riches*. These riches are a free gift for the whole of creation, God's eternal purpose for all of us to dwell in an eternal fellowship of love.

It is astonishing to me that so many people (including many Christians) find the riches on display in the *Bluewater Shopping Centre* more alluring on a Sunday morning, than the riches on show from our pulpits!

December 4th

Ephesians 3 v 10

This is not easy to understand, but it reveals a tremendous privilege and an enormous responsibility. Whatever is meant by these *principalities and powers* (angels or devils, spiritual forces or human potentates) they are obviously pretty important, but it is the Church of God which makes known to them the *manifold wisdom of God*.

We do that because of what we are. We are redeemed. We are a kind of firstfruits of the whole creation. We are a sign of what God can do and what He is doing. We are what we are by the grace of God. We make known the *manifold wisdom of God*, simply by being His Body, the Church.

We also make known the *manifold wisdom of God* by preaching the Word to the whole of creation.

December 5th

Ephesians 3 vv 11 & 12

We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness.

So we say, but do we mean it? Do we have a sense that we are enormously privileged to enjoy Communion with God or do we really have a sneaking feeling that He is lucky to have us at all? After all, there are so many other things to do on a Sunday and lots of people hardly bother about God. Far from holding our sins against us, God should just be thankful that anybody bothers to turn up to public worship, drops a bit of loose change in the plate and maybe supports His Church's pastoral programmes.

If we feel like this, it is because our concept of God is so inadequate. He is so much holier than we are that to come into His Presence uninvited would result in our dissolution. The paradox is that we cannot be fulfilled as human beings unless we dwell in the Presence of God but that we cannot safely enter into that Presence because of our perpetual rebellion against His Love. Jesus is the solution. In Him we have access. But this gift is priceless, not valueless!

December 6th (Advent 2, St Nicholas)

Ephesians 3 v13

Today is the feast of St Nicholas of Myra – the original Santa Claus. Nicholas is associated with caring for children and the poor and with standing up for the truth. The Christian life is a life of giving, giving of things and, more importantly, the giving of self. Some, like Paul, have faced imprisonment and death as they have offered their lives to God as a living sacrifice. It is the glory of the Church that she follows in the footsteps of Jesus Who offered Himself on the Cross as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

Almighty Father, lover of souls, who chose your servant Nicholas to be a bishop in the Church, that he might give freely out of the treasures of your grace: make us mindful of the needs of others and, as we have received, so teach us also to give; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

December 7th

Ephesians 3 vv 14-19

Wow! What a prayer! Everything in Heaven and earth makes up Christ's family and Paul asks that His Spirit should dwell in us. When God answers that prayer, Christ dwells in us too and we have a vision of the Eternal Love Who creates, sustains and redeems everything that is so that all of us may dwell in a perfect and eternal harmony of praise love and joy.

December 8th

Ephesians 3 vv 20 &21

No wonder Paul slips into this glorious doxology. I will leave you to think through for yourself the implications of the amazing things He says about God, His Church and us "ordinary" Christians.

December 9th

Ephesians 4 vv 1-3

These verses are almost painfully beautiful. What is your calling? Your calling is to eternal fellowship with the Son of God. Your calling is to be like Him. Your calling is to be one of many millions of members of His Body, the Church, and form *one great fellowship of love throughout the wide earth.*

December 10th

Ephesians 4 vv 4-6

These verses are very well known. They are often used in ecumenical services, when different churches of different congregations come together to celebrate our essential unity in Christ and to explore ways in which that unity may be more apparent in the way we behave towards one another. One of our Eucharistic Prayers prays:

Remember, Lord, your Church in every land.
Reveal her unity, guard her faith
And preserve her in peace.

Christian people are essential one because God is one. Hence there ought to be unity within our congregations and between different congregations. Our failure to be united in love is sin, a falling short of the glory of God. In order to realise the prayer above, we should need to cooperate with God in answering the prayer contained in the previous three lines:

As we eat and drink these holy things in your presence,
Form us in the likeness of Christ,
And build us into a living temple to your glory.

December 11th

Ephesians 4 vv 7-10

The Church is one Body. We, however, remain distinct individuals. We are different people, though we are one with each other – just as in a marriage husband and wife become one flesh, but remain separate people. Indeed husband and wife become the individuals they were meant to be through marriage and we become the people we were meant to be through Baptism. God made us different, just as He made men and women different, because that is how He wants us. We are each different because we each have a distinctive contribution to make.

