

Basic Bible Stories



Genesis 11-43

Bible Notes April-June 2017

April 1st

Genesis 11 vv 27-32

This quarter we shall look at some basic bible stories. These are stories that children ought to learn from infancy. Perhaps you did, but they are such wonderful stories and there is always more to learn about them. They are basic stories both because they teach us something fundamental of what it means to be human – how we relate to God and to one another – and because you really have to know them in order to understand the rest of the Bible.

Are cities a good thing? Terah leaves one of the very few big cities in the world in those days and sets out for the land of Canaan. He stops on the way at Haran, which would appear to be named after one of his sons.

In favour of cities is that where a lot of people live together you can have culture, you can provide public services relatively economically, you can engage in politics, you can organise religion, you can specialise work wise. Instead of most people being subsistence farmers, you can have engineers and doctors, artists and sculptors, as well as farm and factory workers. Against cities is that they tend to be unhealthy places. Until the end of C19, when railways brought in fresh provisions and decent sewers took away waste, big cities like London depended on people coming in from the country to survive because so many people died of malnutrition, disease and pollution. Even today, cities are notorious for their grime and air pollution caused by motor vehicles is estimated to kill 40-50,000 per year. There is much less sense of community in cities and crime rates tend to be much higher than in the country. There may be more loneliness. In the city, the works of God may be less easy to recognise than in the countryside and cities may be irreligious places or given over to idolatry – the worship of silver and gold.

The Bible is ambivalent towards cities. Terah and his family leave the idolatrous city of Ur in order to make a new, purer life in the pastures of Canaan. Yet Jerusalem is the holy city, the city of the great King, the place where the Temple is built and our eternal home is described as the new Jerusalem. The English like to live in suburbs!

April 2nd (Lent 5)

Genesis 12 vv 1-5

We don't know why Terah stopped at Haran. In fact we usually start the story at this point, when God tells Abram to get on with it and travel on into Canaan. It takes faith on the part of Abram who is already an old man to leave the security of what had become the family home and set off to become nomads in Canaan, a place where life was hard, there were wild animals, water was chronically in short supply and many of the natives were unfriendly. Abram is promised that his descendants will be a great people and that the land of Canaan will be theirs. This too requires faith as Abram and Sarai are childless. Abram will be blessed and Abram will be a blessing. In what ways is Abram an example to us? St Paul emphasises that Abram believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness. The great thing about Abram is his faith. All faithful people are children of Abram. Sharing Abram's faith, we can trust God when He calls us to leave our securities behind and obey Him in new ventures. Like Abram, trusting God for our lives, we are both blessed and a blessing to others.

April 3rd

Genesis 12 vv 6-9

So what do we make of God's promise that Abram's descendants would own the land of Canaan? In OT times, it clearly meant that the Israelites would dwell in the Promised Land and that it would be theirs. Although they would go down into Egypt and become enslaved, God would set them free and bring them back. They would displace the Canaanites and defend the land from invaders. When eventually they would be exiled to Babylon they would return and reclaim it and rebuild the Temple on it. But what about the NT? What about when Jesus comes to fulfil the Law and the Prophets? Some Jews and some Christians believe that God's promise to Abraham means that the land we now call Israel belongs to the Jews and will always belong to the Jews. That would be bad news for the Palestinians. Why should an Arab whose ancestors have lived for generations in Palestine be expected to make way for a Jew whose family have lived for hundreds of years in Europe or Africa? Other Christians believe that in the NT the Promised Land is not Canaan but heaven and that all who share Abraham's faith – Jews and Gentiles alike – are citizens of heaven and that therefore the Jews have no special claim now on what we still call the Holy Land.

April 4th

Genesis 12 vv10-20

This is a difficult story, but it must be important. It is one of three similar stories – two about Abraham and one about his son Isaac. At one level it functions as a prefiguring of Abram's grandson Jacob or Israel going down into Egypt because of a famine and returning to the Promised Land after various vicissitudes, but also with gifts given them by the Egyptians. In many ways, the characters in the bible stories are just like us and that is why their experience of God resonates with ours and reading these stories helps to form our own relationships with God and with other people. In other ways, of course, their lives were very different from ours and stories like these remind us of that. Hospitality was expected to be offered to travellers. That's natural, especially when travelling was difficult and dangerous and there were no motels. Obviously, marriage was something to be honoured too. Yet it would appear that a powerful host could expect to take a woman traveller and do what he would with her, maybe killing her husband in order to get her. Abram tells a half truth to conceal that Sarai is his wife. The commentary I consulted points out that much of the responsibility for the mess which occurred seems to have been Abram's. Faithful Abram seems not to have trusted God to bring him through the danger. It is actually a comfort to us that the great heroes of the bible are fallible. We are fallible too and God loves us just as He loved them. God is faithful even when we are faithless. What matters is that, despite our many lapses, we keep coming back to God Who is always reaching out to us in love.

April 5th

Genesis 13 vv 1-13

Canaan is a dry land. There wasn't enough water or grass for all the flocks and herds owned by Abram and his nephew Lot together. So their herdsmen fought over scarce resources. Don't we fight over oil today? Aren't there fears that there will once again be fighting over water in dry parts of the world as the demand for water increases and the supply maybe diminishes with global warming? We obviously ought to be careful not to waste resources, but how far would be prepared to go without so that everybody could have enough? I'm sure that we could all afford to give away a lot more than we do without going short. Abram and Lot agree to split and Lot chooses the richest pastures even though they are in the vicinity of the notoriously sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. How far are we prepared to trade our virtue for material prosperity?

April 6th

Genesis 14 vv 1-16

This is confusing! What's going on is yet another middle-Eastern war with various allegiances. Lot has thrown in his lot (sorry) with Sodom and Gomorrah, who are on the losing side. Lot is among those taken prisoner and his goods are part of the plunder. When Abraham finds out, he takes 318 of his own armed retainers, chases the victorious army as far as what we now call Syria and sets free the captives and recovers the plunder. Lot had cast his lot with the wrong side – the wealthy, but immoral cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

April 7th

Genesis 14 vv 17-24

What follows has great significance in the NT. Confederate with Sodom and Gomorrah was the ancient city of Jerusalem. Now Jerusalem was ruled by Melchizedek, priest of God most high. He was both king and priest. It is a mystery who his ancestors were. Jerusalem is the city of peace and Melchizedek means king of righteous. Melchizedek offers bread and wine. Abram pays him tithes, acknowledging in Melchizedek a priesthood which is prior to and higher than the priesthood of Abram's descendant Levi which is the tribe from which the Jewish high priests were all supposed to come.

So all this prefigures Jesus – King of Righteousness, King of Peace, High Priest of God most High, Who offers God's faithful people Himself in Bread and Wine and receives their tithes as a token of their gratitude for His Blessings and a sign of their offering of their whole lives back to Him.

King of glory, King of
peace,
I will love thee;
and that love may
never cease,
I will move thee.
Thou hast granted my
request,
thou hast heard me;
thou didst note my
working breast,
thou hast spared me.

Wherefore with my
utmost art
I will sing thee,
and the cream of all
my heart
I will bring thee.
Though my sins
against me cried,
thou didst clear me;
and alone, when they
replied,
thou didst hear me.

Seven whole days, not
one in seven,
I will praise thee;
in my heart, though
not in heaven,
I can raise thee.
Small it is, in this poor
sort
to enroll thee:
e'en eternity's too short
to extol thee.

April 8th

Genesis 15 vv 1-21

Often, in these bible stories, the patriarchs seem to commune with God in quite an ordinary way. We perhaps feel the presence of God with us as we go about our every days and maybe talk to Him about the things that are on our minds. I find this chorus meaningful as it expresses our daily walk with God.

