

Children and Young People in the Bible.



Bible Notes
April - June 2011

50p

April 1st

Mark 10 vv 13-16

Suffer the little children to come unto me.

After last quarter's course on women in the Bible, it was suggested to me that we might look at what the Bible has to say about children and young people. This seems a good place to start. Jesus loves children. The Church is the Body of Christ. If Jesus loves children, then the Church too must love children. In the Church children are welcome and cared for. As Bishop David Say, used to maintain. Children are not the Church of the future; they are the Church of today. They belong just as we all belong. The Church is active in caring for children in the world – supporting family life, looking after the material needs of children in this country and overseas. The Church is engaged in education and supports other organisations involved in education. We try to support youth work.

Loving children means looking after their welfare in this world, but, even more importantly, it means bringing them to Jesus. This is something we can all do as we pray for the children in our families and try to teach them to know Jesus through the Bible stories and through personal prayer. It is also the reason why it is vital to support our outreach work towards children and young people – Saints Alive (Sunday School), St Michael's Angels, Thursday's Children, etc.

April 2nd

Mark 10 vv 1-12

And they twain shall be one flesh.

Family is very important in the Bible. In Genesis, God creates Eve because it is not good that the man should be alone. The first commandment is actually *Go forth and multiply*. The first commandment with a promise attached is *Honour thy father and thy mother*. I am in no doubt at all that the best start in life a child can have is to be brought up by two parents who love one another and who love their children in a Christian home. Faced with difficult or impossible home situations, we have come to accept relatively easy divorce, unmarried motherhood, and living together in uncommitted relationships, but none of these things are what is meant to be and we ought not to give in too easily on lifelong marriage as the basis of family life.

April 3rd

Matthew 18 vv 1-3

Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

In what sense do would be entrants to the kingdom of heaven have to become like children? After all, children can behave pretty horribly. I don't think Jesus is talking about the innocence of children as a prerequisite for belonging to His Church. Some people think that He means that we have to have the faith of children, to be prepared to trust as children trust. What He actually says is that we have to humble ourselves. A child is dependent on his parents for everything. We are dependent on God for everything, but many people imagine they can live without God. They don't pray for what they need. They don't thank God for what they've got. They don't try to order their lives in accordance with His commandments. They hardly think about God at all. They don't recognise their need for God, but without God we are as vulnerable as an orphan child. I think what Jesus means is that we must be humble enough to acknowledge our need for God. If we don't seek, we can't find. If we don't knock on the door, we can hardly expect it to be opened for us.

April 4th

Luke 11 vv 1-13

When ye pray, say, Our Father.

Family life is so basic to the human condition. Admittedly some families can be awful, but, for most of us, family is the most important thing in the world. Our families are the people who most love us and care for us and they are the people we most care for. Most of us are brought up in families and most of us create new families when a man leaves his father or mother and cleaves to his wife so that the two become one flesh. For all the potential problems of family life, modern society undermines the family at its peril.

Our family life is rooted in God because God is love. What we understand of love through our human relationships helps us to understand something of the nature of God. Christ is the perfect husband and the Church is the bride He has perfected. God is our Father and we are His children.

April 5th

Galatians 4 vv 1-7

And because ye are sons God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying Abba Father.

We believe in God the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.

We believe in God the Son, who lives in our hearts through faith, and fills us with his love.

We believe in God the Holy Spirit, who strengthens us with power from on high.

We believe in one God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Affirmation of Faith 7, Common Worship.

Our family relationships, all our human relationships, are grounded in the relationship of the three persons of the Holy Trinity, holy, heavenly love.

Insofar as this is not the case, this is sin, but Christ is the One Who washes all our sins away if only we repent and put our faith in Him.

April 6th

Matthew 18 vv 4-7

But whose shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

I suppose we think first of those terrible stories of paedophile priests. Of course, it is not only the clergy who have abused their positions. Anyone in a position of power over those more vulnerable than themselves can be guilty of abuse. There are also appalling cases of abuse by youth workers and teachers and in children's homes. The priests' cases are I think more emphasised partly because it is indeed most scandalous when religious people behave diabolically but also because wicked clergymen are a useful stick with which anti-Christian journalists and politicians can beat the Church.

Above we talked about the vulnerability of children, about the way they depend on adults. We said that we adults ought to acknowledge our vulnerability and dependence on God. We have a special duty to protect the vulnerable and to exploit their relative weakness.

April 7th

Matthew 18 vv 4-7

And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.

The horror of paedophilia does not exhaust these verses. There are more ways of abusing children than by sexual or physical ill treatment. We abuse children if we neglect their need for love, if we don't provide them with a disciplined moral framework in which to grow up, if we neglect their bodily needs for food, clothing, etc., their mental need for education and their spiritual need for Jesus. We have a responsibility for all children, obviously first for the children in our own families, but also for neighbours and members of our Church and of the wider community, and also for children abroad growing up in war zones or in chronic poverty. To show love to a child is to show love for Jesus.

There is a danger that our fear of paedophiles has poisoned the trust that there ought to be between adults and children so that it is difficult to discharge our responsibility to keep a friendly and protective eye on other people's children within our community and to run youth clubs, Sunday Schools, etc. It is important that we keep our fears in proportion and that we take care that the measures we take to avoid one evil, paedophilia say, don't make it difficult or impossible to build a community of trust between people of all age groups.

April 8th

Matthew 18 vv 10-14

Their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.

One thing I have learned from modern Physics is that this material universe has hidden depths. There is a great deal more to reality than would appear on the surface. Not only does matter consist of invisible atoms, but atoms themselves consist of tinier particles still. What is more the nature and behaviour of those tiny particles do not conform to our common sense understanding of natural laws which we inherited from such giants as Sir Isaac Newton. Chaos Theory, Big Bang Theory and Quantum Mechanics, at the very least, make us realise that there is much more to the physical world of time and space than would appear on the surface. It would be naïve therefore to write off the notion of a spiritual creation, a heavenly creation, of angels and other spirits because they do not fit in with our concept of a mechanistic universe. The complexities of this world point to the greatness of God.

April 9th

Matthew 18 vv 10-14

Their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.

Having got all that out of the way, we can move on to the idea of guardian angels. We are not told much about the heavenly realm in the Bible. We wouldn't understand it if we were. But there does seem to be a correspondence between things in heaven and things on earth. Heavenly beings seem sometimes to have particular responsibilities for nations, peoples and individuals. The ministry of angels is one of the ways in which God cares for us on earth and brings about the fulfilment of His plan for us. I think that what Jesus is saying here in a poetic way is that the guardian angels of children have a privileged access to the Throne of God and that it is therefore all the more terrible to harm a child whether by design or neglect.

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

April 10th

I Corinthians 3 vv 1-8

Babes in Christ!

Jesus said that we must become like little children if we are to enter the Kingdom of Heaven and we have tried to consider what this might mean in terms of humility, vulnerability and acknowledging our dependence on God. But there are several places in the Epistles where the writer complains because Christians refuse to grow up! After Jesus ascended into Heaven, His disciples proclaimed the Good News, from Jerusalem ultimately to the uttermost parts of the earth. Their converts constituted new churches, communities of faithful people. The Epistles in our Bibles are the letters leading Christians wrote to these young churches in order to encourage them in the faith and to put right what was going wrong. It appears that often these new Christians did not realise the implications of the commitment that they had made in Baptism. They were born again, crucified with Christ, but they behaved as if they were no different from people in the world around them.

April 11th

I Corinthians 3 vv 1-8

Babes in Christ!

I hope you don't mind taking two days to look at the same passage. There is so much to be said on these things. The problem at Corinth was that they acted as though they were still in the flesh, rather than in the spirit. The Christians at Corinth were quarrelling among themselves. The Church had split into factions. They were behaving no better than boys in the playground forming themselves into gangs. Yet Jesus had told His disciples to love one another as He loves us. He had prayed that His Church might be one. The Corinthians were very immature Christians. Grown up Christians, Christians who are grown up into the full stature of Christ, love one another and are one in the Holy Spirit. The Corinthian Christians were acting like children in all the wrong ways. They weren't acknowledging that they were entirely dependent on God for everything they had, for their very salvation. They were asserting themselves and their own self-importance. So they cut themselves off from the grace of God and divided His Church into self-regarding factions. Looking at the Church today, we don't seem to have learned much in 2,000 years. Bishop James reminds us that quarrels within the Church are family quarrels. That is why they can lead to such bitterness. But it is also why we must work so hard for reconciliation. We need to grow up.

April 12th

I Corinthians 14 v20

Brethren be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men.

Some people don't seem to want to move on in the Christian faith. I think the popularity of children's services with some adults is not that they are good for the Church's children, but that they themselves don't want to face up to the challenges of being an adult Christian. In the same way, some adult converts seem only to want to go to mission services. They want the excitement of first love all the time rather than a mature long term relationship with Christ the bridegroom. We ought to be like children in our willingness to forgive and to move on from disputes and ill-feeling, but our understanding of our faith and how it relates to our daily lives and to the world in general should be maturing all the time.

April 13th

Hebrews 5 vv 1-14

Ye have need that one should teach you again.

The fact that many of us will find this chapter hard to understand makes the author's point for him. Too many Christians stop at the most basic level of faith. They don't mature themselves. They are not equipped to teach others. Hebrews is saying that there is such a depth about Jesus into which we ought to plunge, but that most of us are content just to paddle at the margins of the ocean of the Love of God. Why don't we contemplate God more in prayer? Why don't we meditate more on the meaning of Scripture? Why do we not have sufficient reverence for the Sacraments? When there is so much of God, how come we are content with so little?

Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise.

April 14th

Luke 2 vv 41-52

Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?

There is very little in the Bible about the childhood of Jesus. We can deduce that He was brought up in Nazareth, that the Holy Family kept the Jewish Law and attended the Pilgrim Feasts and that He worked with Joseph in the carpenter's shop and probably carried on doing so after Joseph's death until Jesus was Himself 30 years old and not much else. So it's difficult to know what to teach children after Christmas and somewhat embarrassing that the only story we have seems to enjoin disobedience to parents at least in certain circumstances. Many people would put family before God. Some people would put God before family. This might be virtuous if your family were trying to hold you back from serving God, but it could also be arrogant. Some people claim to be going against their family in order to serve God, when in fact they are just serving themselves. The first commandment is to love the LORD your God with all your heart, mind and strength. I suggest that we work out the implication of our human loves in the light of our love for God.

April 15th

Mark 7 vv 1-13

Honour thy Father and thy Mother.

This declaring of a man's property to be Corban means that it was dedicated to God. Maybe it was genuinely dedicated to God and actually given to the service of the temple or maybe it was some sort of legal fiction in which it was theoretically dedicated to God but actually retained for the use of the donor. Either way, Jesus declares it to be an abuse and later rabbis would agree with Him. Grown up children have responsibilities towards their parents and they cannot claim religious or other duties as an excuse not to discharge them.

We may be very busy furthering our own careers and bringing up our families. We may even have dedicated our lives in God's service as missionaries or clergy or members of religious orders. But none of this removes our responsibility to obey the commandment. *Honour thy father and thy mother.*

Sometimes the care of the elderly in contemporary Britain is a disgrace. Old people ought not to dread being admitted to a geriatric ward or having to go into a home. They should not be too fearful of being unable to manage to remain in their own homes. Families ought not to leave the care of their elderly relatives to the state but it is not unreasonable to expect the state representing the community of us all to help us to care for our parents and neither is it unreasonable to expect the whole community, whether through voluntary organisations or statutory bodies are just plain good neighbourliness, to look after old people who have no-one to care for them. If we are professional carers or just friends and neighbours we ought to treat elderly people as would want our own parents to be treated (or ourselves when the time comes).

April 16th

Ephesians 6 vv 1-3

That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth.

In Ephesians 5 and 6 Paul works out what it means to live a Christian life in the social conditions prevailing in his day. The conditions change, but the principles don't and one of the secrets of a happy and good life remains the respect of our parents.

April 17th

Ephesians 6 v4

Bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Some parents abuse their children, taking out their own frustrations on these weaker beings. Some neglect them and some exploit them, making them work hard for their parents' profit. It is hard for children to escape parental abuse and it can be a mixed blessing when they do. There are still bonds of love even in inadequate families and it is often a very mixed blessing to be taken into care.

St Paul teaches us here what family life ought to be like. Being a parent is a difficult job, but faith is a tremendous resource. As the Baptism service puts it, "As their parents and godparents, you have the prime responsibility for guiding and helping them in their early years. This is a demanding task for which you will need the help and grace of God." The faith of the parents (and godparents and the rest of the family) is a firm foundation for bringing up the child in the way that he should go.

April 18th

Luke 2 vv 39&40

And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom.

These verses present us with something of a puzzle about the childhood of Jesus and indeed of His life in general. As a normal human boy, you would expect Jesus to grow not only in stature but also in knowledge and understanding. See also v52. As God, however, He knows everything and understands everything. Jesus is Wisdom personified. If Jesus is not fully human, then He does not redeem our humanity. If His divine nature helps Him to evade temptation, He is not tempted in all respects as we are. If He is not fully human, He does not fully understand us from our point of view. If He is not fully human, He is not our friend and brother. On the other hand, if He is not completely God, He does not fully reveal God to us. God has not become one of us. He does not act and speak with the authority of God.

After centuries of deliberation and indeed contention, the Church accepted that the Christian religion requires us to believe that there is one Jesus Christ Who has both a human nature and a divine nature. We cannot understand what this means or imagine what it was like for Him, but it must be so if the Gospel makes sense.

April 19th

Luke 2 vv 22-39

The Days of her Purification.

Mary had to be purified after childbirth. The sense is that there is something sacred about bringing a new life into the world. Some sort of ritual has to be performed before the new mother can resume her ordinary life. Churching was a corresponding ritual in England until not so long ago. There is a sense of thanksgiving for a new life. There is thanksgiving for the safety of the mother through the birth process. There is a need for an interval, for the mother to have some time before re-entering the ordinary world. Churching seemed to die out when most births moved into hospital. The Service of Thanksgiving for the Birth of a Child sort of replaces it, but this is very seldom held and, when it does take place, is too often treated as an alternative for Baptism. It is no such thing! Baptism is the rite of initiation for a new Christian, something else entirely. I doubt if a restoration of Churching is either possible or desirable as a general thing, but I think we have lost our sense of the sacredness of life and that is a very serious loss.

April 20th

Luke 2 vv 15-21

His name was called Jesus

It was usual for Jewish boys to be circumcised on the eighth day. This was a sign of the covenant that God had made with Abraham. Being circumcised showed that they belonged to the people of God.

I think this practice of infant circumcision provides some justification for infant Baptism. Parents who belong to the people of God themselves naturally want their children to be included too. Baptism is the rite of Christian initiation. If you want your children to belong to the Church, you have them baptised.

I understand those Christians who believe that Baptism should be put off until people are old enough to make up their own minds, to articulate their faith with some understanding. My response, however, is that it is God Who makes us a member of His people, not we ourselves. Even as adults, we understand very little of the mystery of faith. Our faith may be very weak, but it is on God we depend. If we couldn't be baptised until we understood certain things, those with

special educational needs might never be baptised and I am quite sure that God does not want to exclude them from His Church. So I am happy to baptise infants in faith.

However, the Bible is quite clear that circumcision is useless if people do not live up to what it signifies. No doubt the same is true of Baptism. It is all of grace, but we have to respond to God's grace at whatever level of development we have attained.

April 21st (Maundy Thursday)

John 6 vv 1-14

But what are they among so many?

I wonder how that lad felt? He'd come out with the crowds to hear Jesus. It was a time of great celebration and anticipation of what God had done and would do for His people. It was Passover. Who was this Jesus? A prophet? A new Moses? The Messiah?

And He wanted bread and this little lad could supply it. He offered the little he had and when Christ blessed it, it was sufficient for all. What do we bring for Christ to bless?

April 22nd (Good Friday)

Mark 14 vv 26-52

And he left the linen cloth, and fled from them naked.

After another Passover celebration, Jesus led His disciples into the Garden of Gethsemane. In the Garden, He prays as I expect we would pray that, if possible, He would not have to go through with the crucifixion. However, He formally accepted God's Will for His life – that He should become *a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world*. He didn't call on angels to rescue Him. He did not use His power to escape. He accepted God's Will for His life because He loved God and because He loved the human race He was sent to redeem.

All the Gospels tell the story of Gethsemane, but only Mark mentions the young man who fled naked. Some people think that maybe this was Mark himself. We run away from Jesus in His hour of need, but, without Him, we have nothing.

April 23rd (Holy Saturday)

Luke 2 vv22-39

Every male that openeth the womb.

The first born male of both human beings and farm animals was treated as belonging to the LORD. This is traced back to the first Passover when the first born of the Egyptians perished and the firstborn of the Hebrews were saved because the blood of the Passover Lamb was daubed on the doorposts of the Hebrews' houses. Because they belonged to the LORD, they had to be redeemed (bought back) by a sacrifice. This is what is going on here. Jesus, like every Jewish first born Son, has to have the price paid, to be bought back from God.

Israel is described as the son God calls out of Egypt. Jesus Himself as a baby is a refugee in Egypt and is called from Egypt by God. Jesus is God's Son and He personifies the people of Israel, the people of God. He personifies the Church, redeemed humanity. Adam is the son of God who represents the whole human race. Jesus is the second Adam, God the Son, Who represents the whole of humanity before the Throne of God. We are baptised into His death so that we may share His resurrection.

April 24th (Easter Day)

Acts 7 vv 54-60

And the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.

God raised Jesus from the dead. His prayer and His promise is

That where thou art in glory
there shalt thy servant be.

The glory of Jesus is the Cross and the Resurrection and the Ascension into Heaven. His followers share all three. Stephen dies like Jesus a martyr for the Way, the Truth and the Life. Like Jesus he prays for his tormentors. Like Jesus he commends his life to God. As a Christian he is upheld by the vision of Christ Who shared our earthly life and death and now reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, interceding for us and sending us the Comforter. Stephen's faithfulness is a powerful witness to another young man – Saul, who by the grace of God will become Paul the great apostle, whose testimony to Jesus will convert thousands more to Christianity and found churches all over the then known world.

April 25th

Matthew 2 vv 16-18

Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings

Two days after St Stephen's Day on 28th December we commemorate the Holy Innocents. Stephen is credited with being the first Christian martyr, but, in a way, these children are the first to die for Jesus. They have done no wrong to deserve to die. They have not chosen consciously to accept martyrdom for their love of God. They are helpless victims of Evil's resistance to the purposes of God. It isn't hard to think of such children in the world today: some living in war zones, some corrupted by conscription into militias; others living as poor orphans, street children in the ghettos of South America; yet others living in criminal gangs on the streets of our own cities; yet others born addicted to the substances their mothers have abused during pregnancy.

