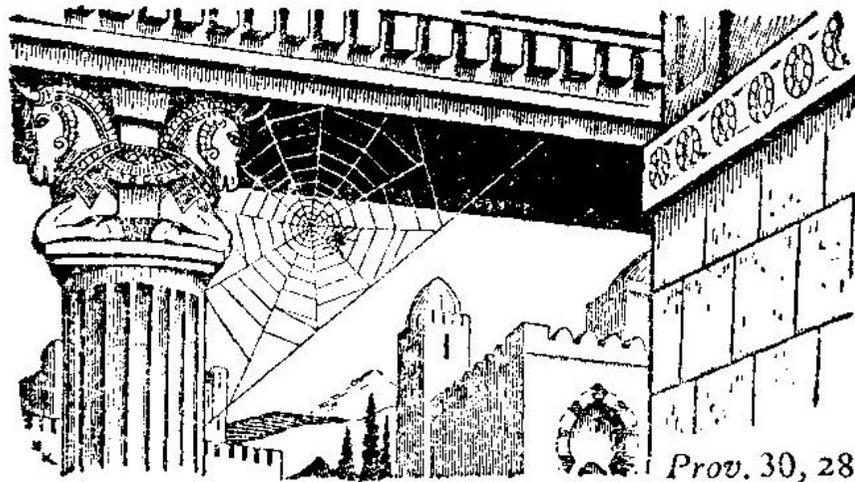


The Book of Proverbs



Bible Notes April-June 2015

1st April

Proverbs 1 v1

There is a whole body of material in the Old Testament categorised as wisdom literature. The Book of Proverbs is the most obvious example, but the Book of Daniel and the Joseph stories are also often thought of as wisdom literature. Then there is Job and there are also some wisdom psalms. Maybe we should think of the origins of wisdom literature in the training boys received if they were being prepared for careers as courtiers or civil servants. The most famous wise man of them all is of course King Solomon and wisdom in ancient Israel is traced back to his teaching. The Book of Proverbs does not always read like a religious book. We are doing this this quarter partly as a change! Nevertheless, we should never forget that *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* (Psalm 111¹⁰). It is not inappropriate to begin this study on April Fool's Day. *The fool hath said in his heart: There is no God* (Psalm 14¹).

The righteousness of thy testimonies is everlasting: Give me understanding, and I shall live. (Psalm 119¹⁴⁴).

2nd April (Maundy Thursday)

Proverbs 1 v2

We remember today the Last Supper and the new commandment *That ye love one another, as I have loved you.* (John 13³⁴). We are what we eat. If we eat too much fat, we get fat. Healthy bodies are made up of the good food we ingest. Sugar gives us energy. Junk food undermines our health and fitness. Do we nourish our minds by feeding on words of instruction and wisdom? Or do we feed our minds on junk? Do we nourish ourselves with the Body and Blood of Christ? Or do we feed them on the materialist junk spewed out by worldly entertainments and activities?

The fear of the Lord is clean, and endureth for ever: the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. (Psalm 19^{9&10}).

3rd April (Good Friday)

Proverbs 1 v3

Wisdom is bound up with justice, judgment and equity. It must be, because the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the LORD and the LORD is the God of Justice. God's mercy meets God's justice on the Cross of Jesus and both are satisfied. Justice and mercy, two aspects of love and God is love.

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends if ye do whatsoever I command you. Christ's commandment is, *That ye love one another, as I have loved you.* He says to do these things, *that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.* (John 15^{13,12,11}). St Paul speaks of Christ crucified as the power and wisdom of God.

Out of the deep have I called unto thee, O Lord: Lord hear my voice. (Psalm 130¹).

4th April (Holy Saturday)

Proverbs 1 v4

The cross, says St Paul, is folly to the Greeks and a stumbling-block to the Jews. The cross makes no sense to worldly intelligence. Why should yesterday be described as a good day? Any execution is a bad thing – even the execution of a criminal. Crucifixion was a horrible death which even the worst villain shouldn't have to suffer. Most people fear death or try to ignore it. Death apparently puts an end to all our achievements. It puts an end to us. Most of us are soon forgotten. What can be good about a death? And, if death is the wages of sin, isn't it all the more tragic when death comes to the only truly good man? How can it be good for the only truly innocent person who ever lived to die a criminal's death? How can the immortal die? And how does it make sense that His undeserved death should mean life for us who deserve to die? The answers lie in pondering our relationship with God, in learning of Him.

Lead me forth in thy truth, and learn me: for thou art the God of my salvation; in thee hath been my hope all the day long. (Psalm 25⁴).

NB. I was taught as a child that it was vulgar to use "learn" as a synonym for "teach", but it was obviously OK when Miles Coverdale translated the psalms (c1535).

5th April (Easter Day)

Proverbs 1 v5

The fool hath said in heart, There is no God. The wise person is the person who trusts God. The wise person will always be finally vindicated because God created the entire universe in wisdom. To act wisely is to go with the grain. The person who walks all the way with God is Jesus. The person who always has faith in God is Jesus. He is still praying when he cries, *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* Why else address God from the cross? Jesus is so much the wise man that He is the personification of the wisdom of God. Therefore, death hath no more dominion over Him. God never lets us down. He never lets Jesus down because Jesus deserves God's faithfulness. God never lets us down, because, as Christian believers, we are in Christ and He is in us. We therefore participate in His cross and His resurrection. In Him, we are for ever in God's keeping.

The Lord is my light, and my salvation; whom then shall I fear: the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27¹).

6th April

Proverbs 1 v6

Today is the day of the Easter Egg hunt. Eggs represent new life. Easter eggs represent the new life in Christ, eternal life, life in all its fulness, resurrection life. This Spirit of the risen Christ is the Lord and giver of life. Most Easter eggs these days are chocolate, *sweeter also than honey and the honey-comb.* Maybe they remind us then of the Law of the LORD, Whom to fear is to be wise. Wisdom isn't necessarily being clever or knowing a lot. Wisdom is knowing God and anyone may know God, Whom to know is to have eternal life. What is required of us is faith. It is all by the grace of God.

Psalm 131.

Lord, I am not high-minded : I have no proud looks.

2 I do not exercise myself in great matters : which are too high for me.

3 But I refrain my soul, and keep it low, like as a child that is weaned from his mother : yea, my soul is even as a weaned child.

4 O Israel, trust in the Lord : from this time forth for evermore.

7th April

Proverbs 1 v7

The more I think about it, the more I am inclined to associate wisdom with virtue and folly with wickedness. In the past, I have always imagined that folly was much the same thing as stupidity. Now, possibly we can't help being stupid. Certainly we all make mistakes. We can't know everything and we don't always act in accordance with what we do know. But, for the Bible, Christ personifies wisdom and folly is the characteristic of the atheist. Read Psalm 14 and it is clear that all the terrible things that human beings do follow from their rejection of God. They don't believe in God. They believe in false gods. They know the truth, but disregard the truth they know. They rebel against God. St Paul takes these verses in Psalm 14 to prove that all human beings are rebels against God and perpetrators of evil. Certainly, the whole Bible story, from the forbidden fruit to the Cross, is the story of God's faithfulness and our faithlessness, the wisdom of God and human folly. Maybe this is why it is such a terrible thing to call a person a fool. If we do call a person a fool, we are in danger of hell fire (Matthew 5²²). Apart from Christ we are all fools. To call someone a fool is to put him outside the people of God. It is folly that people disregard God and the claims that He makes on our lives.

Behold, I was shapen in wickedness: and in sin hath my mother conceived me. But lo, thou requirest truth in the inward parts: and shalt make me to understand wisdom secretly. Thou shalt purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: thou shalt wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. (Psalm 51⁵⁻⁷).

8th April

Proverbs 1 vv 8&9

Honour thy father and thy mother, as St Paul points out, is the first commandment with a promise attached. We often think of biblical society as being male-dominated and treating women as second class citizens. So it is important to note here that the mother is to be respected as well as the father. Young adults always find it difficult to recognise the wisdom of their parents. Perhaps we should be wiser if we tried harder to recognise the contribution they have to make even into old age. One of the consequences of the freedoms we enjoy in modern society is that we often live a long way away from our parents. It cannot always be avoided but we all lose out if the generations are not there to care for one another.

Forsake me not, O God in mine old age, when I am gray-headed: until I shewed thy strength unto this generation, and thy power to all them that are yet for to come. Psalm 72¹⁶.

9th April

Proverbs 1 vv 10-16

Peer pressure. We all want to belong. We don't want to stand out from the crowd. I don't suppose any readers of these notes move in circles in which robbery with violence is commonplace, but we may well feel sometimes that, in order to belong, we have to go along, say, with conversations we are not comfortable with (gossip, bad language, disrespect to women, prejudice) or to join a group going to some entertainment we don't really approve of (a strip club or somewhere where people drink too much or use drugs) or refrain from speaking out about some corrupt practice at work. *Everybody's doing it*. I confess I found myself once participating with a group of people who fiddled their time sheets at work. One of the reasons for moving in church circles and bringing our families and friends up in church circles is to avoid these temptations. (On the other hand, if our entire lives are bound up with church things and we never meet anyone outside the Church, how can we witness Christian truth to the world?) It must be very hard for youngsters brought up on estate where gangs are powerful to avoid being sucked into the sort of behaviour described in today's bible passage. It might seem likely the only way to survive. Remember that the wisdom literature had its origins in the instruction given to young men. *Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way: even by ruling himself after thy word.* (Psalm 119⁹).

April 10th

Proverbs 1 vv 17-19

It doesn't take much intelligence to see that things would go much better for us if we behaved ourselves properly. If people only obeyed the Ten Commandments, they would not only make other people happier; they would make themselves happier as well. It doesn't take much intelligence to see that, but it takes more wisdom than most of us actually have. We are fools who can't take time off on the Sabbath for worship and rest. We are fools who covet what our neighbours have. We are fools who don't put God first in our lives. We are fools who think that a bit of dishonesty to get us out of trouble or to get the things we want won't hurt. We are fools who are unfaithful to our wives and patronising or indifferent towards our parents. There are plenty of fools in the world who think that killing is the way to achieve their aims.

O that my ways were made so direct: that I might keep thy statutes. (Psalm 119⁵).