I serve a risen Saviour,
He's in the world
today
I know that He is
living, whatever men
may say
I see His hand of
mercy, I hear His
voice of cheer
And just the time I
need Him He's always
near

He lives (He lives), He
lives (He lives), Christ
Jesus lives today
He walks with me and
talks with me
Along life's narrow
way
He lives (He lives), He
lives (He lives),
Salvation to impart
You ask me how I
know He lives?
He lives within my
heart

In all the world around
me I see His loving
care
And though my heart
grows weary I never
will despair
I know that He is
leading, through all
the stormy blast
The day of His
appearing will come at
last

However, He is Almighty God. As well as closeness and familiarity, there is also the numinous. There is about God that which fills us with awe, with fear and dread even. Essentially, God is mysterious. He is beyond anything we can understand. When we sing about God being ineffable, we mean that there are no words, no human comprehension adequate to speak of Him. In the Presence of God we ought to feel our smallness, our utter inadequacy, our sinfulness. It is only from that base that we can appreciate how much it means that in His love He exalts us to the heavenly realms. It is only when we acknowledge our utter helplessness and complete dependence on Him, that He can lift us up to dwell with Him for ever.

This chapter includes both the everyday walk with God and the numinous. Both are necessary aspects of our experience of Him. Now it seems to me, and I speak for myself as well as others, that we have all become far too casual about being in the presence of God. We come unprepared. We are distracted and distract one another by chatting about ordinary things before, during and after divine service. We lose our sense of what a privilege it is to come to Him in prayer.

April 9th (Palm Sunday)

Genesis 16 vv 1-3

According to the Prayer Book, the procreation of children is one of the causes for which matrimony was ordained. That, you may say, was when there were high death rates from disease, malnutrition and war and the great problem for the human race was to maintain its numbers. People needed to be encouraged to have children, but only so long as they were in unconditional, long term relationships in which those children would be brought up and nurtured in the fear of the Lord. It was inevitable that most adult women would be pregnant or feeding babies for much of their lives and therefore it would make sense that men did some jobs and women others. Now, however, perhaps overpopulation is the greater problem. Women do not have to devote their lives to motherhood exclusively or at all. Casual sex is OK as long as precautions are taken. If people have children they can't or won't care for, Social Services takes over. There is no reason why couples should not choose not to have children. If gay couples wish to make the commitment of marriage to one another, there is no reason why they should not do so, despite being unable to have children. After all, older couples and couples known to be infertile have always been free to marry for the love and security marriage brings. Infertile couples and gay couples can adopt if they wish or employ surrogates to bear children for them.

What we have to think about and pray about and the Church has to decide about is whether society is so changed since the Bible and the Prayer Book and traditional Christian teaching were formulated that the Holy Spirit is now guiding us into new understandings of sex and relationships and gender roles or whether Society has taken a wrong turn and the Church should be standing up for traditional Christian values. I think the latter, especially in the light of Romans 1, but it doesn't make us popular.

Almighty and everlasting God, who, of thy tender love towards mankind, hast sent thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh, and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant, that we may both follow the example of his patience, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

April 10th

Genesis 16 vv 4-6

Despite the changes we thought about yesterday, many couples who cannot have children are very distressed about that fact and are prepared to undergo all sorts of fertility treatments. One such, of course, is to use a surrogate mother. A fertilised egg is placed in the womb of another woman with the intention that the child should be brought up as the couple's. The child so conceived may be the biological child of both the parents who will bring him up or maybe an egg belonging to the surrogate mother is fertilised by the other woman's husband and implanted. This latter would have the same result as today's story, only cutting out the medical interventions in favour of what nature intended. There are emotional strains. The surrogate who has carried the baby in her own womb for nine months may not want to give him up. I wonder if that is more likely to be the case if she is the biological mother. Occasionally, the baby born will be diseased and not what the intending parents wanted and they will refuse to accept him. In some ways then, Abram's world is so different from ours and in some ways we're so much the same. I wonder if some modern families ever do what Abram and Sarai did with Hagar to get a child? These situations can give rise to much joy and much pain.

April 11th

Genesis 16 vv 7-14

In a case not so long ago, a very poor woman from a third world country was paid to become a surrogate mother for a rich couple. The child was born handicapped and the rich couple did not want him and left the poor woman to bring him up, although she did not have the resources to do so. In these fraught circumstances, people can behave very selfishly. I was going to write "very badly", but of course it is the same thing. Relationships, marriage, parenthood, friendship can be very fulfilling, but, paradoxically, if you go into them only for what you think you can get out of them, you are doomed to disappointment. Exploitative relationships cannot satisfy any of the parties concerned. *It is more blessed to give than to receive.* The same applies in our relationship with God. It's not surprising that people who join a church for what they think they can get out of it come away with nothing. We British perhaps used to play down emotion too much, keeping a stiff upper lip no matter what. We've possibly now gone too far the other way. Having strong emotions about something does not justify you in demanding your own way at the expense of others.

April 12th

Genesis 16 vv 15&16

The Arabs claim descent from Ishmael and the Jews from Isaac. Both look back to these stories, claiming Abraham as their legitimate ancestor and tracing the rivalry between their two peoples right back to the rivalry between Abraham's two sons. When Abraham died, Ishmael and Isaac buried him at Hebron. There is a shrine there today, but it is divided by a wall to prevent Arabs and Jews from fighting with one another there.

The effects of events echo down the generations. When you listen to the rhetoric of opposing factions in wars today, how often do they hark back to what one side's ancestors did to the other side's ancestors centuries ago? Generations of children are brought up to distrust the children of the other community: Catholics and Protestants in Ireland and parts of Scotland, Serbs and Croats in what was Yugoslavia, Israelis and Palestinians, different tribes in Africa, different races in America. The sins of the fathers are visited on the children to the third and fourth generation and more. It can also be true of family squabbles at a much pettier level. Why don't we speak to Aunt Maud's side of the family? At some stage, there has to be a willingness to forgive, to be reconciled and to start again. Yet *sorry* is often the hardest word to utter and genuine forgiveness isn't much easier. Reconciliation requires grace. It takes the Cross of Jesus to break the cycle of retribution.

April 13th (Maundy Thursday)

Genesis 17 vv 1-8

There are several instances of God making a covenant with His people in the Bible. After the Flood, God makes a covenant that He will not again destroy the earth by water and that the seasons will continue until the end of time. Human beings will obey His commandments. God makes this covenant with Abram that he will be the father of many nations and that God will be his descendants' God and they will be His people. God makes the same covenant with Moses at Mt Sinai. God is holy. His people will be holy. He will bring them to the Promised Land. They will keep His Law of love. All these covenants in the OT prefigure, foreshadow and are fulfilled in the New Covenant or Testament which God makes with His Creation in Jesus. He will be our God and we shall be His people. Because He is holy we shall be holy.

April 14th (Good Friday)

Genesis 17 vv 9-14

Circumcision was the sign of the covenant with Abraham. It signified who belonged to the people of God. They had been included by their families from infancy or they had come later to wish to join God's people. God would be their God. The implication was that they would keep His Law, though they very often let Him down, as do we all. The new covenant is in the Blood of Christ. To be a member of the people of God is to have faith in Him. If we know Him, we repent of our sins (our failure to love God with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves), we turn to Christ, we renounce evil. The sign of the new covenant is Baptism. Knowing Christ through Word and Sacrament, through Christian fellowship and prayer, and every other way in which He makes Himself known to us, we are transformed. We grow to be like Him. As we become more like Him, so our lives become more like His and we live by God's perfect Law of love simply because that is the people we are. Because He is holy, we are holy. We are His people and He is our God.