The traditional collect for the Holy Innocents is very hard to say (and it is replaced by a much nicer one in Common Worship) but there is something inside me which can't let go of that horrible second introductory clause.

O Almighty God, who out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast ordained strength, and madest infants to glorify thee by their deaths; Mortify and kill all vices in us, and so strengthen us by thy grace, that by the innocency of our lives, and constancy of our faith even unto death, we may glorify thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

April 26th

Matthew 21 vv 1-16

Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings

This is a much happier use of the quotation from Psalm 8. When the authorities object to the children praising Jesus on the first Palm Sunday, He tells them that they are fulfilling a prophecy. If you are wondering why it says *thou hast ordained praise here* and *thou hast ordained strength* elsewhere, the reason is that the Hebrew and Greek versions of the psalm are slightly different, but this is not a huge problem. Psalm 149 says: *Let the praises of God be in their mouth: and a two edged sword in their hand.* We fight God's battles with praise.

April 27th

Hebrews 2 vv 6-18

A little lower than the angels.

We've had two interpretations of Psalm 8 so far – one very grim, the other light hearted. Now for a profound interpretation. Psalm 8 speaks of the privilege which belongs to the human race – that God especially cares for us in the light of all the apparently much more marvellous things which He has made. It is astonishingly wonderful to be human. God loves us so much. Hebrews builds on this. God so loves us that Jesus becomes one of us. Divinity assumes humanity. Jesus fulfils what it is to be human. Jesus is in complete sympathy with us. In Him we fulfil our full human potential to be the children of God and ultimately therefore to partake of the divine nature.

April 28th

Luke 7 vv 11-17

I have been especially conscious lately of how much a mother loves a son and how terrible it is for a parent to be confronted with the loss of a child. It is quite probable that the son of the widow of Nain was his mother's only support. She must have been stricken with grief at her personal loss and anxious for a future in which there would have been no-one to take care of her in her old age. What does it mean that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life? I'm sure we'd all like Him to save our loved ones from dying or even to bring them back to us. His enemies demanded of Him, why, if He was the Son of God, didn't He step down from the Cross? But Jesus embraced death in order to overcome death. *He tasted death for every man and thereby opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers.* It would obviously be impossible and undesirable for all of us to live this earthly life for ever, but in Christ we don't have to fear death, either our own or of those whom we love. We are *not sorry as men without hope for them that sleep in Him.* A better eternity is laid up for us and, much as we miss our loved ones, we know that they are one with us within the communion of saints, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the Body and Bride of Christ, the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

O heavenly Father, who in thy Son Jesus Christ, hast given us a true faith, and a sure hope: Help us, we pray thee, to live as those who believe and trust in the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection to life everlasting, and strengthen this faith and hope in us all the days of our life: through the love of thy Son, Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

April 29th

Mark 5 vv 21-43

Talitha cumi

Every day on the TV we look at stories about people. Many of them are fictional – soap operas etc. Some are factual – the news and documentaries. If we aren't careful the news can seem as remote from reality as the soaps. These peoples' stories briefly impinge on our lives. We may not have much empathy with them. Perhaps we never think of them again. As the news circus moves on, we may never find out what happened next to them even if we want to know. There is an unreality about what we see and read every day.

And the same thing can happen to our reading of the Bible. The Bible tells stories very economically. They are mostly extremely short. They are obviously set at a time and in a place very different from our own. Sometimes we know them only too well. For what ever reason the reality of these stories doesn't have the impact on us it ought.

But this story of Jairus' daughter and the woman with the issue of blood is told very personally here in Mark. Mark even gives us the actual Aramaic words Jesus said to the girl. We can empathise with the characters. This 12 year old girl gets up and walks and wants something to eat! These are people who are human beings just as we are, even though their lives were so very different. They have to *work out their own salvation with fear and trembling* in their world as we do in ours. Their story is preserved and proclaimed in Holy Scripture as a guide to us.

April 30th

Acts 20 vv 7-12

Being fallen into a deep sleep.

Maybe we can empathise with Eutychus falling asleep during a long sermon! We may be put to the test today – the day of our Annual Meeting, though I doubt that St John's church will be so warm that it contributes to our doziness. Remember. *Many are cold, but few frozen.* Paul broke bread, surely an action with Eucharistic overtones. He preached the Word of God. The congregation at Troas received the Bread of life and the Word of life. Eutychus' resuscitation has to be appreciated in the context of the Eternal Life all Christians enjoy.

May 1st

I Samuel 3 vv 1-6

And the word of the LORD was precious in those days.

Today we are celebrating in our churches the 400th anniversary of the Authorised Version of the Bible. The Bible is the Word of God. In the time when Eli was the high priest, the Word of the LORD is described as precious – not precious because it was highly valued, but precious because it was scarce and hard to come upon. The reason the Word of the LORD was precious in those days was people had stopped listening. What do suppose is the Word of the Lord for England today? Not only do we have the Authorised Version. The Bible is available in umpteen English translations. It is on sale in most bookshops. There are no laws in this country against reading the Bible and sharing it with other people. (There are such laws in other countries). The Bible is preached every Sunday from pulpits throughout the land. Study guides and commentaries are abundant. So what is the Word of the Lord for England today? Maybe if we're clueless as to what is God's Word for us, it is because we, the people of England, are just not listening.

May 2nd

I Samuel 3 vv 7-10

Speak, LORD, for thy servant heareth.

In the time of Eli the shrine at Shiloh, the national shrine, was a national disgrace. The priests (Eli's sons) were greedy bullies. The worshippers, many of them, were not so much worshipping in spirit and in truth as indulging in orgies of self-indulgence. But Eli was faithful. And Samuel's mother was faithful. And no doubt there were other faithful people too. The building still housed the symbols of religion – the Ark of the Covenant and the lamp which burnt before it.

God could still speak in the shrine. His voice was unexpected when it came. It came to a young child rather than to the official spokesmen of religion. The boy had to learn to recognise the Voice of God and an older, wiser servant of God was needed to authenticate the word of prophecy. God can still speak through our churches (as He can speak anywhere at any time.) He speaks unexpectedly. It is necessary to learn to recognise the Word of the Lord. The prophetic vision has to be authenticated by the Church, the people of God. Do you think He is speaking to us?

May 3rd

I Samuel 3 vv 11-14

Both the ears of everyone that heareth it shall tingle.

What would you expect God's Word to be to the Church of England. Do you think He is saying *Well done, thou good and faithful servant?* Do you suppose He is saying, *There, there. Never mind. I'll make it all better for you?* Is He saying, *I quite understand. Given the difficulties you face you can't possibly be expected to convert England, to transform society, to support overseas missions or charities at home, or even to pay your quota?* Some people think that what God is saying to the Church of England today is what He said to the Church in Laodicea, *I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then, because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.* (Revelation 3 vv 15&16). Or is He saying to you and me, *Take up thy cross and follow me?* God's Word has a way of making the ears tingle!

May 4th

I Samuel 3 vv 15-18

Hide it not from me.

The boy Samuel was afraid to speak the truth. This was perfectly understandable, given what the truth was. Fortunately, for all his weakness in dealing with his sons and undisciplined members of his congregation, Eli was willing to listen. Would we be as open as Eli to hearing the Word of God from an unexpected source? How do we judge whether what claims to be the Word of the Lord really is? The simple answer to that one is that it has to be judged to see whether it conforms to what has already been accepted as revelation – the Bible and its faithful interpretation within the Church.

I suggest, however, that we have to be very open in reading the Bible. It is easy to gloss over the difficult bits, to ignore the hard bits and to explain away the most challenging bits. It's easy to confine ourselves to reading those parts of the Bible which appear to confirm our prejudices. We need to read the whole of the Bible. The Church needs to read the whole Bible and to be open to the challenges it makes to our complacent twenty first century face. I doubt very much that slow decline is what God has in mind for His Church. So what is He telling us to do about it? We had better pray for the answers.

May 5th

Jeremiah 1 vv 1-6

I am just a child.

I'm not sure just how old Jeremiah was when God called him.

Basically a male could be a na'ar (נער), a boy, lad or youth, or a zaken (זקן), an elder, senior or bearded one. It isn't clear when a youth became a senior, maybe when he could first grow a beard, maybe when he grew a long beard, or maybe the reference to beards was a faded metaphor and you became an elder at some arbitrary age or maybe when the tribe accepted you as one.

I imagine he was perhaps in his early teens. Imagine if a lad that age claimed to be some sort of prophet in our congregations. Imagine if a boy like that tried to tell us what we should do.

We might try to suppress such youthful enthusiasm because we genuinely believed he was wrong. We might suppress him for fear that, even if he is right, it will go to his head. We might suppress him because we are fearful for our own position.

In churches we say we want to foster new ideas and young talent, but we are very good at discouraging people whose enthusiasms might seem to threaten our position. Diocesan Synod often agonises as to why we don't get more young people on PCCs and synods, but how much encouragement do we give them? Do we really listen and take notice of what they say? Do our dull as ditchwater procedures discourage anyone who is eager to make a difference?

They haven't got all the answers just because they are young. Neither are they necessarily clueless. Respecting the merits of the young doesn't mean disregarding the talents of the elderly and *vice versa*.

May 6th

I Timothy 4 vv 11-16

Let no man despise thy youth.