April 11th

Proverbs 1 vv 20-33

I was asked recently why the Jews rejected Jesus. After all, Jesus was a Jew. He was evidently a good man, a wise teacher. He healed their sick, cast out demons and even raised the dead. The more perceptive of them would have recognised that Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets. So why did the Jews reject Jesus? The answer is because they are human. Humanity has always rejected God from the Garden of Eden to Calvary and we still reject God today. That is why there is so much sin and suffering in the world. The world would be so much better if only human beings obeyed the commandments of God. It needs very little intelligence to see that, but it requires a lot of wisdom. It isn't difficult to imagine these Old Testament wisdom teachers trying to interest a group of teenage boys whose thoughts are on the games they hope to be playing when school is over, girls, and what their chances are of joining the army or attaining to the higher echelons of the bureaucracy. Thousands of people (including us) can always find something more urgent or important to do than to pray, read the Bible or come to Church.

Open thou mine eyes: that I may see the wondrous things of thy law. (Psalm 119¹⁸).

April 12th (Easter 2 or Easter 1)

Proverbs 2 vv 1-9

The reason this can be Easter 2 or Easter 1 is that Common Worship (2000) and Common Prayer (1662) count differently. Both of them, however, set out a scheme of Bible reading, meditation and celebration for the whole year. As we read the Scriptures and meditate on what Jesus did for us, as we enter into the experience of worship, of knowing God, Whom to know is to have eternal life, so we are formed as Christians. There's no perfect scheme which suits everybody, which is why Common Worship and Common Prayer are slightly different. We have to be prepared to compromise sometimes and do not just what suits us as individuals, but what is best for the whole Christian community. Being a Christian is not just about our own personal relationship with God (still less our own personal spirituality, which can be another term for pious self-centredness); being a Christian is about belonging to the people of God, being members one of another, growing together, building one another up in the likeness of Christ, Who is the personification of wisdom.

I was glad when they said unto me: We will go into the house of the Lord. (Psalm 122¹).

April 13th

Proverbs 2 vv 10-15

How do you imagine wisdom entering your heart and doing all these good things, making you a better person? Is it simply through reading the Scriptures? Or is it reading them and meditating on them? Is it reading the Bible prayerfully? Is it reading the Scriptures and acting on what you read? Is it receiving teaching about the Scriptures from books and commentaries, preachers and teachers? Is it belonging to the Christian community, people who are walking together in the way, the way which is Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life? Is wisdom entering your heart what happens, when you first turn to Christ? When you are baptised in His Name? When you receive His Body and Blood in Holy Communion, *that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us?* I think the answer to all those questions is *yes*. What do you think.

O stablish thy word in thy servant: that I may fear thee. (Psalm 119³⁸).

April 14th

Proverbs 2 vv 16-22

Reading these verses made me think of Dustin Hoffman in *the Graduate*. It isn't hard to imagine why the teachers of a class of teenage boys should feel the need to warn against the temptations of sex. Of course, it is not only a problem for teenage boys. Teenage girls may be just as tempted and run the further risk of being left holding the baby. Even in later life, promiscuity devalues sex. Adultery destroys the covenant of marriage. Sex is a very powerful force and one of God's greatest gifts to us. The first commandment is *Go forth and multiply*. The relationship between lovers is analogous to the love which unites the believer and God. Marriage signifies *unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church*. Like all powerful forces and like all God's good gifts, if sex is abused it becomes destructive, both to the abused and the abuser.

Make me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence: and take not thy holy Spirit from me.

(Psalm 51^{10&11}).

April 15th

Proverbs 3 vv 1&2

The basic thesis of wisdom literature (and indeed much of the Bible) is that if you live well, you will also prosper and live long. That makes sense. If you don't eat or drink to excess, if you work hard and spend carefully, if you are faithful to your wife, if you are honest and treat other people fairly and don't run any unnecessary risks, the chances are that you are less likely to get sick, you won't run out of money and other people will look out for you. It is not, however, a universal rule. The Bible (including the wisdom literature) is well aware that sometimes terrible things happen to good people while the wicked apparently prosper. The thing is to remain faithful to God whatever He sends.

Flee from evil, and do the thing that is good: and dwell for evermore. For the Lord loveth the thing that is right: he forsaketh not his that be godly, but they are preserved for ever. (Psalm 37^{27&28}).

April 16th

Proverbs 3 vv 3&4

Mercy and truth are characteristic of God Himself. That is what God is like and God's people are called to be like God. *Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy.* (Leviticus 19²). Someone said to me the other day that S Athanasius was very daring when he claimed that Jesus became human in order that human beings should become divine. Athanasius was daring, but it is true. The Son of God partakes of our nature so that we might partake of His nature. He redeems us by His Blood. In Him we are born again and made God's children by adoption. We are nourished by His Word. We are sustained and strengthened by the fellowship of the Church, His Body, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. We feed on Him in the Bread and Wine of Holy Communion. Athanasius was daring, but he was firmly grounded in the Bible. *...his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.* (II Peter 1^{3&4}).

O go your way into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and speak good of his Name. For the Lord is gracious, his mercy is everlasting: and his truth endureth from generation to generation. (Psalm 100^{3&4}).

April 17th

Proverbs 3 vv 5&6

I seem to remember writing this out and sticking it on my wall in college in an effort to remember these verses. Our own understanding so often leads us astray. We may think we know everything or at least we think we know enough to get by. We choose our own way. Then it goes wrong, as it is bound to do, and we fall into despair. We feel we have messed up again and there is no hope. Far better to acknowledge God from the start. Pray to Him for guidance what we ought to do. Cultivate a familiarity with the Scriptures and with the teaching of the Church so that we know the framework in which we operate as Christians. Trust God for the outcome. Trust God to look after us.

Except the Lord build the house: their labour is but lost that build it.

Except the Lord keep the city: the watchman waketh but in vain. (Psalm 127^{1&2}).

April 18th

Proverbs 3 vv 7-10

When I was a child, my mother had a brass moneybox with several compartments. The idea was that you allocated the week's money when you received it – so much for coal, so much for rates, so much for groceries, etc.. That way you wouldn't run out of money and get into debt if you couldn't pay the coalman because you'd treated yourself to a new coat you really couldn't afford. This is prudent management of money. I don't suppose many people nowadays work it out like this. Most people are paid monthly into their bank accounts rather than weekly in cash and we mostly pay our bills electronically. I suspect this makes it easier to lose track of what is coming in and what is going out and, if credit is easily come by, it easy to get into debt – though not so easy to get out of it again. So, unless your income is a lot more than your expenditure, it is probably prudent to budget. But how do you prioritise? I would say food (especially for the children), rent or mortgage, taxes, adequate clothing, heating, should be at the top of the list. Many families would also find it hard to do without phones and internet access and you'd have to very disciplined to go without TV or any other entertainment. But what about what you give back to God - what you put in the church collection or give to charity? Are these your last priorities after you have paid for the "essentials" or are they most essential of all your expenditure as these verses state?

Praise the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me praise his holy Name. (Psalm 103¹).

April 19th (Easter 2 or Easter 3)

Proverbs 3 vv 11&12

If God is all powerful, all knowing, just and all loving, why do good people suffer? There is no final answer. Maybe we just have to accept that there are some things which are beyond our understanding. There are, however, several partial answers and this is one of them. God chastens us in order to make us better people. If things go wrong for us, if we are punished, when we do bad things, hopefully we learn our lesson. Moreover the endurance of suffering builds character. If our lives were simply bland, easy living all the time, we should have no opportunity to develop or exhibit courage or strength. If there were no trials and temptations, there would be no possibility of making wrong choices and therefore no free will. If there were no evil, how would we recognise good? God treats us as a loving parent. He gives us a certain amount of freedom, even allowing us sometimes to hurt ourselves. He punishes us when we go wrong. This is because He is the God of love.

I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right: and that thou of very faithfulness hast caused me to be troubled. (Psalm 119⁷⁵).

April 20th

Proverbs 3 vv 13-15

A few days ago we remarked on what a powerful force sex is. Money too seems to have the power to rule our lives. Except in primitive barter based cultures, we all need money. We need material goods, the things money can buy. Yet they can take over our lives. Goods and money become goals in themselves. They cease to be our servants, things we make use of, and become our masters. We are not always aware that this has happened. Maybe we need sometimes to stop and think what our priorities are. Into which aspects of our lives do we put in most time and effort? What are our real goals? What do we worry about the most? The question we asked on 18th might be pertinent here. Yet wisdom is of far more worth than money or material goods – wisdom, the beginning of which is the fear of the Lord, wisdom which is personified in Jesus Christ, Who said to His apostles, when He commissioned them, *Freely ye have received, freely give. Provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in your purses, nor scrip for your journey, neither two coats, neither shoes, nor yet staves: for the workman is worthy of his meat.* (Matthew 10⁸⁻¹⁰).

As for our God, he is in heaven: he hath done whatsoever pleased him. Their idols are silver and gold: even the work of men's hands. (Psalm 115^{3&4}).

April 21st

Proverbs 3 vv 16-18

And her ways are ways of gentleness and all her paths are peace. That's the last line of the second verse of *I Vow to Thee my Country* and refers to God's Kingdom. We don't always recognise where the words of our hymns come from, but the best hymns are the ones which are firmly grounded in Scripture. Wisdom, then, brings in the Kingdom of God of justice, mercy and peace. The good things follow from the acquisition of wisdom. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us not to worry about things like food and clothing or what might happen tomorrow. He says the heathen worry about all those things. God knows what we need. He says, *But seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.* (Matthew 6²³).

They that make them (idols of silver and gold) are like unto them: and so are all such as put their trust in them. But thou, house of Israel, trust thou in the Lord: he is their succour and defence.

April 22nd

Proverbs 3 vv 19&20

Sometimes when I am feeling overwhelmed, either personally or when I think of the challenges the Church faces, I am comforted by the last verse of Psalm 124, *Our help standeth in the Name of the Lord: who hath made heaven and earth.* We cannot imagine just how great God is, but it is a start to contemplate the fact that He is the maker of heaven and earth, *of all that is, seen and unseen.* To think further that the Creator of heaven and earth is our help, yours and mine, gives rise to a feeling which I cannot put into words. It is too marvellous. Today's passage tells us that God made everything that there is by wisdom. Wisdom is therefore a very wonderful thing, something well worth acquiring. It is astonishing that we may partake of wisdom, that we may acquire something of what God used to create heaven and earth. God's wisdom is infinite. Our wisdom is only too limited. But it is the same wisdom in which we share with God. If you want to be a bit sophisticated, the wisdom of God is Jesus, in Whom we live and Who lives in us in order that we might become like Him.