April 15th (Holy Saturday)

Genesis 17 vv 15-27

Grant, O Lord, that as we are baptized into the death of thy blessed Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, so by continual mortifying our corrupt affections we may be buried with him; and that, through the grave, and gate of death, we may pass to our joyful resurrection; for his merits, who died, and was buried, and rose again for us, thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We often think about Baptism around Easter. When we are baptised, we are crucified with Christ. We are dead to sin, dead to the flesh, our lower nature. We are born again, born from above. We make a fresh start. We are risen with Christ and growing into the fulness of His Resurrection. We are citizens of heaven and we are on our way home. Baptism is the sign of who we are as the people of God. As a Sacrament, it effects what it signifies. God acts in Baptism to make us His own, to give us His grace. By that same grace we seek to yield our lives to Him. Like Sarai, we might take a new name. God promises us His blessing. We each have our vocation, the work He made us for (as Sarah became the mother of Isaac), members of Christ and of each other.

April 16th (Easter Day)

Genesis 18 vv 1-8

On the first Easter morning, the women go to the tomb of Jesus. Inside it, they don't find Jesus. Matthew says they saw an angel. Mark says they saw a young man dressed in white. Luke says they saw two men in shining garments. John says that Mary Magdalene saw two angels. They all agree that outside the tomb they saw Jesus, but, in John, we are told that Mary was told not to touch Him or not to cling onto Him. The Greek could mean either. There is something mysterious about the risen Body of Christ. It is clearly Him, but different from His Body before the Crucifixion. These inconsistencies are not surprising. How would you put into words the unique experience of Resurrection? You wouldn't be able to take it all in. You wouldn't have words to express even what you could understand of it. The message, however, is the same – not to seek the living among the dead, to tell His disciples, to tell the world the Good News. Something similar can be said about this passage from Genesis. Who were these three men? The Epistle to the Hebrews regards them as angels. Genesis calls them “men”, but segues into referring to them as the LORD and using the singular “I” when He/they speak. The early Church thought they were three because they represent or possibly are God the Holy Trinity. There is a great deal we can't understand, but we can do what we can do within our limitations. Abraham shows hospitality. He makes them welcome. Do we welcome Jesus into our lives? Do we recognise that in welcoming other people we are welcoming Him? They Abraham and the three men eat together. Jesus will eat with His disciples later on Easter Day. We eat with Him in Holy Communion every Sunday. Shared meals are an important aspect of fellowship, expressing our fellowship with one another and deepening it. Perhaps we shouldn't be too cynical about the observation that people are more likely to come to Church when there is food involved.

Thine be the glory, risen,
conquering Son;
endless is the victory, thou
o'er death hast won;
angels in bright raiment
rolled the stone away,
kept the folded grave
clothes where thy body lay.

*Thine be the glory, risen
conquering Son,*

*Endless is the vict'ry, thou
o'er death hast won.*

Lo! Jesus meets us, risen
from the tomb;
Lovingly he greets us,
scatters fear and gloom;
let the Church with
gladness, hymns of triumph
sing;
for her Lord now liveth,

death hath lost its sting.

No more we doubt thee,
glorious Prince of life;
life is naught without thee;
aid us in our strife;
make us more than
conquerors, through thy
deathless love:
bring us safe through Jordan
to thy home above.

April 17th (Easter Monday)

Genesis 18 vv 9-15

Abraham and Sarah receive both a promise and a commission. They will receive the promised child. Abraham will be the father of many nations (the father of all the faithful) and in him all nations will be blessed (because Jesus is a child of Abraham). The promise and the commission are staggering. Sarah laughs at the idea of either being fulfilled now. They're both too old. It's impossible to hope for a child now or to expect what would follow from that child being born. But with God, nothing is impossible. We have God's promises and we have God's commission to play our parts in God's work in the world. We may be staggered both by the promises and by the calling. We may feel too old, too insignificant, too helpless, too weak, but nothing is impossible with God. What is asked of us is that we are found faithful. Almighty God, who through thine only-begotten Son Jesus Christ hast overcome death, and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life: We humbly beseech thee, that as by thy special grace preventing us thou dost put into our minds good desires, so by thy continual help we may bring the same to good effect; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

April 18th

Genesis 18 vv 16-22

Life makes sense because God is just. Otherwise, there would be no point. Things would just happen irrespective of right and wrong. There would be no getting what you deserve, no justice.

Ecclesiastes 9¹¹ I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

That's the bleak picture you get if you look at the world without taking into account that God is and that God is just. It is very interesting that God makes known to Abraham the way things are, what God is going to do. In Amos 3⁷, God says He will reveal what He is going to do to His servants the prophets. We know that God is at work because He foretells what will happen. We know that God is working in the world and how He works because He makes Himself known to us.

April 19th

Genesis 18 vv 23-33

It is certainly true that if people live righteous lives, things generally go better for them and for other people. It is also true that sometimes the wicked appear to flourish like the green bay tree and that the innocent suffer – most notably Jesus Himself. If you live in a lawless country or one that embarks on unwise military action or one in which there is general indifference to the needs of the sick and the poor, there is a fair chance that you will suffer however righteous you are and if your nation suffers invasion or falls apart in civil war or suffers plague, pestilence or famine, the righteous few will suffer with the unrighteous many. So how is it just if Sodom gets what it deserves and what Sodom deserves is destruction but a very few people living in Sodom are not participants in its iniquity? Abraham asks a fair question. I suppose we should assume that only Lot's family were righteous (and they were hardly shining examples of moral rectitude) and that, therefore, once they had left, all the people in Sodom deserved what was coming to them. I think that the righteous person would derive comfort whatever happened to him or her from knowing God in this world and I am confident that we all get justice in the world to come. I am also aware that there is none righteous, no, not one. So we all depend on God's mercy that we don't suffer what we justly deserve. Why God didn't show mercy on Sodom I don't know. Maybe Lot's family escaped because they had some degree of faith, despite their moral turpitude.

April 20th

Genesis 19 vv 1-11

The angels appeared to be men. Lot performed his duty of hospitality to the travellers. The men of Sodom were resentful of Lot living among them – an immigrant, an alien. The focus of the wicked thing they wanted to do to the travellers is as much their abuse of the duty of hospitality and the element of compulsion as it is what is regarded as the typical sin of Sodom. Lot's suggestion regarding his daughters is also repulsive. This passage is omitted from the lectionary I have been using presumably because it is so horrible, but the Bible is the Word of God which speaks in every situation, the terrible as well as the pleasant. Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

April 21st

Genesis 19 vv 12-16

I'm thinking that there must have been those two virgin daughters plus other married daughters who were now part of their husbands' households and stayed in Sodom because their husbands didn't believe there was anything to worry about.

It seems to me that we're always being warned about possible doomsdays. It used to be annihilation by nuclear war. Now it's climate change. Or running out of fossil fuel. Or a global pandemic such as the influenza which followed the First World War. Or bacteria resistant to antibiotics. Or pollution. Or the obesity epidemic. There is always something which might wipe out the human race or at least bring our own lives to a premature end. Obviously, none of them has so far to pass or I should be here writing about it. Of course some have only be avoided because we have taken precautions. So, how do we decide whether the doom mongers are crying wolf or whether there is really something to worry about? You can only use your common sense, weigh the evidence and try to decide which supposed experts you can trust. We are all going to die eventually, however, and the world will end one day. It's all in the purposes of God. So we needn't worry too much about it. We can't ultimately change our destiny and it's in God's Hands anyway. Lot's sons in laws' real mistake was not discounting the risk of dying but being complacent about living as citizens of a sinful society.