Paul is afraid that people won't respect Timothy because he is a young man. Paul says the two important points are that Timothy has received the gifts he requires for his ministry in the laying on of hands with

prayer (what we call ordination) and that he is faithful in discharging the duties of a minister. His age ought not to come into it.

I should like to make two points about the modern church here. One is that, for at least a hundred years, there has been a tendency for elderly congregations not to treat young clergy seriously. What matters is that they preach the Word of God authentically, not how old they are.

The other is that in the last twenty or so years the Church of England seems to have joined society in general in infantilising young adults. Although clergy tend to be ordained later in life now than was the case in the past, there seems to be determined effort to protect the newly ordained from taking responsibility either for themselves or for their parishes. I cannot help but think that this frustrates their own personal development and limits their usefulness in the work to which God has called them.

May 7th

Jeremiah 1 vv 7-10

I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the LORD.

The point about Jeremiah is not how old he is. The point about Jeremiah is that he is commissioned by God to be a prophet. A prophet proclaims the Word of God. And the Word of God effects what it proclaims. So the lad Jeremiah will be responsible for the fall and rise of kingdoms. He is proclaiming God's Word and it is by the Word of God that everything happens.

May 8th

John 1 vv 1-14

And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

When we think about children in the Bible, surely above all we think of the baby Jesus. Today's reading is the traditional Christmas Gospel. The Christmas story is the Christian story. God communicates Himself to us in Jesus. He effects the Redemption of the entire created order in Him.

Yea Lord, we greet thee,
Born this happy morning,
Jesus to thee be glory given,
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing,

May 9th

I Samuel 16 vv 1-13

I have provided me a king.

The Christmas story is the subject of the East window at St John's Church, Halling. The window above the font depicts children in the Bible. It is placed there because it has been the custom in the Church of England to baptise babies for many centuries. We have wanted to include our parishioners within the Church from the very beginning of their lives and that I still believe is right. We cannot, however, disregard the criticisms of those who say that it is scandalous that we have baptised so many people who have grown up to show little or no interest in religion in later life. I'm not sure how you get round that!

We are baptised in Christ, the Word of God made flesh. Our lives ought to reflect and proclaim Him. These characters in the Bible more or less live out their own lives, work out their own salvation, in the context of God's revelation of Himself as we have it recorded in the pages of Scripture.

David is another boy from Bethlehem. In many ways, he will prefigure Christ, the anointed one, the king, the one who will prepare for the building and the worship of the temple. We meet him first while he is still a young boy in his father's house.

May 10th

I Samuel 16 vv 1-13

There remaineth yet the youngest.

Same old story. The boy is overlooked. How do we judge people? I suppose it depends on what we want them for. Eliab apparently looked like a king. Failing him, there were his brothers. But none of them suited. God knew the person He wanted and that person was the youngest, so junior he hadn't even been invited to the feast. So how do we recognise the people God is calling? I do mean calling to ordained ministry, but not only that. How do we know whom God would choose to be on the PCC or to be a churchwarden or to arrange the tea rota? Or don't we think God is interested in those things? We can look for the qualities we think would make good vicar, churchwarden, gardener or administrator, but we mustn't be surprised if God surprises us.

May 11th

I Samuel 16 vv 14-23

David took an harp and played with his hand.

David was young, but he was far from without talent. He was good-looking. He was a skilled shepherd and brave in defending his flock from wild animals. He would shortly prove himself a warrior. He was a singer and musician. It makes you sick!

We probably can think of teenagers like David, young people who seem to have everything. It is easy to be envious both of their talents and of their youth. That might be a reason why we hold them back. It is also true, however, that such young men can too easily grow arrogant and they do need direction.

Teenagers and even children can do a lot more than we are prepared to let them do in this risk averse society we live in. Society may be the poorer for quenching the spirit which is in them and their frustration at being held back may lead to apathy or rebellion. My sister used to child mind some very lively, smart, but amoral boys. She thought they might well become master criminals. In fact they joined the police. Fortunately, they were given a moral framework and their talents were directed and used to good purpose.

May 12th

I Samuel 17 vv 1-11

I defy the armies of Israel this day.

It is the arrogance of Goliath which strikes you. He is bigger than everyone else. He is stronger than everyone else. He is better armed than everyone else because nobody else could lift the weapons he is using. It's a pity, for his sake, that he isn't smarter than everyone else. But he can't see how he can be beaten and neither can anyone else till David comes on the scene.

We don't see things straight. We don't see things as they really are. We are impressed by wealth and power, by good looks and celebrity status, by skill and human talents. We don't really believe that the *meek will inherit the earth*. But the Bible consistently teaches the opposite of what we believe. The boy David is chosen in preference to his more impressive elder brothers and now he will defeat Goliath.

May 13th

I Samuel 17 vv 12-19

Run to the camp.

What happened to the notion of children running errands? We all used to do it. Take messages. Get shopping for our mothers. Take our younger brothers and sisters to school. When did it suddenly become too dangerous to let children out on their own? When did it become exploitation to expect them to help out with the household chores?

It isn't more dangerous today than it used to be. Admittedly there's more traffic about, but it's better controlled. There are half the number of fatal road accidents on the roads today than there were between the wars, despite there being so much more traffic now. I doubt if there are really more paedophiles than there used to be. Our parents' generation as children faced the dangers of the blackout and the Blitz, but they weren't taken everywhere by anxious parents or kept in for fear of accidents or worse. Young David was sent to a battlefield.

A couple of years ago, there was a walk from all over the Diocese to the cathedral and we were told that even adults had to register for *health and safety* reasons! People have been walking to Rochester Cathedral for 1500 years and most of those times were very much dangerous than C21. When did we lose our nerve? I suspect it disappeared with our faith.

May 14th

I Samuel 17 vv 20-29

What have I done now?

David was excited to be on the battlefield. His older brothers were cross with him and suggested that he had only come because he wanted to see the battle. A bit like Mark's account of the raising of Jairus' daughter, it is not difficult to empathise with this story. The humanity of the characters shines through. Think of the twelve year old boys who served as midshipmen in Nelson's Navy or the lads who lied about their age so that they could fight in World War I. I certainly don't want to see boys fighting in battle. I don't want anyone to have to fight. We follow the Prince of Peace. But I do think we should allow our children to grow up. They have so much potential and they should not be prevented from fulfilling it.

May 15th

I Samuel 17 vv 30-37

Thou art but a youth.

The natural thing would be to assume that David didn't have a chance against Goliath. But he had two things going for him. In the context of the Bible, the point is that he is on the LORD's side. Goliath has defied not only the army, but the God of Israel. David has faith that he is fighting for God and that the LORD will see to it that he wins.

But it is also clear from the Bible that David is an experienced fighter. If not against human beings, he has had to fight various wild animals to protect the flock. He is also a lot smarter than Goliath. Of course Goliath would beat him in a sword fight or a wrestling match. So David uses a sling.

David has faith. God uses David to defeat the Philistines, but this does not mean that David doesn't have to use human skills, experience and brainpower. Dare I suggest that it is because he has faith that he uses his human talents rightly and to such good effect?

May 16th

I Samuel 17 vv 38-51

The battle is the LORD's.

We are often reminded that Jesus chose what would look to us like an odd selection of men to be apostles – fishermen, a tax-collector, a potential revolutionary, etc. The obvious choices would surely have been religious people like the Pharisees and Sadducees, people who knew their Bibles, observed the Law obsessively and were already respected leaders of the nation with political influence where it mattered and financial resources to draw on. Of the twelve he did choose, none of them really shone until after the Crucifixion and Resurrection. One was a traitor. The remaining eleven seemed to understand very little of what Jesus said and did and ran away when He most needed their support. I have a horrible feeling that our contemporary Church of England might be seduced into choosing Pharisees and Sadducees as successors in the apostolic ministry as it looks to the world of business for models of good management practice. Yet David and Goliath is just one of many stories throughout the Bible illustrating the theme that God uses unexpected people to accomplish His purposes.

May 17th

I Samuel 17 vv 52-58

Enquire thou whose son the stripling is.

I like that word *stripling*. It seems such an apt word for a boy on the cusp of manhood. Saul seems to have forgotten Jesse's son. He does after all have these terrible mood swings and I expect David was just one of many boys about the court. David had seemed too insignificant even to remember. There is a saying that a certain man loved the human race; it was people he couldn't stand. We can claim to be concerned about the "young people" en masse but fail to take the trouble to know them and appreciate them as individuals. We can do the same with the "elderly" or "ethnic minorities" or "women". All these categories are made up of individuals, people in their own right, who are entitled to our respect. If we are Christians, we have a genuine interest in and concern for individuals. We don't just lump them together and make assumptions about them because they are young or old or female or male or belong to a particular ethnicity. All these things may give us clues about people, but they don't define them.

May 18th

I Samuel 18 vv 1-4

The soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David.

Teenagers are very good at friendship. They are gregarious and meet in groups in the parks and on the street. They keep in touch with another by texting and via social network sites. They'll walk miles to meet up even though they tell their parents it's too far to walk to the school bus stop. Teenage friendships can be hugely loyal and may turn out to be lifelong as David's was with Jonathan. It's something we perhaps lose as we get older. We have neither the time nor the energy that teenagers enjoy. We get caught up in our work and our family responsibilities. But friends do remain important and it is sad if we let friendships lapse because we can't be bothered.