Praise the Lord, O my soul: O Lord my God, thou art become exceeding glorious: thou art clothed with majesty and honour. Thou deckest thyself with light as it were with a garment: and spreadest out the heavens like a curtain. Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters: and maketh the clouds his chariot, and walketh upon the wings of the wind. (Psalm 104¹⁻³).

April 23rd (S George)

Proverbs 3 vv 21-26

Today is England's patron saint's day. Is this wisdom we've been reading about just for individuals? I would think not. If the wisdom literature had its origin in schools for courtiers and civil servants, it wasn't just about teaching these boys how they could be fulfilled in their own personal lives. It was about teaching them how to serve, to serve the king, to serve the people, to serve God. There was no rigid division between home and work, the private sphere and the public, so that you followed godly wisdom in your dealings with your family and among your circle of friends, your faith community, but you lived by a different set of standards, secular standards, in the public sphere, at work, in government or local government. This godly wisdom is actually what makes the world go round. It is as imperative that nations are governed wisely and govern themselves wisely as it is that we act with wisdom in our personal lives. As Britain becomes more secular and multicultural, it is vital that we Christians do not allow ourselves to become marginalised or to retreat into the ghetto. We cannot acquiesce in the view that there are secular standards by which everybody is governed and that religious principles are an optional extra for members of faith communities. We cannot serve our country unless we faithfully bear witness to the Truth, to Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Wisdom and the Power of God.

Blessed are the people, whose God is the Lord, Jehovah: and blessed are the folk, that he hath chosen to him to be his inheritance.* (Psalm 33¹²).

[*If you are interested, while this OT verse surely refers to Israel, the word for people here is *goy* גוי, which usually means “gentile” or “nation” – a hint, perhaps that God will choose peoples, gentiles, nations other than Israel, as well as Israel, in Christ in the NT. Possibly I'm reading too much into it, but it is interesting.]

April 24th

Proverbs 3 vv 27&28

The Bible teaches us to pay our debts on time, also to pay any wages which are due. Some people are just careless about settling bills, which is unfair on the person to whom the money is owed and may cause hardship if the creditor is a small business or shop or a poor man with bills of his own to meet. There is also the risk that, if we don't pay our bills when they fall due, we might spend the money on something else and be unable to pay. Some big firms and government departments deliberately keep small suppliers and contractors waiting for their money, knowing they cannot afford to sue or to take their business elsewhere. It is part of their business plan. What do you think of that?

Lord, who shall dwell in thy tabernacle: or who shall rest upon thy holy hill? Even he, that leadeth an uncorrupt life: and doeth the thing which is right, and speaketh the truth from his heart. (Psalm 15^{1&2}).

April 25th (St Mark)

Proverbs 3 vv 29&30

Why would anyone devise evil against a neighbour or try to hurt someone who has not hurt him? But people do. It is that twist in human nature which we call original sin. Maybe someone picks a fight as an opportunity to demonstrate his strength. Maybe someone spreads gossip in order to appear knowledgeable and important. Maybe we want to look better than the Joneses. Perhaps we are jealous of them. Perhaps the intention is to take vengeance for some real or imagined slight. By contrast, the Bible (OT & NT) tells us to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Lord, who shall dwell in thy tabernacle: or who shall rest upon thy holy hill? He that hath used no deceit in his tongue, nor done evil to his neighbour: and hath not slandered his neighbour. (Psalm 15^{1&3}).

April 26th (Easter 3 or Easter 4)

Proverbs 3 vv 31-35

It is possible to *envy the oppressor*. Maybe somebody appears to be doing better than we are in life and we think the reason that they are doing better is that they are less scrupulous than we are. We might then be tempted to become less scrupulous ourselves. Today's remaining verses indicate why that would be a mistake.

Even he that hath clean hands, and a pure heart: and hath not lifted up his mind unto vanity, nor sworn to deceive his neighbour. He shall receive the blessing from the Lord: and righteousness from the God of his salvation. (Psalm 24^{4&5}).

27th April

Proverbs 4 vv 1-4

Christians and Jews – followers of the biblical religions – make much of the importance of the family. The family is our primary support. Our families care for us, feed us, look after us when we are sick, provide for our elementary education, take care of us when we are old. More important even than doing all these things for one another, is the point that within the family they are done in love. There are, however, at least four objections to this idyllic account of the family. The first has always existed – the fact that some people are not good to their own families and that has always been the case: drink, drugs, domestic violence, abuse infidelity. The second comes with a more technological society, which grants us the freedom to move around. We may literally not be there for our families, who may live many miles away. The third is related to the second. As we have become freer and more individualistic, I think we have become more selfish. We are less willing, perhaps, than people used to be to sacrifice our own personal fulfilment even for the good of the people we love. (The paradox is that human beings can only be fulfilled in sacrificing self to the needs of others in love.) Fourthly, in modern society, medicine, education, even childcare, have all become very specialised. We need the services of professional teachers, doctors, etc.. Finally (maybe fifthly, may be four and a halfly), there is the point that the state is no longer prepared to trust families to look after themselves and has taken to itself all sorts of powers to intervene: to protect from abuse; to ensure educational standards; to see that at least children get proper medical treatment when they are sick. Do you think the state has too much power to intervene in family or two little? I am still committed to the family both as a support for individuals and as the building block of human society. If it were up to me, we would all spend more time in our homes. Beyond the family, however, above the family, sustaining the family and correcting the family is God.

When my father and my mother forsake me: the Lord taketh me up. Teach me thy way, O Lord,; and lead me in the right way, because of my enemies. (Psalm 27^{12&13}).

28th April

Proverbs 4 vv 5-9

A crown of glory shall she deliver unto thee.

Wisdom, more important to acquire than wealth or position, than good looks or status. Living wisely can be expected to lead to reasonable prosperity, a decent job, a good reputation and possibly even better looks if we don't wrinkle our skins with tobacco, redden our noses with gin, or suffer cauliflower ears when fighting. None of these things, however, is the point of wisdom. Wisdom is an end in itself and, as we have seen, it does not always lead to success or popularity. *A crown of glory shall she deliver unto thee.* Christ is the personification of wisdom and Christ's glory is the Cross as well as to sit at the right hand of God.

But the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous: and the way of the ungodly shall perish. (Psalm 1⁷).

29th April

Proverbs 4 vv 10-19

Teenage boys. It doesn't take much imagination to think of a father or a teacher worrying about his son or pupil getting into bad company, joining a gang, robbing, fighting rival gangs, dealing drugs, getting some girl pregnant. They're tricky years, the teenage years, when you inevitably lose the control you had when they were children but they might not yet have acquired the wisdom to avoid doing something which will destroy their lives. To impart wisdom. From the time they are born, pray for them. Pray with them. Teach them as children the Bible stories and the doctrines of our faith. Bring them to Church and Sunday School. Be careful of what example you set. If there comes a time when they reject all these things and they are too old to compel, keep praying for them and keep the doors open how ever far away they go. Many return in later life when they realise what life is really all about as they embark on careers, marry, have their own children.

O remember not the sins and offences of my youth: but according to thy mercy think thou upon me, O Lord, for thy goodness. (Psalm 25⁶).

30th April

Proverbs 4 vv 20-27

Keep thy heart with all diligence.

Jesus says, *For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness.* (Mark 7^{21&22}).

That is why we say in the BCP confession, *We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.* “Heart” here means the seat of your personality, your character, the kind of person you are. Are you a good tree which brings forth good fruit or an evil tree which brings forth bad fruit?

Are you the wise man who built his house on the rock (which is Christ) or the foolish man who built his house on the sand? It depends on whether you hear and obey Christ’s teaching, the Word of God. Our “hearts”, our personalities, our characters, need first to be redeemed by the Blood of the Lamb and then to be nourished by the Word of God.

Make me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me.

1st May (S Philip & S James)

Proverbs 5 vv 1-14

Sexual attraction. Who is responsible when things go wrong? Other things being equal, we tend to blame the man, because he is likely to be the physically stronger. Sometimes we blame the woman for making herself too obviously available as if men couldn’t be expected to exercise self-control. We would blame an older person of either sex for seducing a younger or a person in a position of power (e.g. a boss or a senior politician, or someone who was wealthy or famous) for seducing someone in a weaker position, though it is not unknown for someone who is physically attractive but poor or in a lowly position to use sex to establish a relationship with someone who can do her or him some good. In some such cases there may be genuine love and there is nothing wrong with that. Surely we all need to take responsibility, responsibility not only for ourselves but responsibility for the welfare of other people – the prospective lover, of course, but also for other people who might be harmed if we were to enter into any illicit relationship. Truly loving someone else’s wife is no justification for adultery. On the contrary.

I will inform thee, and teach thee in the way wherein thou shalt go: and I will guide me with thine eyes. Be ye not like unto horse and mule, which have no understanding: whose mouths must be held with bit and bridle, lest they fall upon thee. (Psalm 32^{9&10}).

2nd May

Proverbs 5 vv 15-23

The contrast. Instead of inappropriate and possibly promiscuous relationships, based on lust, basically selfish, there is Christian marriage – lifelong fidelity to one another, love whatever happens in life, lives fulfilled because they are shared, commitment to the point of self-sacrifice setting a man and woman free to rejoice in the Lord always and to be thankful in all things, to share in all joy and in all sorrow, to journey through life together, whatever befalls us, till we come into that eternal Presence in which love is all in all.

Blessed are all they that fear the Lord: and walk in his ways. For thou shalt eat the labours of thine hands: O well is thee, and happy shalt thou be. Thy wife shall be as the fruitful vine: upon the walls of thine house. Thy children like the olive-branches: round about thy table. (Psalm 128¹⁻⁴).

3rd May (Easter 4 or Easter 5)

Proverbs 6 vv 1-5

This is a common theme in the wisdom literature – the risk of going surety for a friend. I don’t know how common that is nowadays. I know that people do go surety for family members. That means that they undertake to pay their child’s or husband’s debts if they are unable to pay. You can see the risk. Such an arrangement might encourage the child or husband to borrow more than they are likely to be able to repay. Family ties might make you feel that you are under some obligation to act as surety even if you don’t really think they can repay. If they default and you have to pay their debts (possibly having your own house repossessed or some such) there would be a tremendous strain on the relationship. You really have to keep your eyes open if you are contemplating such an arrangement. My advice would be, if you can afford it, just give them the money. If you yourself can’t afford to lose it, don’t risk it.