Matthew 10²⁸ And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

April 22nd

Genesis 19 vv 17-22

I think there's an element of what we considered earlier about city and country here. The city is so often a place of sin, pollution and disease, but civilised living is much more comfortable than roughing it in the countryside where there are few amenities. There is often, however, the sense in the Bible that God's people have to get out of corrupts civilisations and endure any hardship consequent on going their own way.

Not for ever in green pastures
do we ask our way to be ;

but the steep and rugged pathway
may we tread rejoicingly.

April 23rd (Easter 2 or Easter 1)

Genesis 19 vv 23-29

In Luke 17³², Jesus says, Remember Lot's wife. There's no hanging back. Once you're a Christian, you follow Jesus wherever He is leading. It is the way of the Cross, but it is the only way which leads to eternal life. There's no place for looking back longingly on the illusory comforts offered by sin, the world and the devil. You are for Christ or against Him. You choose life or death. There is no middle way. Almighty Father, who hast given thine only Son to die for our sins, and to rise again for our justification: Grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, that we may always serve thee in pureness of living and truth; through the merits of the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

April 24th (S George transferred from yesterday)

Genesis 19 v30

The readings and ceremonies of the Church's year take us through the great truths of the Christian faith. We remember what has happened in the history of the people of God, our history. We worship God for Who He is and what He has done. We consider what He requires of us. We receive from Him the grace we need for each one of us to do the good works God has prepared for us to walk in. Living the Christian year is one of the means of grace by which God forms us as His disciples and His children. In this world, however, nothing is perfect and there have to be judgments made and compromises. So 1662 counts Sundays after Easter (making yesterday Easter 1) and Common Worship counts Sundays in Easter (so Easter Day is Easter 1 and yesterday is Easter 2). Whether Easter 1 or 2, the eighth day of Easter is more important even than S George, which is why his day has been put off till today.

We think of George courageously standing up for what is right. In the legend he slays the dragon to protect the virgin. The more likely story is that he accepted a martyr's death as a faithful witness to the truth of the Gospel. His flag is the blood of the martyr in the shape of the cross on the background of a white Roman pavement where he died.

Lot, for all that he got the angel to agree to let him stay in Zoar, was still afraid and hid in the cave. Better to die meekly for Christ than to hide away from death in fear and sin.

April 25th (S Mark)

Genesis 19 vv 31-38

Lot's fear and lack of faith in God's promise that he would be safe in Zoar leads to this terrible story. It should have been the girls' family who found them husbands, but their mother was dead. Presumably, their brothers and sisters died in Sodom. Their father was hiding away in a cave. So they themselves took drastic action as the only way they could see to become mothers. The implication is that the tribes of the Moabites and Ammonites who were conceived in this shocking manner were always shamed by their conception and that this explains a great deal of their subsequent history. As we have seen, actions have consequences down through the generations unless the cycle of retribution is broken by grace: by repentance and forgiveness, by healing and new beginnings, which can only ultimately happen in Christ.

I have interpreted the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in traditional Christian terms. However, many of us find it hard to believe, in the Light of Jesus, that God would utterly destroy these cities, however wicked their inhabitants. Many Christians are tempted to get out of attributing such disasters to God by suggesting that He is not responsible, that He is not that involved in the world. These things happen by chance or according to the impersonal and ineluctable laws of Science. Attractive as it is, however, thinking like this brings more problems than it solves. Who would want to live in a world where things happen by accident, without reason or meaning? What would be the point of prayer, of intercession or thanksgiving, if God were not involved in the day to day running of the universe? There certainly was once a major seismic destruction in the region where Sodom and Gomorrah are believed to have stood. It is surely more profitable to believe that God is in control (however hard it is to understand why He should act like this) than it is to think either that He was powerless to intervene or that He had the power but chose not to use it.

Terrible things do happen, but they are not outside of God's control. Knowing that God is in charge, we can always be confident that He hears our prayers and that He is working His purposes out to redeem His whole Creation.

April 26th

Genesis 20 vv 1-18

Yesterday was S Mark's day. Mark was an evangelist. He was a companion of Paul. On one occasion, he let Paul down by giving up and going home, presumably because the going was too tough. Later on, however, he was a faithful supporter of both Paul and Peter. Traditionally, he is believed to be the author of the Gospel which bears his name. Like us, Mark made mistakes. As in our time, there were tensions in the Church, even in the ministry. Our task is to remain faithful. It is God's Church. I am His adopted son. You, if you are a Christian reading this, are God's adopted son or daughter. You are His adopted child if you put your faith in Him, repent of your sins and are baptised in His Name. What God requires of us is not that we are perfect, that we never make mistakes, that we are always strong, but that we are faithful. We can trust God for our lives.

Faithful Abraham also got it wrong in today's reading. He made a very similar error to the one we read about not long ago. God sorts out the mess Abraham has made. While that's no excuse for not trying our best to do things right, it makes all the difference to know that God is in ultimate control. His Will will be done in earth as it is in heaven whatever mess we make of things. What is required of us is that we remain faithful.

O Almighty God, who hast instructed thy holy Church with the heavenly doctrine of thy Evangelist Saint Mark: Give us grace, that, being not like children carried away with every blast of vain doctrine, we may be established in the truth of thy holy Gospel; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

April 27th

Genesis 21 vv 1-8

Sarah laughed scornfully at the notion that she should have a child at her age. Now she laughs joyfully at the birth of her son. *For his wrath endureth but the twinkling of an eye, and in his pleasure is life: heaviness may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.* (Psalm 30⁵). I was spoiled for choice of bible verses that make this point. Joy is God's gift to His people. It is the end of the darkest journey. Joy is our companion in the valley of the shadow of death and our host in the House of the Lord for ever. Faith is never without hope.

April 28th

What tho' the spicy breezes
Blow soft o'er Ceylon's isle;
Though every prospect
pleases,
And only man is vile?
In vain with lavish kindness

Genesis 21 vv 9-11

The gifts of God are strown;
The heathen in his
blindness
Bows down to wood and
stone.

Only man is vile. Yesterday, we were rejoicing because God has given Sarah a son in her old age. His very name is laughter. Today, Abraham's family is torn apart with mocking, resentment and jealousy. Isn't it so often the case that we human beings spoil what is good? God creates a beautiful world. He gives us so many good things. He gives us one another. And we ruin things. We quarrel. We argue. We're jealous. We're selfish. We're ungrateful. We're unfaithful. We're unforgiving. We're dishonest. Even, we're violent. We destroy *what is true, what is honest, what is just, what is pure, what is lovely, what is of good report* (cf Philippians 4⁹). We mess up God's world and, in doing so, we mess up our own lives. *The heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone.* We don't sing those lines much today because it looks as if we're looking down on other people for their ignorance. The real truth to bear in mind if we sing them is that the whole human race worships what is created rather than the Creator and that is why man is vile and the reason we ruin what God has given us. Those of us who call ourselves Christians need to pray for forgiveness for where we fall short of wholehearted worship of our heavenly Father and for grace to do better and our calling is to be faithful witnesses to the world that Christ is the answer and the only answer to the evil which we have brought into the world by our worship of that which is not God.

April 29th

Genesis 21 vv 12-21

Reading about Hagar, let's think today about all the refugee families in the world today, all those people fleeing conflict or terrible hardship and poverty. What would it be like for a mother to prepare to see her child die of thirst or hunger or at the hands of violent men? Pray about these things. What should our country be doing to help refugees? How can international bodies like the UN, NATO & the EU help? What can churches and voluntary organisations do? What could we do individually?