We are made what we are by the distinctive gifts the Holy Spirit gives to each one of us. Jesus ascends to the Cross to win the decisive victory over evil. He ascends into Heaven. He pours out the Holy Spirit with individual gifts for all of us as we follow in His triumphal procession, the Way of the Cross.

December 12th

Ephesians 4 vv 11-13

Body building is quite fashionable. I'm sure you're up the gym several times a week, working on the *six pack* you will put on display on those Caribbean beaches next Summer. It takes hours on those machines to get fit, doesn't it? But it's worth it. The girls think you're the cat's whiskers. Your mates are impressed and no-one's going to kick sand in your face.

The gifts of the Spirit are about body building, building up the Body of Christ. In other words, God has given each one of us gifts so that we can work with Him to build up the Body of Christ – to make more and better Christians.

December 13th (Advent 3)

Ephesians 4 vv 14 & 15

Traditionally Advent 2 was kept as Bible Sunday. (Nowadays, along with Advent 3, Advent 2 meditates on John the Baptist, who prepares the way for the Lord.) The Bible is that collection of books which have been inspired by the Holy Spirit as a repository of the Truth God has revealed to His Church. The Bible keeps us from being blown off course or sunk. The Bible enables us to speak the truth in love. Ordinary every day Christians ought to read the Bible every day so as to be steeped in the divine wisdom which it imparts.

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and the comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and for ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Nearly 2,000 years ago the Christian thinker Origen taught that, when we read the Bible, the Word of God is reaching out from its pages seeking us, just as we are seeking Jesus as we search the Scriptures.

December 14th

Ephesians 4 v16

We've just had a new baby in the family. It is a mystery how a baby grows in the womb. It is a mystery how, once born, the child grows bigger, organs and limbs are differentiated, and he or she becomes a distinct person. That body will undergo many changes, but the person remains the same. Indeed the person will remain and enter into the fulness of what it means to be a person only when the body is left behind.

But how does Christ's Body grow? What makes the Church get bigger and better? According to St Paul, the principle underlying Church growth is love.

December 15th

Ephesians 4 vv 17-32

There should be a distinction between the Church and the world. The world has its own standards, developed in rebellion against God. Self comes first. If worship happens, it is self-indulgent. Relationships are exploitative. Greed is good. Materialism rules. The end justifies the means. *But you have not so learned Christ.* If we are Christians, our lives ought to be unspotted.

December 16th

Ephesians 5 vv 1-6

When Paul preached that salvation is by God's grace, not a reward for being good, some people concluded that it did not matter how you behaved. God would always forgive you. Maybe He didn't even care what you did in this world so long as you had faith in the world to come. But God sent Jesus because He *so loved the world*. Sin alienates us from God because sin hurts people and God is love. God cannot bear to see people hurt. So He cannot bear people who hurt others through sin. Jesus makes us see just how awful sin is. Jesus shows us how a good human being really lives. His sufferings demonstrate just how evil the human race is. God's wrath falls on human beings because we are sinners. In Christ, we are forgiven. We are set free from sin. In Christ, we are set free to live Christ-like lives. So the Christian always seeks to live free of sin.

December 17th

Ephesians 5 vv 7-17

To be a Christian is to be like Christ. The path of least resistance is to be conformed to the standards of this world, to do what everybody else does. You don't have to think for yourself. You don't have to stand out from the crowd. But a Christian will examine his life in the light of the Bible and the teachings of the Church. He will measure himself against Jesus. He will seek the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in prayer and in the counsels of the Church. When England was supposedly a Christian country it was easy to assume complacently that it was enough to live by the values of British society. As the United Kingdom increasingly drops the pretence of being a Christian commonwealth, it becomes an ever starker choice. Do you want to be *conformed to this world* or do you want to be *transformed by the renewing of your mind*?