O my soul, thou hast said unto the Lord: Thou art my God, my goods are nothing unto thee. Psalm 16²).

4th May

Proverbs 6 vv 6-11

A lot of people would recognise this proverb without knowing that it comes from the Bible. Does the Bible contradict itself here, warning us not to lie in bed all day, but to get up and go to work, whereas Psalm 127 promises sleep to God's beloved? I'm sure the answer would delight the wisdom teacher. The answer is moderation. You don't have to live a life of hyperactivity, fearful that you can never do enough, always anxious. Our lives are in God's Hands and we can trust Him. You can relax. Indeed the Sabbath rest is one of His commandments. On the other hand, we are expected to work with God. He doesn't (since what happened in Eden) supply everything we could desire without any effort on our part.

O Israel, trust in the Lord, for with the Lord there is mercy: and with him is plenteous redemption. And he shall redeem Israel: from all his sins. (Psalm 130^{7&8}).

5th May

Proverbs 6 vv 12-15

On 30th April we thought about the human "heart", our character, our personality. What we do and say is determined by what sort of people we are. The unredeemed human *heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked* (Jeremiah 17⁹). We saw what Jesus says proceeds from the unredeemed heart. Living in accordance unredeemed nature has its consequences.

But the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous: and the way of the ungodly shall perish.

6th May

Proverbs 6 vv 16-19

These six things doth the LORD hate: Yea seven are an abomination unto him. This formula indicates that the seventh is the worst of them. The seventh is to sow discord among brethren. That's worth pondering if deliberately or carelessly we cause trouble in a family, a workplace, a community, or even a church. Brothers are meant to love one another. God is love. To stir up discord, to fracture the bonds of love would obviously be an abomination to the LORD.

Behold, how good and joyful a thing it is: brethren, to dwell together in unity. (Psalm 133¹).

7th May

Proverbs 6 vv 20-23

Justification and sanctification are two words whose meanings are not absolutely clear and different understands of which have given rise to divisions within the Church – discord among brethren. Do you become a Christian once and for all when you first put your faith in Jesus? Or is becoming a Christian a lifelong process only complete when you get to Heaven? Is it something God does to you all at once or does He form you as a Christian over your lifetime? Are you expected to work at it yourself or has God done it all for you? Using the words justification and sanctification as Protestants tend to use them, the answer is probably something like this. You do become a Christian when you first believe. God makes you righteous. You will not be punished for your sins. You will go straight to heaven if you die the moment after your conversion. God has justified you. (Just and righteous are the same word in NT Greek δικαιος.) In the course of your life on earth, however, God sanctifies you. He makes you holy. You become what you are. You were justified when you first believed and (hopefully) you act more and more like a just person as you mature in your faith. You are sanctified. It is all of God. It is all the grace of God which first justifies and then sanctifies us. There are means of grace which we ought not to neglect – the Bible, the Sacraments, Christian fellowship, prayer, etc. These are all the gift of God, but we must be willing to receive His gifts. Read the Bible. Pray. Worship with fellow Christians. Receive the Sacraments. They are means of grace by which God sanctifies, by which He makes us the people we ought to be. To that extent, maybe we do have to work at it. *Thy word is a lantern unto my feet: and a light unto my paths.* (Psalm 119¹⁰⁵).

8th May

Proverbs 6 vv 24-35

Two things. One is to note the distinction drawn between adultery and stealing. Stealing is understandable if you are poor, though there will still be consequences if you are caught. Society couldn't function if people could just help themselves to what they need. Poor people are often more likely to be crime victims themselves than the rich. They can't afford security and tend to live in rougher areas. There is no excuse for adultery, however. The second point is that some people claim that the Bible only condemns women, not men, for adultery, but this passage makes clear that that is not true. *Thou art my portion O Lord: I have promised to keep thy law.* (Psalm 119⁵⁷).

9th May

Proverbs 7 vv 1-4

The father or teacher instructs the young man to be diligent in the pursuit of wisdom. He is to study the law. He is to obey the law. Practice makes perfect. He is to be in a relationship with the law, to think of wisdom as a sister. But, if it is all of God, if it is by grace we are saved through faith (Ephesians 2⁸), why do we need to work at it? I'm reminded of the story of the vicar who admires a beautiful garden and says, "It is wonderful what the Almighty can do." The gardener responds, "You should have seen what this plot was like, Vicar, when He had it to Himself." It is God Who makes things grow. It is God Who sends the sun and rain. Indeed it is God Who makes the gardener, a man with his own free will, whose vocation it is to work with God to make the garden fruitful and beautiful. Personally, I'm troubled by the number of people who think that they can be Christians without coming to church, never become communicants, don't read the Bible and only pray for themselves and their concerns. They won't grow as Christians and, since the Church is made up of Christians, neither will the Church be strong.

Seven times a day do I praise thee: because of thy righteous judgments. (Psalm 119¹⁶⁴).

10th May (Easter 5 or Easter 6)

Proverbs 7 vv 5-27

Earlier in these notes we have considered the literal danger of illicit sexual relationships. So let's (following on from yesterday) take this metaphorically. Marriage signifies the mystical union which is betwixt Christ and His Church. The LORD is the husband of the people of God (cf Hosea 1-3). Infidelity to God is like being unfaithful to a husband. Adultery is an analogy for apostasy (falling away from God). Now, note that in our passage the seductress emphasises how pleasurable will be the experience. She tells him that there is no risk. Now, aren't we told (by the devil?) that it will be harmless and pleasurable if we go shopping or play sport instead of going to church, if we watch TV and play computer games rather than read the Bible or pray? Aren't we told that there is no risk? "You can be a Christian without going to Church?" "The Bible is just a book." *So teach us to number our days: that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.* (Psalm 90¹²).

11th May

Proverbs 8 vv 1-11

Just as the prostitute tries to lure passers by into her house of shame, wisdom is envisaged here as a virtuous woman attempting to attract the attention of human beings on life's journey. She is better than wealth or fame. Her counsel will be a guide in every situation. It is not that wisdom is hard to find or even hard to understand. Wisdom is not the same thing as cleverness or intelligence in the sense of doing well in IQ tests. Wisdom is on offer to everyone. Fools continue in their folly because they are rebels against God. They will not accept the sovereignty of God in their lives and therefore they continue like lemmings on the path that leads to destruction. Jesus Himself says that there are few who find the path to life (Matthew 7^{13&14}). So what are we to do if seek wisdom? Repent. Return. *Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.* (Romans 12²). *I will say unto the Lord, Thou art my hope, and my stronghold: my God, in him will I trust.* (Psalm 91²).

12th May

Proverbs 8 vv 12-21

In our public prayers in church, our intercessions, we often remember the terrible things going on in the world – wars and civil wars, anarchy, terrorism and other crime, plagues, natural disasters, chronic poverty. We often pray for wisdom for people in authority and those with the responsibility for dealing with these situations. Typically (in the Common Worship Communion service) the first paragraph of the intercessions is for the Church and the second for the world. These issues usually come in the second paragraph. I cannot help but think, however, that the wisdom our leaders need is the wisdom of God, the wisdom personified in Jesus Christ. It is not merely a matter of being bright enough to think up solutions to the world's problems. How well has that worked out over thousands of years of human history? True wisdom begins in the fear of the Lord. True wisdom is worked out in the self-sacrificial love of Christ. The beatitudes (Matthew 5¹⁻¹²) are counterintuitive – folly in the eyes of the world. Yet they are the wisdom and power of God – the true solution to our problems. What the world needs is the wisdom which God has entrusted to His Church. If only we were Christians were wise enough to live by it! *I have more understanding than my teachers: for thy testimonies are my study. I am wiser than the aged: because I keep thy commandments.* (Psalm 119^{99&100}).

13th May

Proverbs 8 vv 22-31

Following the Ascension, the apostles and thousands of other Christians preached the Gospel throughout the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond. The Church grew rapidly, but, from time to time, she faced persecution, sometimes savage persecution. This seemed, however, only to make the Church grow more. The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church (Tertullian). In 312AD, the Emperor Constantine won a great victory at the Milvian Bridge and, so the story goes, he was promised victory in a vision given to Him by God. *In this sign*

conquer. The sign was ✠ which is the first two letters of Christ in Greek and a Christian symbol. Constantine became a Christian and established the Christian religion in the Roman Empire. He hoped that the Church, with its message of unity and love, would unify the empire, which was then rent by civil war. To his frustration, the Church almost immediately fell apart. From the very beginning, Christians worshipped Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The implication was that Jesus and the Holy Spirit were God. To worship anything other than God would be to disobey the first commandment. It appears that they did not give this matter too much thought until a very able preacher and pastor called Arius started to teach that, as there is only one God, Jesus cannot be God. Arius taught that Jesus was not the Creator, but the greatest of created beings. He was not eternal, but He had a beginning in time, when God the Father created Him. This caused consternation among Christians and a council was called at Nicaea in 325. It was Athanasius who most clearly recognised that the very essence of the Christian faith is that Jesus is both God and man. Christ fully discloses God because He is God. He thoroughly redeems humanity because He is human. If Jesus isn't God, if Jesus isn't human, the Christian religion is simply false. It was Athanasius who suggested putting the word 'ομοιουσιος in the Creed. This is variously translated as *being of one substance with the Father* or *of one being with the Father*. This was agreed at Nicaea, but of course, it didn't satisfy Arius and a lot of good people were unhappy with introducing into the Creed this new word which doesn't appear in the Bible. So the Church remained divided. A compromise was attempted (imposed by Constantine by force) that Christ is neither God (Arius) nor *of one substance* with God (Athanasius) but of a similar substance (or nature) to God. This is of course nonsense. Jesus was either God or He wasn't. There is no middle way. Nothing is like God. So the Church eventually came round to accepting Athanasius' position, which is just as well, because Christian faith makes no sense unless he was right. I'll tell you what this has to do with Proverbs on Friday!

By the word of the Lord were the heavens made: and all the hosts of them by the breath of his mouth. (Psalm 33⁶).