April 30th (Easter 2 or 3)

Genesis 21 vv 22-34

Life was tough in the Holy Land. There was always a shortage of water. Grass for fodder only grows where there is water and it is soon eaten up by flocks and herds of farm animals. The people are nomads, unable to stay in one place because resources are soon used up. They are in competition for the things they need, especially water. Sometimes they fight. When they are wise they come to fair agreements. The same principles apply in the world today. Resources are limited. We can share them fairly. We can work together to make the best use of them as stewards of the gifts God has given the human race. Or we can fight over them. As always, these truths are equally valid at a personal level, within families, in communities, in nations and between nations. It is all so obvious and yet it seems that we never learn and why not? *The heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone*. Instead of trusting God for what we need and receiving it thankfully as a blessing, we put our material needs before our need of God. The result is that we are never satisfied. We can never have enough and selfish materialism poisons our relationships with God and with one another. Jesus says, *But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you*. It doesn't work the other way round.

May 1st (S Philip & S James)

Genesis 22 vv 1-17

What a story this is. I'm sure that no parent could imagine any worse trial than what God put Abraham through. In fact, I was once taught that it meant something like this that Jesus taught us to pray *Lead us not into temptation*. Why would God demand such a sacrifice of Abraham? Yet, countries ask or demand that families give up their sons to be soldiers, sailors or airmen and risk their lives, sending them into battles where high casual rates are certain. Although we try to minimise the risks, we do expect people to lay their lives on the line in rescue operations, in construction work, in research and in the treatment of infectious diseases. Avoiding death is not always our highest priority, though to give your life in even the greatest cause is rightly called the supreme sacrifice. Some cultures practised human sacrifice and one of the points of this story is that God does not require human sacrifice. What God requires of us is to be faithful. Abraham's faith in this story!

May 2nd (S Athanasius)

Genesis 22 vv 1-18

This story needs more than two days to think about. It obviously prefigures the Crucifixion. The Son of God, unlike Isaac, is offered as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. God the Father Himself was in the position in which He put Abraham. God did provide Himself a sacrifice. It was not possible for the bitter cup to pass from the lips of Jesus. That would not have been the will of the Father. I'm a fan of Athanasius. His clear thinking guided the Church in our understanding of Jesus as fully God and fully man, yet one Christ. I believe ... And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, Begotten, not made, Being of one substance with the Father, By whom all things were made: Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man, And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, And ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead: Whose kingdom shall have no end.

This is Who Jesus is, one with God and one with us. That is why we are at one with God (atonement) in Christ. It is His sacrifice of Himself on the Cross which atones for our sins. Fully man, Jesus experiences death as Isaac would have experienced death as we would experience death. He dies for us. He suffered under Pontius Pilate. This is why all nations are blessed in the seed of Abraham. Jesus is Abraham's seed. We receive this ineffable blessing by faith in Him alone. Athanasius saw and taught this clearly. He suffered rejection, exile and great danger for his faithfulness to the truth of the Gospel. When Jesus spoke of His own death, He spoke of His disciples taking up their cross to follow Him. Mark 8: ³⁴ And when he had called the people unto him with his

disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

³⁵ For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it.

³⁶ For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

³⁷ Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

³⁸ Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

May 3rd

Genesis 22 vv 18-24

The last verses of this chapter are family news. They are relevant because they colonise different places and give rise to the interacting tribes of the Middle East.

More obviously relevant to us, however, is to continue to think about sacrifice. Jesus laid down His life for us and thereby purchased for us the gift of eternal life, life more wonderful than everything which this life has to offer, wonderful as this life is. It follows that it makes sense to be prepared to sacrifice what this life has to offer us in favour of the eternal life which is God's free gift to us. What is required of us is that we remain faithful. Athanasius remained faithful. So did Philip and James to whom Jesus had revealed that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life with all the apostles in the Upper Room on the night in which He was betrayed.

O Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us perfectly to know thy Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life; that, following the steps of thy holy Apostles, Saint Philip and Saint James, we may stedfastly walk in the way that leadeth to eternal life; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

May 4th

Genesis 23 vv 1-20

Abraham was a nomad. Although he was promised an inheritance in Canaan, he never in fact owned any of it, except this burial plot which he bought for Sarah and which would become a family grave. It is a stake in the promised land, an earnest that it will belong to his seed for ever, but the promises are not fulfilled in Abraham. He lives in faith and hope. Abraham walked by faith and his true and final home, the fulfilment of God's promise, is the same as it is for all God's faithful people (including us) in Heaven. We walk by faith, not by sight. We have this hope in us. We surely have a stake in the Kingdom of Heaven, but we are not there yet. For now, by His grace, we walk in the footsteps of Jesus, the way of the Cross, which is also the way of life, and, by His grace and by His grace alone, we shall participate in His Resurrection.

Almighty God, who hast given thine only Son to be unto us both a sacrifice for sin, and also an ensample of godly life: Give us grace that we may always most thankfully receive that his inestimable benefit, and also daily endeavour ourselves to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

May 5th

Genesis 24¹

And Abraham was old, and well stricken in years.

Sometime I know how he felt! Why should we honour old age? An older person has so many more years of experience to share with us and wisdom from which we could benefit. The current older generation looked after us when we were young. We owe them. If they are frail and vulnerable, then we have a special responsibility to care for them as we do for all the vulnerable people. One day we shall be old (if we're spared that long) and we should treat people the way we would hope to be treated if we were in their circumstances. We're inclined to see growing numbers of old people as a problem. They are in fact an opportunity, people who offer us friendship and love, people whom we can love and care for.

May 6th

Genesis 24 vv 1-6

Sometimes, as people get older, they worry about what will happen to the people they love when they are gone. Will my wife be able to afford to stay in our home? Will my children be able to manage? If everything I had hoped to leave my family is used up in care home fees, what will they do? It's harder still if your grown up children's family life or love life or employment prospects are a mess. Worst of all perhaps, is having to leave a handicapped or chronically sick child. We can do our best to make sensible provision. It's important to make a will. We may have savings or insurance policies. We try our best to teach the next generation to live wisely and to make good relationships. We do what we can for them, not least praying to God to look after them. In the end, we can only trust Him.

May 7th (Easter 3 or 4)

Genesis 24 vv 7-9

This is the vexed question of mixed marriages or marrying out. The most important thing in your life is your relationship with God. The next most important is your relationship with your husband or wife. What if these are pulling you in different directions? What if your husband or wife is not Christian? You'll have fundamentally different priorities. How will the children be brought up? Will you give up on God because your spouse isn't interested or is hostile or belongs to a different religion? For these reasons, mixed marriages are generally discouraged, but at great cost to a couple who may be deeply in love. (See next page for prayer.)

Almighty God, who shewest to them that be in error the light of thy truth, to the intent that they may return into the way of righteousness: Grant unto all them that are admitted into the fellowship of Christ's religion, that they may eschew those things that are contrary to their profession, and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

May 8th

Genesis 24 vv 10-28

This is a beautiful story. It is told at unusual length and in much more detail than most bible stories. Like Abraham, the servant is an old man. They seem to have been friends as well as master and man. Eleazar has undertaken a long journey and a difficult task, a very responsible one. So he prays to God - always the best thing to do whatever we undertake, not only when we don't feel we can cope on our own. We're never on our own and we don't need to manage without God because He is always with us. Eleazar asks God to bless his journey and God does. A young woman comes to the well who seems to meet all the criteria. She is beautiful, considerate and hard-working and she comes from the same family as Abraham. She worships the same God – which is the whole point of the exercise.

May 9th

Genesis 24 vv 29-49

In the world as it then was, Rebekah would have lived under the protection of Laban and Bethuel. They would be expected to find her a suitable husband. So they were delighted that as eligible a bachelor as Isaac was looking to her as a possible wife. Eleazar tells the story again at some length – as old men are wont to do. There is a need for patience, but there is also a sense of urgency here. They won't eat until he has explained his business. They are all very excited – Rebekah about the prospect of marriage and the rest of the family about her making a good match.