In a traditional village or street, people knew one another, spoke when they met in the street, knew one another's business, cared for one another, quarrelled with one another, gave or withheld their approval. We lost that with everybody going out to work or school in different places and travelling by car. Do mobile phones and the internet give us back something of the community which industrialisation took away?

May 19th

I Samuel 20 vv 35-42

But the lad knew not anything.

There came a time when Saul was so jealous of David that he determined to kill him. Jonathan wouldn't believe it and arranged to sound out his father. The way he would let David know was that David would hide in a field and Jonathan would come out for a bit of target practice. He would take a boy to pick up his arrows and, depending on where Jonathan told the boy to look for the fallen arrows, David would know whether Saul was after his blood.

Of course, Jonathan had to accept that Saul wanted to kill David and he gave the signal which meant that David should quietly slip away. But they couldn't bear to part without meeting. So the boy was dismissed.

So we have the king's son and the king's anointed successor plotting against the king. I wonder how the lad felt about it? Where did his loyalties lie. It wasn't important for his own safety that he *knew not anything*.

May 20th

II Kings 4 vv 8-17

Verily she hath no son, and her husband is old.

Children are a joy. Admittedly sometimes they can be very draining, but they are a joy. Their games, their enthusiasms, their affection all bring a lot of pleasure to adults. It means a great deal to parents to know that they have little people like themselves growing up to continue the family line and to inherit what they, the parents, have in store for them. New mothers have such love for their new born babies, even (usually) when the joy is sometimes spoiled by post natal depression. The Bible celebrates children and the joy they bring. The other side of that is that people who cannot have children may feel that there is something very important missing in their lives. I'm of the school of thought which assumes that God knows what He is doing and that, if we do not have children, either because we are not in a relationship or because our bodies, despite medical intervention, are infertile, then we are meant to remain childless and our lives are fulfilled without them. Nevertheless it is good to want children and this Shunammite woman was very blessed.

May 21st

II Kings 4 vv 18

Did I desire a son of my lord?

They say that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. The Shunammite woman seems to disagree. I think, however, that *they* are generally right. It is better to have had someone for a short time than never to have had them at all. Obviously a stillbirth or a birth very soon after death might be different, but, normally the pain of grief at losing someone is outweighed by the joy of loving them albeit for a short while.

I suppose we can imagine a world where everybody lives to a ripe old age in decent health and then passes away painlessly and peacefully, but it is not the world we live in. If we didn't know pain and grief and hardship, our characters could never develop as they do. I'm back to trusting God that He knows what He is doing in making a world where there is so much pain.

You can imagine that little boy and how happy he was to run out to the field where his elderly father was working with the reapers. And then tragedy struck. Sunstroke? Joy was turned to sorrow. These parents had their prayers answered with a miracle. Spare a prayer for those who don't.

May 22nd

II Kings 5 vv 1-7

Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria.

I love this story. What a wonderful little girl Naaman's wife's made must have been. She had been taken prisoner when the Syrians (Arameans) raided Israel and forced to become a maid in the Syrian commander's own house. I like to think she was well-treated there. Even so, she would surely have resented being taken from her home and family. Maybe they had been killed in the battle. Nevertheless this little girl cared that her mistress' husband was a leper and naïvely suggested the remedy. And what a kafuffle that caused among all the important people in the royal palace!

May 23rd

II Kings 5 vv 8-14

He shall know that there is a prophet in Israel.

The contrasts in this story are between the rich and powerful, the important people, who expect to be deferred to and waited on, and the simple humble people of faith. Hundreds of years after this, Jesus will point out that there were many lepers in Israel, but it was only Naaman the Syrian who was miraculously healed. Miracles are not the prerogative of the rich and powerful. Neither, more surprisingly perhaps are miracles rewards we can expect for our faithfulness, our goodness or any other virtue we might claim or that other people might claim for us. Miracles are acts of God's grace. They are signs. God gives us these signs as a sign of His nature, His love. If we see the signs, we continue in the faith whether or not our troubles are miraculously spirited away.

Tribulation worketh patience; And patience experience; and experience hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is spread abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. (Romans 5 vv 3-5).

May 24th

II Kings 5 vv 15&16

Take a blessing of thy servant.

The wealthy general seems to want to pay Elisha for what he has graciously received from God. Grace by definition is free. To offer to pay for a gift might be construed as an insult. In the New Testament (Acts 8) Simon Magus gets into serious trouble for thinking he can buy the power of God. In fact the attempt to buy or sell spiritual things has been known as simony ever since and is regarded as a serious sin. So what about donations people may make as a thank offering for answered prayer? It is important to make the distinction between offering thanks to God for what He has graciously done and trying to buy His favour. He loves you as you are. He hears your prayers for Jesus sake. You can't earn or buy His favour and you don't have to. But it is right to offer freely back to Him everything that He has given you. It is good to show your thankfulness with a gift.

But God commendeth his love to us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5 v8).

May 25th

II Kings 5 vv 17-19

The LORD pardon thy servant in this thing.

Naaman is half convinced that the LORD is God. He wants to take some Israelite soil home with him so that he can worship the God of Israel in Syria. Two mules are to be punished for his naivety. God can be worshipped anywhere! However, Naaman wants to have his cake as well as to eat it. He wants to worship the God Whose grace has cured his leprosy, but he is not prepared to abandon the cult of Rimmon, because if he did so he would have to give up his position as the King of Syria's right hand man. Wealth and power or humble faith? His maidservant had humble faith and without her faith this story would never have been told and I doubt that any of us would have heard of Naaman. So the answer appears obvious. Humble faith is much more than worldly position.

So why do so many Christians "bow down in the temple of Rimmon", compromise their faith in order to maintain their position in the world? Yet, if Christians steadfastly refused to make the necessary compromises in order to be the equivalent of the King of Syria's right hand man, would that mean that we could only have irreligious people occupying positions of power and influence, positions such as commander in chief of the army or prime minister? There's a conundrum for you! Can a good man or woman exercise power without being corrupted?

May 26th

II Kings 5 vv 20-27

I will run after him, and take somewhat of him.

Gehazi wants some of the action. He wants a bit of wealth and power. He seems to think that Elisha should have capitalised on the opportunity. By running after Naaman, Gehazi compromised the lesson which Elisha had been trying to teach about austerity and grace. Elisha's own servant failed to understand. Strait is the gate and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. (Matthew 7 v14).

May 27th

II Kings 8-16

Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. Elisha's new servant is a young man, a lad like Jeremiah. He is a na'ar (נער). This young man thinks the situation is desperate. The Syrian army is surrounding the town where they are. There is no hope an escape. This is where the wisdom of the older man, the prophet of God is needed. *Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them.* Those of us who are mature ought to be giving confidence to the young. We have experienced God in our lives. We know the Bible stories. We know something of the life of God's Church. We know from personal experience the effectiveness of prayer. S, from our maturity, we ought to be able to give support and guidance to the young.

We shan't be able to, however, if we are like those Christians we considered earlier in the quarter who have never grown up!

May 28th

I Kings 17 vv 8-16

That we may eat it, and die.

When Jesus remarked that, of all the lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha, only Naaman the Syrian was healed, He also pointed out that, of all the widows in that time of famine under King Ahab, Elijah was sent only to this woman of Zarephath (New Testament Sarepta), which isn't even in Israel. God bestows His grace upon whom He will and it is no use claiming any special status as a faithful Christian. God certainly hears our prayers and He answers them in accordance with what He knows is right rather than in accordance with what we think is right. We wouldn't expect to change His mind. Why would we when He knows infinitely more than we do and is infinitely more loving? There are plenty of places in the world today where women don't know where their children's next meal is coming from. The crops may have failed because of natural disaster such as drought. There may be more people than the land can well support. The wealth of the nation might be in the hands of a wealthy corrupt minority. Food production and distribution may have been disrupted by war. We can and should pray about these situations and we might be part of the answer to our own prayers if we support charities and political reform.

May 29th

I Kings 17 vv 17-24

Art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance?

It must have been a bitter blow. Having miraculously survived the famine, the boy sickened and died. Why should such a thing happen to anyone? The answer the widow thinks of is that she must have sinned and the presence of the prophet has reminded God that she deserves punishment.

We want to know why things happen? It is because human beings ask questions that we find answers. We ask questions in the expectation that there are answers. So we progress. We ask why people get lung cancer. We discover that one of the most common causes is smoking tobacco. Knowing this fact, we can decide not to smoke and be much less likely, therefore, to contract lung cancer. There are answers because the universe we inhabit is the creation of a rational Mind analogous to our own minds. God is infinitely greater than we are, infinitely more rational, but human reason is the same thing (albeit infinitely more feeble) as divine reason. We can discover the Laws of Nature (or Science) because they are the Laws of God and we are made in the image of God. We instinctively look for explanations because we know deep down inside us that the world must ultimately make sense.

The God Who called into being laws like gravity is also the God Who issues the moral Law, the laws of Justice, mercy and love. We instinctively expect the universe to make moral sense, just as it makes scientific sense. It seems fitting to us that the wicked should suffer and the good prosper. So, like the widow of Zarephath, we expect to find a link between sin and suffering.

There is such a link. Ultimately the universe is just even more surely than that the motions of the planets are determined by gravity. But the moral law is much less straightforward than the scientific law. You can predict how an apple will fall to the earth. (The gravitational force is proportional to the product of the two masses divided by the square of the distance between them.) It is much less easy to relate particular sin to particular suffering. You cannot assume that people are getting what they deserve, although ultimately they will except by grace.