14th May (Ascension Day)

Proverbs 8 vv 32-36

One of my happy memories is of an Ascension Day thirty years ago. I was curate at Orpington and my day off was Wednesday. My friend was curate at Eastbourne. The cycle ride took about four hours. I was much fitter and the roads were less busy and there was more unspoilt countryside. So, when the days were long, it was possible to cycle down to my friend's house Tuesday evening, have a day with him, and cycle back Thursday morning. Leaving at 5.00 am, I would be in time for the 9.30 Communion at Orpington. A beautiful day – late Spring, early Summer – and, as I cycled through Mayfield at around 7.00, I could hear them singing the ascension hymn in the church. Ascension Day. The Good News to be proclaimed to the ends of the earth, Christ the wisdom and power of God. Those who attend to Him receive eternal life. It saddens me that so few people think our Ascension Day services sufficiently important too attend, that we Christians are so negligent and diffident in sharing our faith and that so many people in the world are indifferent to the words of life.

Their sound is gone out into all lands: and their words into the ends of the world. (Psalm 19⁴).

15th May

Proverbs 8 vv 22-31

The wisdom teachers of the OT taught that God created everything there is by His wisdom. His wisdom is the same thing as human wisdom, only infinitely greater, to the point that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. Human wisdom is nothing unless it is informed and inspired by the divine wisdom. It might seem reasonable, then, that, if God created the world through wisdom, wisdom would have to be the first thing He created. Wisdom would be the most important thing He created. This is not too far from the thought that the universe was created by the Word of God. God's words are words of wisdom. In the NT Jesus is identified as the Word of God and as the wisdom and power of God. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.* (John 1¹⁻³). So, early Christian thinkers tended to identify the figure of Wisdom in these verses with Jesus. People who agreed with Arius maintained that God created wisdom and therefore He created Jesus, but this really is stretching the analogy too far. The authors of Proverbs 8 did not have the doctrine of the Incarnation in view. *O Lord, thy word: endureth for ever in heaven.* (Psalm 119⁸⁹).

16th May

Proverbs 9 vv 1-6

Am I pushing the analogy too far if I draw a parallel with the Bread and Wine of Holy Communion? It is possible to mug up a subject in order to pass an examination and then, if you don't use the skills and knowledge you have acquired, to forget it all within a few months. On the other hand, if you practise a skill, it becomes second nature. Driving would be a good example for many people. A carpenter is more than someone who is good at working with wood. It is what he is. The wisdom teachers are not trying to encourage their pupils to learn about wisdom. They are trying to make them wise. The preacher is not trying to teach people about Jesus: he is trying to make them Christians. You are what you eat. We don't read the Bible simply for information which we could use to pass a Scripture test; we read the Bible in order that the Word of God might be engrafted in our hearts and bear fruit in love and joy and peace and all the other fruits of the Holy Spirit. It is important to read the Bible prayerfully and in the context of worship, not only as though it were just any book. God speaks to us in many ways as well as through the written Word. Jesus, the Word of God, nourishes us with His Body and Blood in Holy Communion. There are many means of grace.

He rained down manna also upon them for to eat: and gave them food from heaven. (Psalm 78²⁵).

17th May (Sunday after Ascension or Easter 7)

Proverbs 9 vv 7-12

Time to come clean for those of you who don't know. The tradition followed in the 1662 BCP is that there is Easter Sunday and then five Sundays after Easter, followed by Ascensiontide, beginning on the following Thursday, and then Whitsunday and Whit week. Common Worship 2000, for very good reasons, counts the whole fifty day period as the Easter season. Whitsunday (now usually called Pentecost). The giving of the Holy Spirit is the culmination and last day of Easter. So Whit week is no longer marked. The Ascension receives less emphasis and the following Sunday is merely Easter 7. This means that, unless people come to Church on the Thursday, they may miss celebrating the Ascension. The Roman Catholics have done something different and more or less given up on the Thursday. Accepting that people won't come on Thursday, they now celebrate the Ascension on the Sunday. As this passage implies, it can be useless to reach out to the unheeding. *Thou art gone up on high, thou hast led captivity captive, thou hast received gifts for men:* (Psalm 68^{18a}).

18th May

Proverbs 9 vv 13-18

Stolen waters are sweet.

This is another of those phrases people may recognise even if they don't know that they come from the Bible. It's funny how sometimes things seem more enjoyable if you shouldn't really be doing them. As a teenager, going to the park is much more fun when you are playing truant from school than it is at the weekend. I wonder if that's why dieters find it harder to resist cream cakes than people who aren't worrying about their weight. In a passage I don't entirely understand (Romans 7⁷¹⁻¹⁴) S Paul seems to imply that knowledge of the Law makes it all the more attractive to break the Law. Maybe this is another aspect of original sin. Not merely naughty but nice, but all the nicer because it is naughty.

Order my steps in thy word: and so shall no wickedness have dominion over me. (Psalm 119¹³³).

19th May

Proverbs 10 v1

I was listening to a discussion on the radio recently about "living wills". This is where you lay down directions while you are fully compos mentis regarding what treatment you would like to receive in the event that you either become incapacitated to make decisions or (if perhaps your brain is still working, but you are paralysed and cannot communicate) you come to a point where you can't tell people what you want. One woman in good health was adamant that she was leaving directions that she should not be kept alive if she became demented or comatose or severely disabled. When she was asked whether she had considered how her family might feel about that, she said she didn't care. What would happen to her was her decision to make and hers alone. That struck me as very selfish. Of course we have to consider other people no matter how desperate our own situation. If we're in a hospital bed, we still have responsibilities to the ward staff and to our visitors. Nearer to today's verse, if we're thinking about doing something wicked or foolish or dangerous, we can't act without considering the impact on our families and, indeed, on other people in general. We are never individuals without responsibilities towards other people and to God. *O consider mine adversity, and deliver me: for I do not forget thy law.* (Psalm 119¹⁵³).

20th May

Proverbs 10 v2

How often in recent years have we heard of some scandal in financial services or banking? Miss selling payment protection insurance, rigging the LIBOR rate, comparison websites which don't after all offer customers the best deal. It sometimes seems that there is no longer any integrity in banking or financial services. If you can get away with taking money off naive people, that's regarded as fair game. Even if you go so far as to break the law, the worst that can happen, it seems, is that you might have to repay the money. The regulatory system and the legal system seem to be far better at protecting bankers' bonuses than at punishing bankers who have done wrong. I sometimes wonder what sort of consciences – these people who grow rich basically by cheating simple decent people out of their money.

For the ungodly for his own lust doth persecute the poor: let them be taken in the crafty wiliness they have imagined. The ungodly is so proud, that he careth not for God: neither is God in all his thoughts. (Psalm 10^{3&4}).

21st May

Proverbs 10 v3

In the end there is justice. Good people, poor people do endure great suffering. The wicked, the heartless prosper in this world's terms, but there is justice in the end.

Great are the troubles of the righteous: but the Lord delivereth him out of all. (Psalm 34¹⁹).

22nd May

Proverbs 10 vv 4&5

This is perhaps more obvious advice that anyone would give to a young person. If you want to get on and you want your family to prosper, you have to get on with it. They say that teenagers need a lot of sleep. Possibly, but you have to get up and go to school or work and it's no use loafing around when you're there.

Man goeth forth to his work, and to his labour: until the evening. O Lord, how manifold are thy works: in wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy riches. (Psalm 104^{23&24}).

23rd May

Proverbs 10 v6

I'm writing this the day we heard of the so-called Islamic State burning a captured Jordanian pilot to death. The savagery of these people is beyond our imagining. This was the latest and most horrifying of a series of atrocities – beheadings and other murders, threats, forced conversions to Islam, depopulation and starvation of minority groups. Even Al Qaeda condemned the savagery of this lot. You and I probably wouldn't hurt even an animal and we find it hard to understand how human beings can act like this. It certainly isn't just Moslems. The massacres in Rwanda were tribal. Christians too have been guilty of torture and killing in the name of religion. Right wing dictators in Latin America “disappeared” their critics. Left wing terrorists in C20 let off bombs in crowded cities. Europeans were guilty of genocide in the Nazi era. Atrocities perpetrated by the British too have come to light as documents from the dying days of empire have been brought to the public notice. How is it that human beings can be inhumane? The answer lies in our distorted relationship with God. Either we don't believe in Him at all or we have a false picture of Him – an idol if you like. What is God like? God is like Jesus. To know Him is to have eternal life. To know God is to know that God is love. We are only truly human when we are in a true relationship with the one true God.

Lord, what love have I unto thy law: all the day long is my study in it. Thou through thy commandments hast made me wiser than mine enemies: for they are ever with me. Psalm 119^{97&98}).

24th May (Pentecost / Whitsunday)

Proverbs 10 v7

The memory of the just is blessed.

It has been said that without the Holy Spirit the Church would have been nothing but a memorial society for a dead carpenter. *Do this in remembrance of me.* Christ is our beginning, our alpha, the reason for our existence. We do not, however, do these things merely because Christ has died. Christ is risen and we live in the presence of the Risen Christ. Christ will come again. He is our goal, our omega, our end. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Risen Christ, the Lord and Giver of Life. In the Spirit we know Jesus. In Jesus we know God. In the Spirit we are empowered with Christ Who is the wisdom and power of God to complete His work in their world, which is the salvation of the cosmos.

When thou lettest thy breath go forth they shall be made: and thou shalt renew the face of the earth. (Psalm 104³⁰).

25th May

Proverbs 10 vv 8-11

When Jesus says, *For unto everyone that hath shall be given, but he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath* (Matthew 25²⁹), it is hard to understand what He means.

Some people take it as Jesus repeating the cynical saying that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. What I think He means, however, is spiritual wealth. Good people practise goodness and get better. Wise people attend to wisdom and become wiser. Bad people do more and more bad things so that they become worse and fools refuse to listen.

Open thou mine eyes: that I may see the wondrous things of thy law. Psalm 119¹⁸).

26th May

Proverbs 10 v12

This is picked up in the New Testament. I Peter 4⁸: *And above all things have fervent charity: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.* All sin is a failure of love, charity. The Summary of the Law is that we should love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, mind and strength and that we should love our neighbours as ourselves. If we truly loved, we wouldn't sin. When we do sin, love can put things right. Moreover, if we are people of love, we are prepared to forgive the sins of other people.

With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not go wrong out of thy commandments. (Psalm 119¹⁰.)

27th May

Proverbs 10 vv12-17

These are by now familiar themes. Wisdom begets wisdom. Folly refuses amendment. Living wisely brings peace and prosperity. Living foolishly brings nothing but trouble. I was asked the other day if someone who hadn't previously believed in God and perhaps had opposed religion came into Church, would God welcome him. Of course, I replied. Jesus sent His disciples (us) into the whole world to preach the Gospel, to bring the Good News, to invite people to come to Him. God searches for the lost like a shepherd looking for a missing sheep. He longs for the prodigal son to return to Him. All human beings are fools in their rejection of God and His commandments, but God sends us His wisdom in the person of Jesus Christ to bring us home to Him, to participate in His wisdom so that we may live.