O perfect Love, all human
thought transcending,
lowly we kneel in prayer
before thy throne,
that theirs may be the love
which knows no ending,
whom thou forevermore
dost join in one.

O perfect Life, be thou their
full assurance,
of tender charity and
steadfast faith,
of patient hope and quiet,
brave endurance,
with childlike trust that fears
nor pain nor death.

Grant them the joy which
brightens earthly sorrow;
grant them the peace which
calms all earthly strife,
and to life's day the glorious
unknown morrow
that dawns upon eternal love
and life.

May 10th

Genesis 24 vv 50-67

The custom of arranged marriage seems alien to us. It is often confused with forced marriage when a couple are made to marry their family's choice of a husband or wife against their will. In any marriage, consent is essential. Whether you fall in love with someone you met apparently by chance, whether you have been introduced by family or friends who believed that you were made for one another, or whether your family have more formally arranged a marriage for you, your consent is essential. If someone is forced to marry against his or her will (a shotgun wedding) or if a person cannot give informed consent (too young, drugged or drunk, lacking mental capacity), such a marriage can be annulled and normally should be. We often suppose that an arranged marriage cannot also be a love match, but note here how Isaac and Rebekah fell in love. I think it is a very human touch that falling in love with Rebekah helped Isaac to come to terms with the loss of his mother. Couples who have voluntarily entered into arranged marriages often do fall deeply in love. We ought not to be too dogmatic. Too many marriages break down to say for certain that one way of finding a partner is better than another. If family and friends truly love the individuals they are supporting in their relationships, they will kindly and gently encourage them towards what is best for the couple themselves and not try to push them into decisions for which they are not ready.

May 11th

Genesis 25 vv 1-18

After Sarah's death, Abraham had another family, but it is Isaac in whom the promise is fulfilled – that Abraham's seed will be a blessing to all nations. We see that Ishmael too was blessed with descendants who became the ancestors of nations. In the biblical context, *nations* really means something more like *tribes* than what we mean by *nations*. They begin as large families, the descendants of a patriarch. No doubt, other people joined them as they grew and prospered. Some were nomadic and some settled and built cities. The word for *nations* is the same word as the word for *gentiles*. Sometimes, it is translated *peoples*. Occasionally, the word *nation* is used for Israel, but normally Israel is referred to as *the people*. This is all worth bearing in mind when we read Scriptures and sing psalms about God's promises to Israel and their fulfilment in the inclusion of all nations, which of course includes us. I like it that Ishmael & Isaac come together for their father's funeral, especially when we think about the ongoing conflict between their descendants.

May 12th

Genesis 25 vv 19-28

We're back on more familiar territory. These are stories that my generation learnt in Sunday School and county school. They are basic stories which everyone should know. With everybody seemingly leaving it to everybody else to teach the next generation these stories, when are they supposed to learn them? Parents think that their children will get religious education at school. Schools think it is the task of parents and the Church. Parents don't take or send their children to Church.

The two peoples descended from Esau and Jacob are the Edomites and the Israelites. The Edomites dwelt in the mountains west of the River Jordan, where Petra now is. The rocks are red, like Esau's hair. They would often be rivals of Israel and too often at war with one another. The account of their conception and birth indicates the way in which the history of the peoples they give rise to (and all nations) are in the hands of God and unfold according to His Providence. Elsewhere in the Bible, what happens to Esau and Jacob is used to illustrate how our salvation depends on God's grace alone and not on what we deserve. If you asked me, I should say that Jacob did not deserve to come out on top, but, by God's mercy, he did.

May 13th

Genesis 25 vv 29-34

Red again. The red haired youth whose descendants would live in the red mountains was dying for a taste of the red lentil pottage. Although they were twins, Esau was the first born and entitled to the birthright. I strongly suspect that he was "dying for some pottage" in the same way as I might be "dying for a cup of tea" after Evensong. In other words, he wasn't literally about to die. Elsewhere in the bible (Hebrews 12) we're warned against giving up our birthright as God's children as easily as Esau gave up his for a "morsel of meat". Once gone, he never got it back.

Nevertheless, I'm sure I should have liked Esau better than Jacob. Esau was casual and irresponsible, but Jacob was mean and scheming. Surely, he should have given his brother some pottage for free.

May 14th (Easter 4 or 5)

Genesis 26 vv 1-16

So Isaac inherits the promises that God made to Abraham. *In thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.* God protects Isaac and prospers him, though Isaac doesn't seem to have learnt from his father's mistakes – a mistake which Abraham made twice. Like Isaac, we look to God to bring us through this world to our eternal home and we look to His guidance so that we should know how we ought to live.

O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men; Grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

May 15th

Genesis 26 vv 17

Again we see the consequences of living with limited resources. Water was always very precious. Forty years ago Sheikh Yamani was the Saudi oil minister back when we came close to petrol rationing because of problems in the world oil markets. He came to a conference in London and, seeing the rain streaming down the windows, he reminded us that we have a much more precious resource than oil. Oil or water, however, do we share what God has given us as friends or do we fight over it?

May 16th

Genesis 27 vv 1-40

Now Isaac knows that the end of his life is drawing near and decides to make provision for the future. There are so many things wrong in this family: the fact Isaac favours one son and Rebekah the other; the rivalry of the two lads; Esau's choice of Hittite brides; the willingness of Rebekah and Jacob to deceive Isaac; Jacob claiming that he was Esau and that God had blessed him with a swift kill. It's a good story, but none of them come out of it well, except perhaps Isaac.

Yet God takes all this mess and uses it as part of His providential plan for the salvation of the world. This is why we read the story. Jacob gets to inherit the Promised Land. His descendants go down into Egypt and are delivered by Moses. They receive the Law. Jesus is one of them.

May 17th

Genesis 27 vv 41-46

When anyone is murdered, the family are usually the first suspects. Why would you murder anyone you didn't know? Why would you care enough to kill someone you were indifferent to. They were more violent times when Esau and Jacob vied with one another for their father's favour, but such things do still happen. *Thou shalt do no murder* is one of the Ten Commandments, but Jesus wants us to be much better people than merely not being murderers. He says (Matthew) 5²¹ Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: ²² But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. ²³ Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; ²⁴ Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

May 18th

Genesis 28 vv 1-9

Esau's Hittite wives didn't please his parents. So seeking a bride of their own people and faith provides Jacob with a reason for going to stay in Haran with his Uncle Laban, Rebekah's brother. Esau tries to get back into his parents' good books by marrying Ishmael's daughter, who presumably worshipped the same God as he did.

May 19th

Genesis 28 vv 10-15

Jacob was leaving the land Promised Land. He was leaving his family behind him. His father was angry with him. His brother wanted to kill him. He was setting off on a long, arduous and dangerous journey to stay with relatives he might well never have met. I guess that he felt desolate and afraid. God made Himself known to Jacob and assured him that the promises would be fulfilled in him. You can always trust God.

O God of Bethel, by whose hand
Thy people still are fed,
Who through this weary pilgrimage
Hast all our fathers led.

O spread Thy covering wings around
Till all our wanderings cease,
And at our Father's loved abode
Our souls arrive in peace.

May 20th

Genesis 28 vv 16-22

I possibly fail in my duty in that I don't often preach about giving. It's embarrassing to talk about money. People might resent it if I talk about what they give or what they ought to give. If I tell people what I give, they might think I'm mean or else that I'm boasting about being generous. The implicit threat is that, if clergy upset people by asking them to do more than they want to, they'll stop coming to church altogether and then it will be the vicar's fault if the people are lost and the church closes.