May 30th

II Kings 11 vv 1-3

And he was hid with her in the house.

These were chaotic times. Israel was divided into northern (capital Samaria) and southern (capital Jerusalem) kingdoms. Sometimes they were allies. Sometimes they fought. There was war on and off with Syria (Aram) and all sorts of alliances made and broken. There was an alternation between worshipping the LORD and worshipping Baal, which always led to disaster. Jehu had been appointed king of Israel (the north) by Elisha the prophet instructed by God. He had allied himself with one of the Syrian generals (Hazeael) and they had overthrown the rulers of Syria, Israel and Judah (the southern kingdom). Jehu had been ruthless in massacring the worshippers of Baal. Jehu had the King of Judah (Ahaziah) killed because he was a Baal worshipper and supported the house of Ahab kings of the northern kingdom. Ahaziah's mother, Queen Athaliah then murdered all the royal princes except for the very young Joash who was protected by his aunt. The children were pawns in the political game and suffered for it.

May 31st

II Kings 11 vv 4-16

God save the king.

When the boy Joash was seven(!) the priest Jehoiada mounted a coup and set him on the throne. He was the rightful heir to his father Ahaziah. Of course he wasn't old enough to rule himself, but the intention was that the priest Jehoiada should rule through him and restore the worship of the LORD in place of the worship of Baal. This he did with great ruthlessness. The fact that they used the boy like this demonstrates what a powerful symbol kingship is. Joash had never sought this position, but it was his because of who his father was. He had an unsought public duty and a rôle which might not have been in his own best interests.

June 1st

II Kings 11 vv 17-21

And Jehoiada made a covenant between the LORD and the king and the people.

Using the boy king as a figurehead Jehoiada re-establishes the worship of the LORD as the national religion. We are not told what Joash thought about it, although he was brought up under Jehoiada's tutelage.

June 2nd

II Kings 12 vv 1-3

But the high places were not taken away.

The fact that Joash (Jehoash) reigned forty years is a sign that he was a good king, blessed by the LORD. It is also perhaps unsurprising as he came to the throne at the age of 7. Under Jehoiada the priest, he extirpated Baal worship and established the religion of the LORD in Jerusalem. When it says that the people still sacrificed in the high places, it is referring to unofficial places of worship, which did not come under the control of the Jerusalem priesthood. Popular folk religion worshipped gods other than the LORD or worshipped the LORD improperly or combined worship of the LORD with worship of other gods (syncretism).

People are naturally religious. It is actually exceptional to be an atheist and even atheists seem to find it necessary to employ the trappings of religion at significant moments in their lives. Hence we have humanist funerals, civil marriages with as much ceremony as church weddings, and secular naming ceremonies for babies.

The problem for the Church is not that people don't want religion. The problem is that they want a religion which confirms them in their own preferred life style rather than challenging them to live the way God wants them to live. Popular religion all too easily tries to satisfy the personal spirituality of its devotees. Popular religion all too easily affirms people's ungodly lives: their dubious business practices, their indifference to the poor, their infidelities, their political ambitions, etc.. Our task is to demonstrate to people that the Way of God manifest in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the only authentic way to live.

June 3rd

II Kings 12 vv 4-16

Why repair ye not the breaches in the house?

The Temple was in a poor state of repair and people were giving money to repair it. But the priests weren't getting on with the job. Either they just couldn't be bothered or they were siphoning off the funds for other purposes. How often in the modern world do projects get delayed in bureaucracy, red tape and even fraud? Why do we never learn?

June 4th

II Kings 12 vv 17-21

And his servants arose, and made a conspiracy.

Joash' reign came to an unhappy end. He had to use the Temple treasures to buy off the Syrian army. He lost his authority and his courtiers conspired against him.

June 5th

II Chronicles 24 vv 15-22

Thus Joash the king remembered not the kindness which Jehoiada his father had done unto him.

The Books of Chronicles complement the Books of Samuel and Kings in telling the story of the history of Israel from slightly different points of view. The basic theme of both histories is the same – that when you walk with the LORD things work out right and that disaster follows any deviation from the paths of righteousness. Chronicles, however, concentrates on the southern kingdom and has a great deal more to say about worship.

Here Chronicles explains what goes wrong for Joash. Jehoiada had brought him up to fear the LORD and had worked with him to establish true religion in Judah, the southern kingdom. When Jehoiada died, however, the nobles of Judah persuaded him to a change of policy, to permit other religions. Maybe they wanted to keep on good terms with other nations which worshipped other gods. Maybe the people were restive because they had been forced to give up the “folk religion” they found so comforting in favour of a strict obedience to the Law of self-sacrificial love. Maybe the nobles themselves were not convinced followers of the LORD, at least not in the uncompromising manner demanded by priests such as Jehoiada.

Anyway the outcome is that standards are allowed to slip badly and God inspires Jehoiada's son Zechariah to prophecy against them. They stone him to death. And this is why Joash's kingdom falls. You can't run a state based on false religion and injustice.

Jesus seems to be referring to this incident in Matthew 23 v35, when he warns that the people of His own day are in danger of being guilty for the deaths of all the martyrs from Abel onwards when they crucify Him.

June 6th

II Chronicles 24 vv 23-27

The army of the Syrians came with a very small company of men.

How does all this apply to the contemporary United Kingdom? Our constitution, insofar as we have one, assumes much the same model of the nation as the Old Testament. The people are assumed to belong to the national religion. The monarch is the servant of God, answerable to Him for her actions and entitled to expect the loyalty and obedience of her subjects. In the past, we have to admit with shame, the British state has attempted to enforce religious conformity by persecuting non-conformist protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, atheists, etc.. We do not believe nowadays that we can or ought to try to enforce conformity in this way. We rightly accept that people of other Christian denominations, people of other religions and people of no religion have as much right as Anglicans to be British citizens and to share in all the rights and responsibilities this entails. We are indeed encouraged to celebrate diversity. We are multicultural whether we like it or not. Increasingly, the state sees itself as secular, not deriving its values from any religious tradition. But is this sustainable? Can a government exercise authority without an ethical foundation? And where do ethics come from if not from God? It is my belief that individuals and nations cannot flourish unless they conform to the Way of God made manifest in Jesus Christ. It is also my belief that it is wrong and counterproductive to coerce and threaten people in order to make them act like Christians. So we persuade people, rather than bully them. But what do we do about the people we can't persuade, especially if they are the ones running the country?

June 7th

II Kings 22 vv 1&2

And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD.

By and large, the Bible story is one of failure. Strait is the gate and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. (Matthew 7 v14).

The history of Israel as told is one of a people who rebel against God time after time and suffer the consequences. It is the tale of the human race. All too often it is the tale of the Christian Church. Very few kings are commended in the Bible. Josiah was one of the few and he was only eight when he came to the throne!

June 8th

II Kings 22 vv 3-7

Repair the breaches of the house.

It sometimes seems like the Jerusalem Temple always needed expensive repairs. Our church buildings may seem the same! The Temple stood for the dwelling place of God. Its worship was the focus of the nation's worship and therefore of the nation's life. At its best, the Temple declared the glory of God and inspired men and women *to offer themselves, their souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice*. Inspired by the worship of the Temple, good people would live out the whole of their lives in peace, honesty and generosity to other people. Of course it wasn't only the building which often needed repair. Sometimes the people worshipped false gods. Sometimes they thought it was sufficient to participate in the ritual and then went home to live selfish, dishonest and greedy lives.

Jesus replaces the Temple. He truly is *God with us*. And we beheld his glory, the glory as the only-begotten of the Father. He fulfils all the sacrifices. He is the only priest we need to mediate between us and God. His life and teaching epitomise and fulfil God's perfect Law of Love. It follows that we who worship in Christ have even less excuse than those who worshipped in the Temple if we fail to enter in at the strait gate and walk in the narrow way which leads to life, the way of peace, honesty and generosity.

June 9th

II Kings 22 vv 8-14

I have found the book of the law.

The story is that the Israelites have so far forgotten the Law of God that they don't even have a copy to hand. Such a book comes to light when the temple is being repaired. It is often thought that the book Hilkiyah found was our Book of Deuteronomy or something like it. When they read it, King Josiah was appalled. He realised just how far short they had fallen from God's standards and what their just punishment would be. We might think of Jesus on the Cross and, when we do, we ought to be equally appalled. The Summary of the Law is love. What loves means is what Jesus does for us on the cross. The cross is our standard. It demonstrates how far short we fall, just as it is also the means of our redemption – to be received with awe, not taken for granted.

June 10th

II Kings 22 vv 15-20

Thine eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place.

Those who think that women have no place in proclaiming the word might notice the biblical precedent of Huldah. Those who think that women and men have the same rôle in society might ask themselves why people like Huldah are the exception rather than the rule. Is it because men have kept women down for generations, as the feminists claim? Or is it that men and women are generally different and generally have complementary rôles to play in society?

Josiah's personal repentance and his efforts to reform the nation will bring a respite. The problem is, however, that Judah's rebellion against God runs very deep. The reforms will not survive the death of Josiah. The people will return to apostasy. That is they will worship other gods and compromise the worship of the LORD. Consequently, they will abandon the moral law and go back to dishonest business practices and oppressing the poor. Selfishness is destructive of self. Selfishness is fallen human nature. Every generation needs to repent, to receive forgiveness and to be born again in Christ.

June 11th

II Kings 23 vv 1-3

And all the people stood to the covenant.