Their sound is gone out into all lands: and their words into the ends of the world. (Psalm 19⁴),

28th May

Proverbs 10 v18

If you really don't like someone, is it better to say that you don't like them and perhaps upset them, maybe cause a fight? Or is it better to pretend to their face to like them and perhaps behave differently behind their backs from the way you behave to their face? Neither alternative is very savoury. Surely it would be better to learn to like them. Now I'm sure it wouldn't make sense to like everyone the same. Moreover I have to admit that there are people I find it very hard to like. A good place to start is to pray for them. That helps. We really ought not to say or do things behind people's backs which we wouldn't do to their face. If we practise loving people, we may find we get better at it. *Thou shalt show me the path of life; in thy presence is the fulness of joy: and at thy right hand there is pleasure for evermore.* (Psalm 16¹²).

29th May

Proverbs 10¹⁹⁻²¹

Some people talk for the sake of talking. That isn't entirely a bad thing. Neither is texting, phoning or going on social media. We need to communicate if we are to relate; we need to relate if we are to love. However, if we just talk for the sake of talking without thinking what we are saying (or tweeting or texting) we might say some very foolish things – giving away too much about ourselves, gossiping, making remarks which other people find offensive, etc.. I know from experience that electronic media can be something of a snare here. Sitting at the computer screen or holding your 'phone, you are that bit more detached than you are face to face and you might find yourself writing or saying things that you wouldn't say if the person was in front of you. It is good to talk, but what we say should build up the other person, not put him down.

Keep thy tongue from evil: and thy lips, that they speak no guile.

30th May

Proverbs 10 vv 22-32

The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable.

I was rather amused that the King James Bible of 1611 uses the word "acceptable" here. It is such a modern word in this context. Teachers, social workers, politicians, etc. say that certain words or actions are "unacceptable" when they really mean "bad" but can't say "bad" because they don't want to appear judgmental, as if they believed there were any moral absolutes. The contortions that unbelievers get into! *The fear of the Lord is clean and endureth for ever:* (Psalm 19⁹)

31st May (Trinity Sunday)

Proverbs 11 v1

What has this verse to do with the Trinity? God is the God of justice. He creates heaven and earth in accordance with His Laws, and His Wisdom permeates the whole of creation. Christ is the wisdom and power of God. Christ is the Word of God. The Ten Commandments are the Ten Words. They are summarised in the commandment to love. The entire cosmos is created in love, and disorder, chaos, results when God's commandments are disregarded, right down to the level of a market stall, where a dishonest greengrocer might be tempted to sell under weight. *The wages of sin is death.* The Holy Spirit is the Giver of Life. Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life. God is one, three persons united in love. Love is just and merciful. In Christ we are one with Him and He with us. We are one with one another in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. This is God's Will for the Church. It is His Will for the world, which He so loved that He sent His only-begotten Son. The Trinity is a fellowship of love which embraces the whole of creation and His Will is that the creation, especially the human creation, responds to His Love by loving him, but, *If a man love me, he will keep my words:* (John 14²³) and that includes giving your customers their money's worth.

But the Lord's delight is in them that fear him: and put their trust in his mercy. (Psalm 147¹¹).

1st June (Visitation transferred)

Proverbs 11 v2

This is the day this year on which we commemorate Mary's visit to Elisabeth. Elisabeth was six months pregnant with John the Baptist and Mary had just learnt that she was to become the Mother of the Son of God, the Mother of God. It was on this occasion that she sang the Magnificat a hymn which celebrates God's care for the humble and warns of the consequences of pride. *And his mercy is on them that fear him: throughout all generations. He hath shewed strength with his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.*

Who is like unto the Lord our God, that hath his dwelling so high: and yet humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven and earth? He taketh up the simple out of the dust: and lifteth the poor out of the mire. (Psalm 113^{5&6}).

2nd June

Proverbs 11 vv 3-6

In the end, what really matters in life? They say that nobody on his death bed wishes that he had spent more time at the office. But how do we occupy our time? What do we do with our lives? What matters in the end? If we live by the Ten Commandments, the most important day of the week is the Sabbath, not any of the working days at all. That's not to say that work is unimportant. The house needs cleaning. The clothes need ironing. The garden needs digging. Most of us have to earn a living. Lots of things have to be done in order to sustain our life on earth. In the end, however, it is all vanity. The house will get dirty again. The weeds will come back. The clothes crease. What you make at work will eventually decay. You'll spend the money you earn and you'll need to earn more. It's not even just a vicious circle going on for ever. It will all end in death and most of us will be forgotten in a couple of generations. But the things the Sabbath is for are for ever – worship, rest, relationships with God and with the people we love. How would the wise person use his or her time, on temporal (time bound) pursuits, which are essentially temporary, or on the eternal – the love of God and neighbour? *So teach us to number our days: that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.* (Psalm 90¹²).

3rd June

Proverbs 11 vv 7-9

On 22nd May we were thinking about how bankers and other people in finance, the energy companies, the train operating companies and others in C21, rich people who grow richer by exploiting the naivety of the ordinary decent people who are their customers – charging obscenely high fares to those who don't realise that there are much cheaper fares on offer, taking advantage of loyal customers who don't switch by overcharging them, etc., etc.. We wondered how their consciences allow them to get away with it? And what do they get out of it anyway? What is so great about being obscenely rich, especially when other people do not have enough even for the bare necessities of life? And even if there is something great about living in forty rooms or having two houses when some people are living in cardboard boxes, you won't get to keep them. You can't take them with you and you will have to account for your selfishness and greed. *And yet they think that their houses shall continue for ever: and that their dwelling-places shall endure from one generation to another: and call the lands after their own name. Nevertheless, man will not abide in honour: seeing that he may be compared unto the beasts that perish; this is the way of them.* (Psalm 49^{11&12}).

4th June (Corpus Christi)

Proverbs 11 vv 10&11

Human beings are social animals. We live in families. We live in communities. We associate at work or to play sports or to pursue common interests. We join clubs. We go to pubs. More profoundly, as Christians we are members one of another. The whole community is affected by what individuals do. No man is an island. What we are – good or bad, wise or foolish - has an impact on the whole community. Obviously some people have more influence than others, but we all have some influence on others and they on us. Even the housebound person who lives alone probably has some visitors, even if only professional carers. The housebound person has an influence on them. Then there are letters, phone calls and electronic media. Even if you are entirely alone, you can pray and thereby participate in the well-being of the whole community. Psalm 72 speaks of the blessing of having a good king. Psalm 72 is only completely fulfilled in Jesus. In Jesus, all believers are kings and priests, a blessing to the community in which they live. *The mountains also shall bring peace: and the hills righteousness unto the people.* (Psalm 72³).

5th June

Proverbs 11 vv 12&13

From the top of a number 24 bus, I think it is on the frontage of Westminster Cathedral that you can read the words *Haec Sacra Aedifix*. What they mean is *this sacred building*. An aedifix (edifice) is a building. Hence to (a)edify is to build. I am coming round to it this long way round to emphasise the point that edification is literally building. We nearly always use the words edify and edification metaphorically and perhaps link them at a subconscious level with educate and education. Edify literally means build, however. So when St Paul writes about edifying the church, he is not talking about educating or informing the Church; he is talking about building it. Now, of course, he does not mean by the church a brick building like Westminster Cathedral. What Paul means by the Church is the Body of Christ, us, the people, Christians. The wise person builds community. The wise person builds up other people so that they become the best they can be. The fool demolishes people and breaks down community by gossip and by denigrating other people. Sadly there are plenty of fools like this in churches, which ought to be model communities, modelling the wisdom of God for the world. *Jerusalem is built as a city: that is at unity in itself. For thither the tribes go up, even the tribes of the Lord: to testify unto Israel, to give thanks unto the Name of the Lord.* (Psalm 122^{3&4}).

6th June

Proverbs 11 v14

This is a bit of a hard one. On the face of it, it looks like a no-brainer. If those in authority are not advised or counselled and act autocratically they are likely to bring ruin on themselves and the people they are responsible for. On the other hand, there are situations in which the counsellors come up with conflicting advice. Unless you make a decision, rejecting the advice you consider to be mistaken, the government is likely to be paralysed. What about situations in which the counsellors share the power, town councillors, parochial church councillors, members of parliament, members of the US congress? If they consistently use their position to veto the actual leadership, there may be a stalemate in which no effective decisions can be made. On the other hand, if they are all “yes men”, there doesn’t seem much point in electing or appointing them. *God standeth in the congregation of princes: he is a Judge among gods. How long will ye give wrong judgement: and accept the persons of the ungodly?* (Psalm 82^{1&2}).

7th June (Trinity 1)

Proverbs 11 vv 15-23

I haven’t anything to add to what is said in these verses. They are specific examples illustrating the basic theme of the wisdom literature in the Bible. If you act wisely, if you behave well – better still, if you are wise, if you are good – you are living in harmony with the Maker of heaven and earth and it is therefore reasonable to expect that things will go well for you, for the wider community and indeed for the whole of creation. If, on the other hand, we are fools who disobey the commandments of God, we are like people driving on the right hand side of the road, a crash waiting to happen, a danger to ourselves and to other people. *I hate them that imagine evil things: but thy law do I love. Thou art my defence and shield: and my trust is in thy word.* (Psalm 119¹¹³¹⁴).