This passage is the earliest reference in the Bible to tithing. Of what God gives him, Jacob will give a tenth back to God. This is an acknowledgement that *all things come from thee O Lord*. To offer back to God what He gives to us is to consecrate everything that we have. It is an act of love to give to God (or to give to the poor, etc.). It is an act of faith that God will not leave us to go without if we give away what we have. It is an act of hope of future blessings that we don't need to cling onto what we have now. A tenth isn't giving away all your possessions as Jesus told the rich, young ruler to do, but neither is it insignificant. It's not giving God your leftovers, a tip, what you won't miss. In the New Testament, we are not under law, but under grace. So I don't think that we should say that everybody ought to give a tenth. I do think, however, that it gives us an idea of the sort of amount we should be giving away regularly to do God's work.

May 21st (Easter 5 or 6)

Genesis 29 vv 1-14

No email, no 'phone, no regular mail services either, no Skype, so how did people keep in touch with their families when they lived far away? Of course, opportunities were limited. Travellers might bring news. You might encounter people at places where people gathered like wells. To the extent that people were nomadic, how did you even know where to look for them. So we see the hand of Providence in bringing Jacob and Laban's household together. It looks as if Jacob took advantage of the situation to introduce himself to the family in a good light. O Lord, from whom all good things do come: Grant to us thy humble servants, that by thy holy inspiration we may think those things that be good, and by thy merciful guiding may perform the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

May 22nd

Genesis 29 vv 15-30

Jacob was the twister who cheated Esau. Now Laban cheats him. These are not nice people! We're not told how the four girls concerned felt about these arrangements. I say four and not two because the handmaids also became the mothers of Jacob's children. In the NT, Jesus goes right back to the beginning to Adam and Eve to make the point that God's plan for marriage is for one man so to cleave with one woman that they become one flesh. What God has joined together, let no man put asunder. I still stick to the principle. The two possibilities for fulfilled human love are lifelong heterosexual marriage and lifelong celibacy. Other arrangements may be entered into for all sorts of reasons, some of them good reasons, but they are all less than the ideal.

May 23rd

Genesis 29 vv 31-35

Matthew Henry points out that polygamy seems to have been permitted in OT times, but it never seems to have worked out happily. Leah is rejected but God has compassion on her and she is the one who bares Jacob his first four sons. Surely, she thinks, he will love her on account of the boys. Families are a love mesh of relationships between husband and wife, parents and children, relationships with other family members. Churches are the same – love meshes. If we dwell in the love of God, our human relationships support one another. Insofar, however, as we fall short of the love of God, human relationships can get messed up and damage instead of sustaining one another.

May 24th

Genesis 30 vv 1-13

This is reminiscent of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. The maid bears children on behalf of the barren wife. How willing were the maids? Did they bring up the children whose mothers they were? What was the legal status of these boys born to surrogate mothers? Were there jealousies within the family or did they become all one big, happy family? We can only guess at the answers to the first three questions. I expect the answer to the last is the same as for most human families – a mixture of love and falling out, of fierce loyalties and petty jealousies. Family life has changed a great deal in our life times, let alone over 3,000 years. The principle of love, however, always remains the same.

May 25th (Ascension Day)

Genesis 30 vv 14-21

It appears that the reason Leah had had no more children was that Jacob had stopped sleeping with her. The implication is that the more loved wife, Rachel, insisted that he didn't sleep with Leah. Mandrakes were believed to be a remedy for infertility, which is why Rachel wants them. The two wives make this odd bargain and Leah has two more sons and a daughter. Dinah is often forgotten and, as we shall see, she was not treated well and was forced to rely on her courage and her wits. It all seems very sordid to me. Our calling is to live our lives on earth by the light of eternity. We are citizens of heaven. We should be living by heaven's rules.

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

May 26th

Genesis 30 vv 22-24

Rachel at last has a son and his name is Joseph. Joseph will become the best known of them all and he will have the key part in saving the Israelites in the coming time of famine and keeping them safe in Egypt – which will in turn lead to their enslavement, redemption and the Exodus. It is all in God's plan for the salvation of the whole of Creation. As we know, Joseph is spoilt and grows up to be a not very nice boy who will have to learn wisdom through the vicissitudes he will undergo. Very likely, Joseph was spoilt because he was so long in coming and because Rachel was the favourite wife. It is important today, just as it was then, to treat all the children in a family fairly, which can be more difficult if some are adopted or some are step children from previous relationships or only half brothers or sisters. It is selfish if parents put their own emotional needs before those of the children they are responsible for. Not only may their lack of fairness harm the children concerned, selfishness can never lead to a satisfied life. So looking after number one or looking after number one's favourites is ultimately counterproductive.

May 27th

Genesis 30 vv 25-43

You could say that Laban and Jacob deserved one another. They were both tricksters. Laban wanted Jacob to carry on working for him. He was obviously a skilled shepherd. He agreed that Jacob's wages should be particularly marked animals. Money wouldn't have been much use in a land without banks or shops! It happened, however, that the lambs and kids seemed mainly to be born with the colouration which they agreed should be Jacob's, even when Laban changed the rules. Moreover, the sheep and goats which had the markings that made them Jacob's were also the stronger, healthier animals. Jacob attributes this to divine providence. He has also been dabbling in selective breeding. Human activity and divine providence are not mutually exclusive. As Christians, we seek to work with God and we pray God to bless and prosper our work. If we pray for God to prosper what we are undertaking, we are bound to ask ourselves whether we are acting in accordance with His Will. Is what we are doing and the way we are doing it what we believe would be acceptable to God? I'm not entirely sure that Jacob's conduct here was entirely ethical. Neither perhaps was Laban's. But God sorted out the mess human beings were making of things as He does in our lives and the lives of our churches and the lives of our nations too.

May 28th (Sunday after Ascension or Easter 7) Genesis 31 vv 1-16

Laban's sons become jealous. Their inheritance is dwindling away as Jacob gains ownership of Laban's flocks and herds. God prospers Jacob at the expense of Laban who is trying to cheat him. As so often over property, the family falls out. Rachel and Leah decide they are better off with Jacob and that's where their loyalty lies. So they decide to split up. Jacob returns to the Promised Land. The promise will be fulfilled in him. He is now a man of substance with twelve sons, a patriarch in a position to found a people. Yet the best of this is only a foretaste of what God has prepared in heaven for those who love Him and what Jacob has on earth is spoilt by all this jealousy and bickering. Their remaineth yet a rest for the people of God.

O God the King of glory, who hast exalted thine only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph unto thy kingdom in heaven: We beseech thee, leave us not comfortless; but send to us thine Holy Ghost to comfort us, and exalt us unto the same place whither our Saviour Christ is gone before, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

May 29th

Genesis 31 vv 17-34

Some time ago, there was a TV programme which claimed that archaeology in Israel had disproved the bible. Archaeologists had discovered vast numbers of images and shrines to gods other than the LORD. They had also found plenty of evidence of worship offered to the LORD but in a way nothing like what is prescribed in the OT. People even believed in God's wife! If they had read the bible properly, they would have seen that, like Rachel in this story, people did make, keep and worship images, contrary to God's commandments. They worshipped false gods and they had false ideas about the one, true God and tried to worship Him in ways which were entirely unacceptable to Him. People are naturally religious. People are naturally superstitious. The task of the Christian prophet, preacher or teacher is seldom to persuade people that there is a God. The task is to teach people what God is like and what He requires of us. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

May 30th

Genesis 31 vv 25-35

The first commandment, Jesus says, is that we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. The second is that we love our neighbours as ourselves. There is no place for compromise with sin, the world and the devil. Of course, while we await our final consummation, the flesh continues to lust against the spirit. We are always in danger of being dragged back into the ways of the world, this passing age. As in the parable of the sower: the devil is always ready to snatch the seed of the Word before it takes root; pressure and opposition threaten to discourage us and make us give up; and, above all perhaps, the affairs of this passing age threaten to strangle our faith. Laban and Rachel at least still valued these images. Jacob respected Laban's concern. Maybe he was superstitious too, Maybe he respected Laban's right to his religion even though Jacob perhaps thought he was wrong. We shouldn't belittle other people's religion even while we pray that they will find the Truth in Christ. Rachel managed to cheat Laban, just as Jacob and Laban were cheats too. Compromise with false religious ideas has that effect on our behaviour.