In 597AD St Augustine landed near Ramsgate and preached the Gospel to the King of Kent and to a large assembly. King Ethelbert was converted and so were many of his subjects. There was a mass Baptism in the River Stour on Christmas Day. So how sincere were the "converts"? Had they made a personal commitment to Christ or were they following the fashion and trying to retain the king's favour? For many of them both may have been true. We human beings look to other people for an example. We follow leaders we respect. We neither mindlessly follow the herd nor do we take every important decision as isolated individuals. We do make up our own minds but we respond to leadership and we are heavily influenced by what everybody else is doing. Heads of families and leaders of communities do have a right and a duty to offer moral leadership. Christian parents ought to bring up their children within the community of faith rather than expect them to make their own unsupported decision in later life.

June 12th (Pentecost / Whitsun)

Acts 2 vv 1-21

Your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

The Day of Pentecost is the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Human sin alienates the world from God. Rebelling against God, we cut ourselves off from the Holy Spirit Who is the Lord and giver of life.

The wages of sin is death. But the Death of Jesus sets us free from sin.

The Death of Jesus sets us free to receive the Holy Spirit, by Whom we call God Father and Jesus Lord. Through the Holy Spirit we are born again. We are washed in the Blood of the Lamb. We are arrayed in white robes as the Bride of Christ in an eternal consummation. We are made members of the Body of Christ, each with our own specific gifts relevant to our particular vocation. We yield the fruits of the Spirit.

We are living stones in the Temple of God, a royal priesthood offering an everlasting sacrifice of worship. The outpouring of the Spirit puzzles the crowds. Some are alienated. Some are curious. Some are open. Peter explains that this outpouring is the eternal purpose of God, already revealed hundreds of years previously by the prophet Joel. *I will pour out of my Spirit on all flesh.* And this is for men and women and people of all ages, rich and poor alike, people of every race and nation. God has done it all. All that He asks of us is faith. *Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*

June 13th

Acts 16 vv 16-18

Which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying.

This poor girl. How ever we understand what was wrong with her so that she should be considered to be demon possessed, it was very wrong of her masters to exploit her condition and the superstitious gullibility of the people who believed in her soothsaying. In C19 England, they sent young boys up chimneys and forced them to work in mines and factories. Young girls have been and are offered up for prostitution. There are places in the world today where children are forced to labour long hours in harsh conditions for little return. People send out their children to beg and have been known to mutilate them so that they earn more. Paul set this girl free and got into serious trouble for it. We can not only pray about exploited children. We can pay attention to how the cheap goods on sale in our shops are made. Brave campaigners can fight child exploitation, even if it is at cost to themselves.

June 14th

Acts 16 vv 19-24

These men, being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city.

Outside interference from another culture. If there are no absolute moral principles and values are culturally relative, who are we to tell other people they are wrong? Sure, in Britain, we believe in children's right to an education and to freedom from having to earn their own living, from physical violence and sexual exploitation, but who are we to impose our values in other countries? We don't like it when "foreigners" (e.g. the European Court of Human Rights) tell us what they think is wrong with our customs anymore than the people of Philippi liked these Jews judging them. Actually, of course, there are absolute moral principles. They are the decrees of God, manifestations of His eternal Law of Love. We do have a duty to spread the Word, to persuade and sometimes even to coerce so that universal principles like justice and mercy are applied in every nation under heaven. We certainly have to be humble, acknowledging that we fail to live up to these standards, admitting that we can be wrong, distinguishing between the merely cultural (e.g. habits of dress or marriage customs) and the universals such as justice and mutual respect, but, insofar as we know the Truth which sets us free, we have an absolute duty to proclaim that Truth.

June 15th

Acts 16 vv 25-27

Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises to God.

There is a cost in doing the right thing. Jesus was the best man Who ever lived. He came with a message of peace. And humanity crucified Him. He warned us to expect to be treated in the same way that He was treated. He was rejected. He died in agony. He rose from the dead and the Spirit came and His Kingdom grew and spread throughout the world. This is what we can expect if we follow Him. We wonder why the Church seems to be dying in our country. Is it because we would rather compromise with evil than confront it? Is it because we are not prepared to put ourselves to any trouble to do the right thing? If we stood up for what is right quite probably we would have to suffer for it but the ultimate result would be our own resurrection and the unleashing of God's Holy Spirit in the world with all His transformative power. Isn't that more likely to work than accommodating ourselves to an increasingly secular society?

June 16th

Acts 16 vv 28-32

Believe on the Lord Jesus and thou shalt be saved and thy house.

Paul and Silas had got themselves into a fix by helping the girl. They had stood up for what was right and suffered for it. In their affliction, they had prayed and praised God. When they could have escaped (which might well have led to the execution of their gaoler) they had remained in the prison. The result of all this was an unlooked for blessing. The Philippian gaoler became a Christian. So the Gospel is spread when we are prepared to suffer for the truth.

June 17th

Acts 16 vv 33&34

He set meat before them.

Their gaoler now shows them kindness. He has learned from the example of Paul and Silas what it means to be a Christian. Jesus speaks of the Kingdom growing like a seed. We don't know how it happens, but it does. What we have to do is to be faithful. If we are faithful we are partners in the inexorable growth of God's Kingdom. If we are not faithful, God's purposes are not thwarted, but we have no part in them. Like Paul and Silas, we have to be prepared to make ourselves vulnerable, to trust in God rather than our own resources, if we are to work with Him in building His Kingdom.

June 18th

Acts 16 vv 35-40

Let them come themselves and fetch us out.

There is nothing wrong with taking advantage of the Law even in corrupt societies. Deep down inside, I am sure, human beings do know the difference between right and wrong. The Laws of many states at least on paper defend the weak, protect freedoms, punish dishonesty, violence and corruption. There are not many regimes which claim to be above the Law. The Law may be ignored by corrupt politicians, officials and policemen. The Law may not be as perfect as it ought to be. But you can often use the courts of a country to limit the worst excesses of the state as in Zimbabwe. Publicity in the international community can shame a corrupt government into acting justly. International courts have a rôle in enforcing universally recognised human rights. Law is a force for good which should always be used where it can be.

They said, Where is thy wife? He said I will return.

This is one of the key passages in the Hebrew Scriptures and fundamental to the Jewish religion. God appears to Abraham and promises that, in the face of all probabilities, he will have a son. This child of the promise will be the father of Israel.

At His Ascension, Jesus told His disciples to tell the whole world about Him and to make disciples of all nations. This worldwide proclamation of the Good News is the ultimate fulfilment of the promise to Abraham. It is not merely that in Old Testament times the children of Israel would possess the Promised Land, marvellous as that promise is; the promise is that all of humanity might share in the promise of Heaven, through faith in Jesus Christ.

This promise takes some grasping and the early Christians struggled to make sense of what God had done, as we still do. The infinity of God is beyond our comprehension! But we can apprehend sufficient of His Truth to believe in Him!

We know that there is only one God. We know that the Father is God, the Son God and the Holy Ghost God. If Jesus were not God, He could not fully disclose God to us. If He were not fully human, He could not redeem our humanity. If the Holy Spirit were not God, He could not be God in us. If we could not recognise three persons of the Godhead, we could not make sense of Jesus praying to the Father or promising to send the Holy Spirit when He is ascended to the Father. Yet there can only be one God. The Church tentatively approaches an understanding of this mystery in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity set forth in our creeds.

If the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is sound doctrine, it must have two characteristics. The Trinity (if Trinity is the nature of God) must be eternal, not just a guise God assumes at the point in history at which the Word is made flesh. It must also be in accordance with what God has already revealed of Himself – that is the Scriptures.

So the early Church looked to the Old Testament for hints and signs that the one God is eternally three persons. This passage about the birth of Isaac was considered to offer such a pointer because, if you read it carefully, it seems that there are three persons representing the LORD, Who speaks in the plural at v9 and the singular in v10. Make of this what you will. Whether it helps you or not depends rather on how you understand Scripture.

June 20th

Genesis 37 vv 1&2

Joseph brought unto his father their ill report.

What did you tell your children when they said they were being bullied at school? Jesus said, *Turn the other cheek*. Would you have thought that was realistic? Generally speaking, people do back off if you don't retaliate. Turning the other cheek often works. But not always. Sometimes you get slapped on that cheek too. Then what?

Or did you tell your children to stand up to the bullies and fight back? That sometimes works too, but sometimes it leads to more fights. Would your child be no better than the bully if he overcame by force?

Did you tell him to tell the teacher? That's the right answer, but nobody likes a grass and he might get into even more trouble with the other children. Is part of growing up learning how to look after yourself and not depend on adults?

What did you do if the school didn't seem to take your child's being bullied very seriously?

Or did you go round the bullies house and try to reason with him or his parents? Would that make it better or worse?

I don't know the answers and wonder what I would do if I were a parent in these circumstances.

June 21st

Genesis 37 vv 3&4

Children have a terrific sense of fair play. They are very quick to tell you *That's not fair*. They are very sensitive to any perceived favouritism. This is a reason for believing that we are born with an innate sense of right and wrong. Justice is a universal abstract principle which we can grasp as soon as we become conscious. Parents rely on their children being able to understand when they explain that it is only fair that your little brother gets a turn or you shouldn't eat all the biscuits. Most parents do try to treat all their children fairly but it must be much harder for, say, a teacher with a class of thirty, some of whom are much more appealing than others.

June 22nd

Genesis 37 vv 5-11

His father rebuked him.