8th June

Proverbs 11 vv 24-31

I'm going to stick my neck out here. When we contemplate our church finances, we sometimes ask whether we ought to be supporting other missions and charities when it is so difficult for us even to pay our own bills. We might wonder the same when our domestic budgets are under stress. If it is all we can do to maintain our own lifestyles and to support our families, ought we to be giving to charity or, indeed, to the Church? Businesses, too, might believe that they can only survive if they make a good profit and that they should therefore take advantage of the market and the regulatory regime to make as much money as they can. Today's reading refers to the practice of holding back corn from the market till the price goes up (an artificial shortage) and then selling it at a greater profit. I'm going to stick my neck out here and say that we cannot expect to prosper unless we are open-handed. Everything we have comes from God and He supplies all our needs. If we are close-fisted and selfish, I do not think we can expect Him to bless us abundantly. If we are generous, however, in imitation of our heavenly Father, we shall discover that we receive in proportion to what we give (Matthew 7¹⁻¹²). Jacob promised God that he would give Him back a tithe (a tenth) of whatever God gave him. This became a standard in the OT. Many Christians believe that tithing should be a standard for Christians too. I do practise tithing myself, but I do not believe that it should be mandatory. Christianity is not a legalistic religion. St Paul says, *He which soweth sparingly shall reap sparingly: and he which soweth bountifully shall reap bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver* (II Corinthians 9^{6&7}). He also quotes Exodus 16¹⁸: *He that had gathered much, had nothing over; and he that had gathered little had no lack* (II Corinthians 8¹⁵). I've often heard people who tithe say that they have never gone short even though they are often, in my experience, people in poorly paid jobs. It would be a travesty to say that tithing is a guarantee of prosperity. You can't make bargains with God, but you can trust Him! *Praise the Lord, O my soul; while I live will I praise the Lord: yea, as long as I have any being, I will sing praises unto my God.*

June 9th

Proverbs 12 vv 1-3

A man shall not be established by wickedness.

Why would anyone think he could be? But obviously people do. In some countries, people take over the government in military coups. Even in democracies, it is not unknown for people to become established in positions of power by lying and by their ruthless treatment of rivals. We've seen how people seek to make themselves rich at the expense of treating their customers, suppliers and workers unfairly and dishonestly. People build their lives without regard to God. But, in the long term, a life based on anything less than God and walking in the way of His commandments is doomed.

Such as are blessed of God shall possess the land: and they that are cursed of him shall be rooted out. (Psalm 37²²).

June 10th

Proverbs 12 v4

I can see why women's rights activists might cringe at this verse. It could be taken to imply that a wife is simply an adjunct of her husband. It could also be read as implying that female purity and continence were more important than male. We have seen, however, that Proverbs (and the Bible in general) expects the same high standards of men as it does of women. The Bible also teaches that men and women are equally made in the image of God. A wife is not simply an adjunct of her husband. Where I think, however, the feminists go wrong is if they try to maintain the independence of the wife from the husband and (obviously therefore) the husband from the wife. You would have two independent individuals who happened to share a household and enjoyed sleeping together. This is not Christian marriage. The biblical view of marriage is that two people, who bring the different characteristics of men and women into their relationship, are united in their love for one another and are dependent one upon the other for the fulfilment of their lives. So whatever either of them does does indeed affect the other, for good or ill. *Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.* (Genesis 2²⁴).

With joy and gladness shall they be brought: and shall enter into the King's palace. (Psalm 45¹⁶).

June 11th (S Barnabas)

Proverbs 12⁵

One of the things people tend to know about Barnabas is that his name means son of consolation. We first meet him in Acts 4 when he sells his lands and pools the proceeds with the Church. Subsequently he recognises that God has called Saul the persecutor to become Paul the apostle. He helps to establish the new Church in Antioch and he fetches Paul from Tarsus to Antioch and accompanies Paul to Jerusalem with the money the Antiochene Christians are sending to relieve the poor there. He travelled with Paul on his first missionary journey, but parted from him when Paul refused to take Mark on their second journey because Mark had them down on the first. Paul and Barnabas are the only people in the NT called apostles apart from the twelve and Judas' replacement Matthias. Barnabas, then, is an example of the righteous man described in today's first. His thoughts are right because he is right with the Lord.

I will hearken what the Lord God will say concerning me: for he shall speak peace unto his people, and to his saints, that they turn not again. (Psalm 85⁸).

June 12th

Proverbs 12 vv 6-8

When, in our parish bible study, we were reading the Epistle of James, someone commented that maybe in James' Church malicious speech was a particular problem – lies, gossip, rudeness, put downs, unkind words. James has so much to say about the power of the tongue and its potential to do evil. *Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God* (James 3⁹). Its something worth thinking, about isn't? What we say about people, what we say to people, do we take it into account that they are made after the similitude of God? Do we ever reflect on the sheer incongruity of using the same tongue for prayer and praise as we use to the detriment of other people?

What reward shall be given or done unto thee, thou false tongue: even mighty and sharp arrows, with hot burning coals. (Psalm 120³).

June 13th

Proverbs 12 v9

Some people are pretentious. They think themselves better than other people. They are snobs, maybe. Perhaps they speak better or are better educated or better dressed or wealthier. It isn't difficult for us Christians to think of ourselves as better than other people. Some people think that other people should look up to them. But which is better, to have an undeserved reputation, or to have bread on the table even though some other people (fools!) look down on you? Sometimes people look up to others for all the wrong reasons. Celebrities for example? Sometimes people are looked down on (because they are poor or poorly dressed or not good-looking) for all the wrong reasons. What matters is what God thinks of us and He looks on us in Christ.

Ye are the blessed of the Lord: who made heaven and earth.

June 14th (Trinity 2)

Proverbs 12 v10

I'm writing these notes the week I sadly had to have my spaniel Max put to sleep. He had just had enough. Jesus teaches us that not a sparrow falls to the earth outside of the providence of God. There is no excuse for cruelty to any living creature. There is no excuse for anything but kindness. God gave humanity dominion over His creation. We hunt. We farm. We mine. We manufacture. It is amazing what humanity can do, but we do it all under licence. The cosmos belongs to God. We are stewards. We are answerable to Him for what we do with the world which He has entrusted to us. So the decent hunter respects his quarry. There is compassion in farming if it is done properly. Manufacturing processes must not be allowed to devour resources or to pollute. Development projects, housing, roads and other infrastructure, must not be ruthlessly pursued without care for the environment they are destroying. There are balances to be struck, but there is no room for cruelty, there is no place for ruthlessness. I'm sure that you and I cannot understand how anyone could wantonly hurt an animal. Still less, then, how can people be so cruel to their fellow human beings?

All the whole heavens are the Lords: the earth has he given to the children of men. (Psalm 115¹⁶).

June 15th

Proverbs 12 v10

When the Flood was over, God made a covenant with humanity (Genesis 9¹⁻⁷). He reaffirmed our dominion over His Creation. We could kill and eat animals, but the life of the creature is represented by the blood. The life must be returned to God. Human life is even more valuable than animal life, the basis of the commandment *Thou shalt do no murder*. The reason why the Jewish Law demands that animals being killed for food have to have their throats cut and the blood drained is that animal life is sacred to God. The animal must be killed humanely and (in Jewish practice) the life returned to God. The Moslem practice of halal slaughter is based on the same principle. Nowadays, it is usual for those of us who are not Jews or Moslems to stun animals before killing them as this is believed to be the most humane way of doing it. If stunning first is more humane than cutting the throat of a conscious animal, it would seem that the principle behind kosher and halal would be best served by agreeing to stunning. Some halal meat is stunned before its throat is cut. There is dispute about whether stunning first is more humane. I don't know enough to be sure about it, but my sympathies lie with the people who say that all animals should be stunned before slaughter – except for one thing. I just have a suspicion that secularists who are opposed to religion in modern Britain are using animal welfare issues as a pretext for taking away the religious privileges of Jews and Moslems. It might be that this campaign against halal and kosher is part of a wider campaign to force all religions to accept the norms of the secular state. *He bringeth forth grass for the cattle: and green herb for the service of men.* (Psalm 104¹⁴).

June 16th

Proverbs 12 vv 11-14

I presume that criminals think that crime is an easier way to make a living than honest work. When I read about criminal cases or watch crime dramas, I often wonder if that is so. It looks to me that there is a great deal of work in a major heist, plus the risk of getting caught. Maybe it's that risk that gives you the buzz. It's more exciting than honest work, especially in these days of risk assessments and health and safety, which I'm told take all the fun out of many jobs. Still foolish to commit crime, however. Whether it's easier or harder, more or less exciting, to commit crime than to work honestly, it will lead to disaster in the end. *Blessed are all they that fear the Lord: and walk in his ways. For thou shalt eat the labours of thine hands: O well is thee, and happy shalt thou be.* (Psalm 128^{1&2}).

June 17th

Proverbs 12 v15

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes.

So how do we know when we are being foolish? Sometimes we don't realise we've acted foolishly until we see the results. We may not be sure even then. I've done some things which have had a bad outcome, but the outcome might have been even worse, had I acted differently. How do you know? As the other half of the verse says, it is wise to listen to counsel. But how do you evaluate the counsel? How do you know whether you are getting good advice? If we are familiar with the Bible and the teaching of the Church, if we make our decisions prayerfully, we are acting wisely. This is why it is important to read the Bible (all of it, not just our favourite passages) regularly and to be constant in prayer. God is always with us and knows all our thoughts. We shan't always get it right, however. None of us is infallible, no matter how spiritual or learned we may be. *Unto thee lift I up mine eyes: O thou that dwellest in the heavens. Behold, even as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress: even so our eyes wait upon the Lord.* (Psalm 123^{1&2}).

June 18th

Proverbs 12 v16

Anger is an interesting subject. There is a good case for righteous indignation, for getting angry when we see an injustice. Jesus was angry to see the the Court of the Gentiles in the Temple given over to the money-changers. We speak of the wrath of God, an appropriate response to the wickedness which is done on earth. On the other hand, human anger at least tends to a loss of control. Even if we are angry for a good reason, we may overreact. Moreover, mostly our anger is more selfish than that. We are angry because we don't get our own way or because someone has said or done something we don't like. There are a few psalms (not as many as many people suppose) which cry out for vengeance against those who have mistreated the people of God. They make us uncomfortable. Jesus asked God to forgive the people who crucified Him. Shouldn't we forgive our enemies? I read the interesting suggestion recently that we shouldn't think of ourselves as the humble poor demanding vengeance on our oppressors in these psalms, but ask ourselves whether we might be the oppressors, who would be punished if justice were done? Are we, for example, complicit in a world economic system which forces poor people to labour in sweat shops so that we can have an excess of cheap clothing? *Bow down thine ear to me: make haste to deliver me.* (Psalm 31²).

June 19th

Proverbs 12 vv 17-22

Probably one of the issues yesterday's verse sought to deal with was hasty speech. The fool speaks hastily, revealing too much, thoughtlessly hurting another person, misleading through carelessness, inaccuracy or downright malice, expressing anger before "counting to ten".

Let the lying lips be put to silence: which cruelly, disdainfully, and despitefully, speak against the righteous. (Psalm 31²⁰).