December 18th

Ephesians 5 vv 18 & 19

We all need to let our hair down. You can exist on a bland diet, calculated to give you exactly the right balance of fat, protein, carbohydrates, etc.. You can keep fit with a scientifically calculated exercise regime. You can live in a perfectly ordinary house with home security, comfy chairs, carefully controlled heating and ventilation, etc. You can go to work and obey all the instructions and regulations and meet all your targets in an atmosphere of cloying health and safety. And you can go mad! We all need to let our hair down but far too many people escape through alcohol or other drugs. It perhaps isn't surprising, given the world we have created for ourselves. But there is a more excellent way. Reconnect with the fully human, the real you. That is Jesus Christ our Lord, encountered in the Holy Spirit.

December 19th

Ephesians 5 vv 20 7 21

In the world, we put number one first. We want. We want more. We are never satisfied. We are never grateful. Other people are to be envied or they are our rivals or they are to be exploited. The world makes us strive, but we can never completely succeed. What the world dangles in front of us is, in the last analysis, not worth having. Faith turns the world upside down. We thank God. We put other people first. Suddenly we find that we are fulfilled. Suddenly life is worth living after all.

December 20th (Advent 4)

Ephesians 5 vv 18-22

When I was first ordained, this was a popular reading at weddings. The old 1662 marriage service required the woman to say *obey* (twice) and *obey* remained optional in the revisions of 1928 and 1980 (which we mainly used). *Obey* has been dropped from *Common Worship* (unless you really look for it) and so has the ceremony of giving the bride away. What was held to be the right relationship between men and women for probably thousands of years came, in the space of a few decades at the end of the C20, to be regarded by many as absurd. Many feminists count the Christian religion as among the enemies of women. Many liberal Christians reject doctrines and biblical passages such as this out of hand and even many conservative Christians are embarrassed by them.

Traditionally, it was regarded as self-evident that men and women are different and that they, therefore, have different roles in the family and in wider society. Religion sees this as the way God has designed things – that men and women are complementary. The Christian faith sees the love between a man and a woman, the joy they bring one another, the responsibilities they have towards one another, the tie that binds them to one another, as a sign of the relationship between God and the believer, between Christ and the Church. In St Paul's teaching, the different roles of husband and wife are worked out in the context of their calling as Christians. It is this understanding of the relationship between men and women that makes it so very difficult for many of us to accept women as ministers of the Church. To conduct worship, to preach, to lead a congregation is to act with authority and the Bible teaches that women ought not to exercise authority over men. Personally, I believe that society as a whole has suffered from the attempt to treat men and women as equivalent. I believe that it is ignoring nature to suppose that most men are as suitable for child care as most women or that most girls would really value the chance to be motor mechanics equally with the boys.

I think I'm likely to find myself out of step with a lot of my readership on these points, but I would plead for open minds. I don't think these questions are settled yet!

December 21st

Ephesians 6 vv 1-9

We had all this in Colossians too. Paul preached in a patriarchal society. There was a social order, largely based on the model of the human family. What was required was that everyone fulfilled his Christian vocation - *to do my duty in that state of life, unto which it shall please God to call me*. We are conscious of the downside of such a traditional society. Those higher up may exploit their positions. Those lower down may be discouraged from attempting to better themselves and therefore unable to contribute fully to the needs of society. As we set the individual free, however, to develop his own potential, we must not lose sight of our obligations one to another. We are individuals, but the human race is also a family, with all that implies.

December 22nd

Ephesians 6 vv 10-24

Living as a Christian is a serious business. There are unworldly forces against you as well as worldly ones. You need all the resources God supplies. And these are many. We may know the armour of God passage quite well. It makes a good Sunday School lesson and it has inspired a few good hymns. It is worth taking time to think through all the implications, however. Do we make use of the means of grace or are we too tied up with the affairs of this world? If we are too tied up with the affairs of this world to bother much about truth, righteousness, Gospel, faith, salvation and the Word, we may find that the unworldly forces sneak up on us. Of greatest importance is prayer – to maintain our communion with God, to hold one another up in the power of the Spirit.

December 23rd

Philippians 4 vv 4-7

This is a popular reading for Advent. One of my friends, who isn't even sure that he's a Christian, learned it off by heart. Being a Christian is a serious business. It is also deep joy. Jesus came so that we should have an abundance of joy. Joy in the Lord is our strength. If we joy in the Lord, we have the security to be of gentle spirit. We don't have to assert ourselves, to fear being put down, to grab or cling. We don't have to worry. We can be thankful. We can take all our needs to God. We are open to be filled with his peace.