On the other hand, if I had been Joseph's father, I might have found it hard to like him! I suppose being the actual parents and having had them since babies makes a difference, but some children are much less likable than others. They say that a mother's love is unconditional. Mothers are supposed to love their children how ever they turn out. I'm not sure that that is universally true. Otherwise there wouldn't be cases of child neglect or mothers who allow their "partners" to abuse their children because they themselves are afraid of losing their "partner's" love. Only God's love is truly unconditional. Only God loves us no matter what. But I guess a mother's life for a child comes as close to unconditional love as human beings can manage. They say a father's love is more conditional and more likely to be withheld if the child lets the family down. Certainly fathers are more likely to desert their families than mothers. Married couples promise unconditional love. That's what the marriage vows say. But the divorce rate demonstrates either that many never really meant what they promised (or understood it?) or that they were not strong enough to hold fast when the time came. The hard saying is that a person who has ruined his or her own life by his or here own wicked or stupid manner of living can probably only be redeemed by unconditional love. God loves us unconditionally, but we may not know that. He redeems us at the cost of the Cross and still many sinners refuse His redemption. The unconditional love of a mother, father, husband or wife might redeem a sinner, but potentially at great cost – the risk of being abused, stolen from, let down, beaten up – and even then the person might be too far gone for redemption. How far ought we be prepared to sacrifice ourselves for those who don't deserve our love?

June 23rd

Genesis 37 vv 12-17

I seek my brethren.

Joseph has to help out in the economy of the family. Even he's got to go and meet his brothers. The family remains the unit of mutual support, but it can go bitterly wrong as it does here. Who then picks up the pieces? Society? The State? Or have we moved on from a family centred economy with the State acting as Nanny to us all?

June 24th

Genesis 37 vv 18-20

Behold, this dreamer cometh.

This is a dysfunctional family! If in modern Britain we heard of a situation in which a group of young men were plotting to kill their younger brother, we would want to know why Social Services or the police or some official body didn't do something. And it does happen in modern Britain. One example would be the so called honour killings in which a young adult is murdered for refusing to take part in an arranged marriage. Terrible things happen within families and some people think that the organs of the state should keep a much closer eye on everybody's home life to make sure that such things don't happen. There is the related concern that families can effectively imprison individuals. In a traditional family, the wife and mother is forced to give up any career prospects. Children may be pressurised to follow a particular career, to avoid particular friends, to marry a particular person. The give and take of family life necessarily places restrictions on our individuality. So send in the social workers and health visitors to support and monitor what's going on in people's homes. Take children into nursery/school/college for as long as possible in order to set their mothers free to go to work and to instil into the children the proper attitudes appropriate to living in modern Britain. Early intervention by the state is the only way to protect children from the horrors of being brought up in a dysfunctional family.

June 25th

Genesis 37 vv 21 & 22

Cast him into this pit.

The family clearly can't sort itself out. Reuben can only protect the lad from murder by casting him into a pit and we all know what happens next. What a pity Social Services didn't take Joseph into care years ago! Or at least enrol Jacob and his wives in compulsory parenting classes. I can see the force of such arguments, but they leave out the reality of love. Most families love one another and, although no family is perfect, only a few are really bad. My view is we are usually better off being brought up by inexperienced people who love us than by experts who just regard us as clients or cases. I also think that families have a right to privacy which the State needs a reason to violate. I also believe that families have a right not to conform to the State's expectations.

June 26th

Genesis 37 vv 23-28

Come, and let us sell him unto the Ishmeelites.

I read recently that there are more slaves in the world today than there were in the time of William Wilberforce. It would be a mistake to think that slavery has been abolished. There is people trafficking for the sex trade. There are people working in London for important foreign personages who are treated as no better than bondservants. In both these cases, the sex slaves and the bondservants, they cannot appeal to the authorities for help because of their dubious immigration status. In some countries like Sudan slaves are still bought and sold. We have considered the case of children working in sweat shops because they have no option. How exactly you define slavery is a bit problematic. But we know what we mean. A slave is someone entirely in the power of someone else and, given the nature of human beings, such a person is very likely to be abused and exploited. It is right to be aware of these things. We do have some little influence through our purchasing choices and our involvement in the political process. A letter to an MP on an issue such as this is not a matter of lobbying him to get him to act against his inclinations. I'm sure all our MPs oppose slavery! What they need to know is that they have the support of their constituents. If you want to get involved, get the facts straight and make them to available to MPs and other interested parties, especially those with influence. A good organisation to start with would be Anti-Slavery International, Thomas Clarkson House, the Stableyard, Broomgrove Rd, London, SW9 9TL.

June 27th

Genesis 37 vv 29-36

An evil beast hath devoured him.

It is a terrible thing for a parent to lose a child – at no matter what age. It seems to go against the natural order of things. Joseph's brothers have manoeuvred themselves into this position where they tell a wicked lie because the truth is even more unbearable to them. Within families we are passionate. The opposite of love isn't hate. It's indifference. Love and hate are passions and it is easy to flip from one to the other. It's possible to hate and love someone at the same time. Our passions are our ultimate motivators, but they can sometimes compel us to act irrationally. The passion which ought to motivate us is the love of God, Who is pure reason. *And here we offer and present unto thee ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice unto thee.*

June 28th

Genesis 39 vv 1-6

He made him overseer of his house.

Why did Joseph now start to flourish? He had been such an obnoxious boy! Maybe he had learnt his lesson. Maybe it was because he was removed from the corrupting favouritism at home. I think it was also because at last he was allowed some responsibility. He was a very talented and able young man. Having everything done for him and being allowed to lounge around the home while his brothers went out to work had done him no good. I have already mentioned the danger that too much concern about *health and safety* may stunt the development of young people and frustrate them. I think there is also a danger in holding back able teenagers either by forcing them to conform with a more mediocre majority in class or by keeping them in class (*in statu pupillaris*) when they are ready to work, to earn money and to take responsibility for their own lives. The Bible doesn't tell us what the school leaving age should be. Neither does it say anything about the relative merits of setting and mixed ability teaching or of grammar schools and comprehensives. So, in my capacity as a minister of religion, I will not presume to pronounce on these things. I do think, however, that the Bible requires us to respect individuals in their own right and both to attempt to provide for their needs and to allow them to play their part in providing for ours. People are human beings to be individually respected. They are not merely customers, clients or cases or representatives of a particular social class, gender, ethnicity or sexuality.

June 29th (St Peter & St Paul)

Acts 22 vv 1-16

Brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel.

Saul of Tarsus had a terrific education. He was fluent in Hebrew and Greek. By trade he was a tent maker. He left home and went to Jerusalem to study under one of the greatest of all Jewish teachers, Gamaliel. He had all the advantages his family could give him. He was undisputedly a Jew. He belonged to the élite Pharisee sect. He was a Roman citizen. I think his parents could be justly proud of him. Yet he lacked the most important thing of all until he encountered the Risen Christ on the Road to Damascus and put his faith in Him. As regards status or position, all those advantages were now dross until he used them all in the service of Jesus Christ. They were useless to Saul making his own way in the world, because in the end that doesn't matter. But dedicated to Christ, Paul's advantages helped found the Church.

It doth not yet appear what we shall be.

Last quarter's notes on Women in the Bible were warmly welcomed and encouraged me to attempt these notes on children and young people. I've found them much harder to do. The Bible stories don't seem to give us (or me anyway) much insight into the characters of the children and young people involved. As in the world today, children tend to be treated as the passive recipients of whatever adults offer them – for good or ill. They are not generally expected to know what is best for themselves or for their families and the wider world. I hope I have managed to draw out some worthwhile insights about children and young people from the passages we have looked at. What is clear is that the Bible is very positive about children. People are encouraged to have children. Children are a blessing. It is wicked to mistreat a child. Children are a model for our adult relationship with God. Jesus is the Son of God. He teaches all of us to call God *Father, Abba*. The Holy Spirit inspires us to call God Father. In Adam human beings are the children of God. Throughout most of the Bible and indeed all of human history, we are rebellious runaways, but in Christ we are forgiven, born again and adopted back into the family home.

It happens that I am preparing these notes in the week of the Sunday the Book of Common Prayer calls the Sixth after Epiphany. Today's reading is the appointed Epistle – one of my favourites. It teaches us that we are here and now the children of God. It teaches us to look forward to a state of unimaginable privilege and bliss. It teaches us here and now to live up to the status of what we are and what we shall be. I'll print the appropriate collect on the back page.

{Just in case you are wondering, the Book of Common Prayer effectively rounds off the Christmas Season on 6th January with the Epiphany. The Sundays following are what we call "ordinary time" although they do tend to look back towards Christmas. We then start looking forward to Lent and Easter on Septuagesima, which is 70 days before Easter. Common Worship, on the other hand, keeps the Christmas theme till Candlemas 2nd February (Sundays of Epiphany, rather than after Epiphany) and starts the countdown to Lent and Easter on 3rd February.

There is merit in both approaches and I find myself schizophrenic at this time of the year, trying to have the best of both worlds}

O God, whose blessed Son was manifested that he might destroy the works of the devil, and make us the sons of God, and heirs of eternal life; Grant us, we beseech thee, that, having this hope, we may purify ourselves, even as he is pure; that, when he shall appear with power and great glory, we may be made like unto him in his eternal and glorious kingdom; where with thee, O Father, and thee, O Holy Ghost, he liveth and reigneth, ever one God, world without end.

Amen.