June 20th

Proverbs 12 v 23

Many years ago, when school assembly was rather in the doldrums, Gillingham Grammar School thought that things might be livened up a bit if boys were allowed to take assemblies. I regularly took this opportunity and I remember one occasion on which I really livened things up. Knowing that what I had to say was controversial, I told my listeners that atheists in the congregation could go to sleep because I wasn't prepared to cast my pearls before swine. Whether or not I was wise to take that line then, of course those are in fact words of Jesus: *Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you* (Matthew 7⁶). There is a time when talking, even talking wisely, does more harm than good.

I said, I will take heed to my ways: that I offend not in my tongue. I will keep my mouth as it were with a bridle: while the ungodly is in my sight. (Psalm 39^{1&2}).

June 21st

Proverbs 12 vv 24-28

One of the things which is hard to understand is that Jesus' friends go to sleep while He is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. You'd think they would have been too frightened. They are described as *sleeping for sorrow* (Luke 23⁴⁵). Depression can make people feel tired all the time. Then they don't get jobs done and the resulting chaos of their lives makes them all the more depressed. Clinical depression is a horrible condition. It does not always receive the sympathy it deserves because friends and family may just think that depressed person is trying hard enough. Moreover depression is often resistant to medical treatment. Prayer is an important support, but it is not a magic bullet. God doesn't simply take all our problems away. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me. (Psalm 23⁴).

June 22nd

Proverbs 13 v1

Today is the anniversary of my ordination as a deacon. A deacon is a servant. Jesus is the Servant. All Christians are called to be servants, servants of God, servants of one another, servants of the world. Deacons epitomise the servant role. At the service I was given a New Testament with the words, *Receive this Book, as a sign of the authority given you this day to speak God's word to his people. Build them up in his truth, and serve them in his name.* We are all servants of God. We are all children of God. (In New Testament Greek the same word {παῖς} can mean either. They are closely related concepts – junior members of the household, highly valued in a properly run household, but under authority.) *A wise son heareth his father's instructions.* The children of God hear His Word in the Bible.

I am small and of no reputation: yet do I not forget thy commandments. (Psalm 119¹⁴¹).

June 23rd

Proverbs 13 vv 2-6

The other day, we thought about the person who is too depressed to take any initiative, clean the house, earn a living, even take a bath. Today, among the familiar warnings about careless or dishonest speech, we think about the person who is just plain lazy. Such a person doesn't prosper. But what makes people lazy or industrious? Some people come from caring homes where they are encouraged to learn and to try hard at school and then are supported in going to college and work. Some people grow up in homes where nobody cares much about education and parents and grandparents have never had meaningful work. Others are over-indulged. Everything is provided for them and they never experience having to look after themselves until they are well into their twenties. Some children from good homes make nothing of themselves. Some children from poor homes transcend their background. It is a curious mixture of genetics, environment and personality. We should not be too quick either to condemn or to condone. A life lived in the context of faith will make all the difference. So children's religious education is the most important thing and ought to be the parents' highest priority.

I see that all things come to and end: but thy commandment is exceeding broad. (Psalm 119⁹⁶).

June 24th (Nativity of S John the Baptist)

Proverbs 13 v7

Neither Jesus nor S John the Baptist had much in the way of worldly wealth, yet they were rich. Jesus is the wisdom and power of God. John spoke with the wisdom of God in order to prepare the way for Jesus. They were very different men, but they were both faithful in proclaiming the Word of God. John lived in the desert, dressed roughly and ate sparingly. Jesus spent His time with *all sorts and conditions of men*, including the people everybody else looked down on. Just like people who say that the reason they don't come to Church is that they don't like the vicar or that the people who do go are all hypocrites, the crowds managed both to reject John because he was too ascetic and Jesus because He was not ascetic enough. Maybe the real reason was that they did not want to accept that the wisdom of God matters more than the things of this world and maybe that is the real reason why people won't come to Church today and little to do with vicars, congregations, styles of worship, convenience or otherwise of times, location of church buildings, etc.. Jesus says *But wisdom is justified of her children.* (Matthew 11¹⁹).

I am wiser than the aged: because I keep thy commandments. (Psalm 119¹⁰⁰).

June 25th

Proverbs 13 vv 8-10

Only by pride cometh contention.

When there is an argument or even a row in a family or a church or a political party or whatever, how often is it the case that it is not really about the matter under discussion? What is really going on is that people are jockeying for position. The person who gets to decide where the family will go for a day out, the person who gets his or her own way about which hymnbook we use, the politician whose economic policy is adopted by the party, is more important than all those other people who have to fall into line. Of course there ought to be discussion about all these things. Getting the views of a number of people (counsel) makes it more likely that good decisions will be taken. Involving people in the decision-making process makes them more likely to support what is decided. But when discussions generate into rows it is worth asking whether the participants are really seeking the answer to the question under discussion or whether they are in fact asserting their own importance. *Make thou thy servant to delight in that which is right: that the proud do me no wrong.* (Psalm 119¹²²).

June 26th

Proverbs 13 v11

There seem to me two aspects to this. If you get rich dishonestly or by fleecing your customers, bullying your suppliers and exploiting your workers, or if you get rich by inheriting a fortune, or if you get rich very quickly as a singer, actor or sports personality, you might find that these dubiously-gotten gains don't last. The thief or drug dealer may have his wealth confiscated. The too easily rich may well spend too easily. It is even possible that the regulators will eventually catch up with the energy companies and the financial services sector! There is more to it than that, however. What you earn by honest labour is likely to mean more to you, to be more satisfying than any ill-gotten gains.

Blessed are all they that fear the Lord: and walk in his ways. For thou shalt eat the labours of thine hands: O well is thee, and happy shalt thou be. (Psalm 128^{1&2}).

June 27th

Proverbs 13 v12

I'm afraid I'm not a patient person. Give me a job to do and (if it's a job I want to do) I'll do it at once. Or not at all. Don't keep waiting if I don't do it straightaway. On the other hand, I can't understand why people keep others waiting for what they could do here and now. *Don't wish your life away*, people used to say when I was a youngster, waiting for exam results, looking forward to going to college, looking forward to ordination. It is good advice. If you don't live in the here and now, but only an imagined future, you might get to your death bed, not having lived at all. We do have hopes and indeed plans for the future, but we shouldn't miss out on what we have now because of what we think is coming. Neither should we be too definite. It is God Who holds the future and things may work out entirely differently from what we expected. I thought I was going to be a doctor when I left school. Some young people have very detailed life plans and get quite upset when even something planned for just a few months gets altered. Maybe they should remember that our lives are not our own. We shall only be truly fulfilled as human beings if we accept that God is in control. He wants what's best for us and He knows what is best for us better than we know ourselves.

They that put their trust in the Lord shall be even as the mount Sion: which may not be removed, but standeth fast for ever. (Psalm 125¹).

June 28th

Proverbs 13 vv 13-16

Whoso despiseth the word shall be destroyed.

Depending on which bible you are using, you will find this verse variously translated. I'm sticking to *word*, however, even though other translations have *instruction* or *warning*. The Hebrew is דְבַר which is the ordinary word for *word*. It is the word which the prophets proclaim. It is the word by which (by whom?) God made heaven and earth. It is the word which ordinary people speak. It is the word which does not return to God void. So it is foolish to disregard instruction or a warning. It is foolish to disregard the teachings of the wise. It is foolish to disregard the word of God written in the Scriptures. Above all it is foolish to disregard Jesus, the Word of God made flesh.

Thy word is a lantern unto my feet: and a light unto my paths. (Psalm 119¹⁰⁵)

June 29th (S Peter {& S Paul})

Proverbs 13 v17

[29th June has traditionally been the commemoration of S Peter in the Church of England. The Roman Catholics keep S Paul on the same day and nowadays the Church of England tends to as well.] Before most people could read and write, messages were sent by human messengers. They had to memorise the words verbatim and when they delivered their message, they would start by saying something like, *Thus says the king* or *These are the words of the general*. They would then say exactly what the king or general had said to them. In the bible, the prophets are messengers of God. God entrusts them with His Word for the people and the prophets convey God's Word to the people. They often begin by saying, *Thus saith the LORD*. The Word of God is actually made flesh in Jesus Christ. The apostles had the task of proclaiming that word to the ends of the earth. The apostolic Church (of which we are members) inherits that commission. It is our task to proclaim the Word of God to the ends of the earth. You and I proclaim that Word by what we do and by what we say and, above all, by what we are. *The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us*, (John 1¹⁴). We are now His Body, the Body of the Word made flesh.

The Lord's Name is praised: from the rising up of the sun unto the going down of the same. (Psalm 113³).

June 30th

Proverbs 13 vv 18&19

The desire accomplished is sweet to the soul.

I remember hearing an address one year at the Three Hour Devotion on Good Friday which spoke about the lust of finishing. I admitted a couple of days ago that I am not a patient person. Once I've started a job, I want to get it finished. A lot of people are the same. This is all very well. The other kind of person is a lot more frustrating to me, the kind of person who gets half a room decorated and then leaves the house in chaos while he takes a prolonged break. People like me, however, are liable to make the opposite mistake. Having put up with a few days of the furniture in the hall and the carpets turned back, I'm likely to bodge the last of the painting and papering in my impatience to get it finished. The address, however, was about one of the seven things Jesus said from the Cross. Just before He died, he said, *It is finished* (John 19³⁰). Jesus had accomplished what He came to do. The cross is the wisdom and power of God. The Word of God is the greatest love possible for any man. The form of God is obedience even to death on the cross. The death of Jesus deals once and for all with sin, the world and the devil. The death of Jesus sets us free from sin and the fear of death. The death of Jesus is life everlasting for all who put their trust in Him. This is the wisdom and power of God. This is the wisdom which is imparted to us in prayer and Scripture and Christian fellowship, the wisdom on which we feed in Holy Communion, the wisdom which we become in Christ, the wisdom which it is our task to impart to the world, the end of all things.

*O praise God in his holiness : praise him in the firmament of his power.
Praise him in his noble acts : praise him according to his excellent
greatness. Praise him in the sound of the trumpet : praise him upon the lute
and harp. Praise him in the cymbals and dances : praise him upon the
strings and pipe. Praise him upon the well-tuned cymbals : praise him
upon the loud cymbals. Let every thing that hath breath : praise the Lord.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son : and to the Holy Ghost;
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be:
world without end. Amen.*

Psalm 150.