December 24th

Philippians 4 vv 8 & 9

These verses too are popular ones to learn by heart. It is just so obvious that our longing ought to be for these things. It is so simple. The weird thing is that we don't behave as if we knew this.

December 25th (Christmas Day)

Philippians 2 vv 5-7

As we contemplate the mystery of the Birth of Jesus, we are invited to meditate on the mystery that He became like us so that we should become like Him. As we think of His humility and self-offering in love, we see not only our example, but also the means by Whom we can follow it.

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)

Philippians 2 v8

St Stephen was the first martyr and the fact that his feast day comes on the day after Christmas Day always reminds us that Jesus was born to die for the sins of the world. It reminds us that all Christians are caught up in the mystery of Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection.

Grant, O Lord, that, in all our sufferings here upon earth for the testimony of thy truth, we may stedfastly look up to heaven, and by faith behold the glory which is to 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)

Philippians 2 vv 9-11

Jesus humbles Himself to accept a human life and death in order to identify with humanity. He is resurrected and exalted in order that we too, through faith in Him, should be resurrected and exalted. John the apostle is associated with the glory of Jesus and its proclamation throughout the world. He is associated with the building of the Church in love and the ultimate triumph of light over darkness as we are made like Him.

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)

Philippians 1 vv 12-26

We've been hopping about rather through Philippians because I've been trying to relate the letter to the events we have been commemorating in the Church's year. This letter too is apparently written by Paul when he is in prison in Rome and anticipating a martyr's death. He wants his readers to understand the paradox that his imprisonment is having the effect of spreading the Gospel. The very fact that he has been imprisoned would make some people wonder about the reason for the hope that was in him. Even factions in the Church seem to have contributed to the proclamation of the Gospel, because everyone wants a slice of the action. In some ways, it is a scandal that there are different churches of different denominations in the same village or town. We ought to be able to unite in love. But it has to be admitted that, as things stand, we probably reach more people working apart than we might if we worked together. Paul's confidence in Christ is such that he is quite ready to die, but he will accept God's Will!

Lord God, you are the most holy one, enthroned in splendour and light, yet in the coming of your Son Jesus Christ you reveal the power of your love made perfect in our human weakness.

December 29th

Philippians 1 v 6

Over Christmas, churches are very often packed. Hundreds of people of all ages sing carols which tell of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God and of all that means for the human race. Those of us who come to Church every Sunday are always saddened and disappointed by the way numbers drop off as soon as Christmas is over. If people really meant the carols they sang and the prayers they said over Christmas, then surely nothing could prevent them from returning to Church at every available opportunity.

Yet I think it would be unfair to accuse the C & E (Christmas and Easter) of hypocrisy. I think they really mean it at the Carol services and the Midnight Mass. I just think they don't think through the implications.

Paul says that he is confident that God *which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.*

We just have to give Him the chance!

December 30th

Philippians 3 vv 1-12

We are drawing towards the close of the year – a time when maybe some people are thinking about New Year's Resolutions. If you regard New Year as a good time for stock-taking on your life, what do you think really matters? Some people were telling the Philippians that it was an outward act of religious observance that really mattered. Paul went over all his worldly and ecclesiastical advantages and decided that they counted for nothing. What was important was to win Christ – no matter the cost. Nothing else counted. Only knowing Jesus. Everything else in life only made sense when seen from the perspective of faith. So, if New Year for you, is the time when you chuck out the old, it might be a good time to review your priorities. What is worth spending time, money and effort on in 2010?

December 31st

Philippians 3 vv 13-21

So, let's look forward. A new year starts tomorrow, the first day of the rest of our lives. What do we want for ourselves? What life do we choose? I won't insult you by suggesting anything less than *the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Jesus Christ*. We aren't there yet, but we are on the way. We have millions of companions and leaders. We have the means of grace. All we have to do is to cooperate with the grace of God. There are crashes beside the road, people who have lost control to worldliness and gone off into the ditch. Some have stopped or gone backwards and lost the ground they had made. But heaven is where we belong. We are heaven's citizens now. The Christian pilgrimage is in fact the journey home. It is Jesus to Whom we look and Who will bring us home, changing us so that we shall be like Him.

But lo, there breaks a yet more glorious day;
The saints triumphant rise in bright array:
The King of Glory passes on his way.
Alleluia.

From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,
Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
Singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost
Alleluia.