May 31st

Genesis 31 vv 36-55

Mizpah. Jacob was angry with Laban. He had plenty of reason to be, but, of course, he was being unfair (though he didn't know it) when he complained about Laban going through his stuff looking for the missing gods. Generally speaking, *the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God*. (James 1²⁰). It's even worse when man's wrath is based on false assumptions. Laban had plenty of grievances against Jacob too. They were, however, the same family. They worshipped the same God. They mustn't fight. They must separate. But they can't stop caring. *The LORD watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another. Mizpah*. It's about stopping them killing one another. It's also about looking after them and protecting them. Ultimately, they are one. Mizpah came to be a precious word in wartime when men went away to fight and their wives and fiancés waited at home or faced danger themselves. It could be engraved on jewellery or just a word they kept in their hearts. *The LORD watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another. Mizpah*.

June 1st

Genesis 32 vv 1-8

How do you think Jacob felt inside. He'd successfully concluded his difficult business with Laban. God's angels had met him on the road. He is, however, afraid of what his brother Esau might be planning. You might think that from his experience of the way God had helped him in the past and from his own personal experience of meeting with God, he wouldn't worry, but he does worry. You and I can look back on times when God has helped us in the past. We know other Christians who have told us how He has helped them. We've read the Bible and we know a bit of Church history. So we know that God takes care of His people. We may have to endure, but He never allows us to suffer more than we can take. We have also experienced God as He has revealed Himself to us. Yet, like Jacob, we worry. We might think that we aren't very good Christians because we worry, but we do worry, and so do much greater saints than us. Don't let the devil make you question your faith because you are a worrier. It isn't you or even your faith that sustains you. It is God Who sustains you. Even faith no more than a grain of mustard seed moves mountains, because it isn't you; it's God Who moves the mountain.

June 2nd

Genesis 32 vv 9-12

*I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth,
which thou has shewed unto thy servant.*

Do we share Jacob's consciousness? Our older prayers and hymns are full of expressions of our unworthiness, but the emphasis has changed in newer prayer books and hymns. The confession is to a degree downgraded. There is a tendency to lament the sins of society rather than our own personal failings. We are encouraged to recognise our self worth and to demand our rights. Basically, we're encouraged to think that we're OK. We're better than some people, probably not as good as others and God and the world should accept us as we are on our own terms.

I think we need to ask ourselves whether this is either realistic or helpful. What does God owe us? After all He has given us everything that we have, including our very existence. What is it about us that God should love us? How do we really measure up to His standards? If we really got what we deserved from God or the world, what would that be? There is a danger in false humility. Some people seem to revel in proclaiming their unworthiness. There is also, however, a danger in complacency. We set the standard round about where we are on the scale of goodness. We look down on those who are not as good as we are and maybe we look up to those who are especially saintly. We've got a 2.1 degree in virtue and we think that qualifies us as Christians. We admire those with a first and feel better than those who have failed.

If we really think like this, we just don't understand either God or how we stand in relation to Him and to other people. We live lives less good than they could be, to our own personal detriment and to the detriment of those around us. It may be too that, deep down inside, we know we're not really good enough. There is always that self doubt. Am I up to the mark? Can I do the things I have to do? Do other people like me? Does God really love me? The good news is that, if we have Jacob's self knowledge, if we know that we can't earn God's love, we also know that we don't have to. God loves as we are, unworthy though we be.

June 3rd

Genesis 32 vv 13-23

Jacob's strategy is to win Esau over with presents. It shouldn't be necessary. If Jacob is truly sorry for what he did to Esau, Esau ought to forgive him unconditionally. That doesn't mean, however, that, if we are sorry for what we have done wrong, we shouldn't try to put it right. If we've besmirched somebody's reputation, we can try to put it right. If we've told lies, we can tell the truth. Some things you can't put right. You've done something that cannot be reversed, like breaking grandma's vase in a fit of temper. Saying "sorry" sincerely very often makes a huge difference, however, if we're brave enough to do it. If they won't accept an apology, there's nothing more that we can do, but we shouldn't make it worse by blaming them for not accepting that we're sorry for the wrong we did them. It's what makes for the healing of relationships that we should be working and praying for.

June 4th (Pentecost or Whitsun)

Genesis 32 vv 24-32

This is a story that fascinates, wrestling in prayer with God. I wonder what your experience of prayer is? I'm sure that we are all different in our relationship with God. Some people might say that mine is quite bland. I say my prayers. I read the Bible. Quite simply I tend to take things as they are. Occasionally, I have what might be called a transcendent experience, an experience of the glory, the beauty or the love of God, but usually I suggest get on with it and trust God. When I pray in really challenging situations, I tend to accept that God knows what He is doing and that He doesn't need me to keep reminding Him or to argue with Him. But there are also plenty of instances in the Bible and in the lives of the saints, where persistence in prayer has been proved vital and even where people have debated with God – like Abraham asking God not to destroy any righteous people in Sodom. We all have our own experience with God. What matters most is that we stick with it, that we pray every day whether we feel like it or not, that we faithfully read the Bible even when we think it's boring or incomprehensible, that we stick with the Church even if we don't feel it does anything for us. It's not what we feel; it's what's real that matters. God, who as at this time didst teach the hearts of thy faithful people, by the sending to them the light of thy Holy Spirit; Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgement in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.

June 5th

Genesis 33 vv 1-20

It's Monday. We encountered God in church yesterday. We participated in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the fellowship of the people of God. We received Christ's Body and Blood in the Holy Communion. We heard God's Word read to us and preached. We joined our prayers with those of Jesus and the Holy Spirit and the whole Church of God at the Throne of Grace. In fact, when you think about it, people who don't make Church their top priority on Sunday can't really understand what they are missing. If they knew what it's really about, almost nothing would keep them away, but the devil is very subtle in suggesting that belonging to the Church is unnecessary, irrelevant, boring and less important than the things of this world. Having said that, however, Monday does come. We go back to the world with all its challenges. Jacob wrestles with God at Peniel. Then he has to face Esau. The point is, however, that Jacob is able to deal with the problems he himself had created by mistreating his brother because he has encountered God. We deal with the opportunities and challenges the world presents us with in our everyday lives in the strength and wisdom of the eternity which we experience in our worship. Lord MacKay of Clashfern, when he was Lord Chancellor, maintained his strict rule of never working on a Sunday. His experience was that he worked much better on the other six days because he obeyed God's commandment on the Sabbath.

June 6th

Genesis 34 vv 1-31

This is a story you probably weren't told when you were a child. It's not one we hear in church much either. No-one comes out of it well except perhaps Dinah herself. We tend not to read the difficult and unpleasant bits of the bible and preachers are reluctant to preach on them. We've probably become more refined from the reign of Queen Victoria onwards. Feminists, however, have revived interest in Dinah. All Scripture is written for our learning and we shouldn't discount any of it. The point for feminists is that Dinah is effectively abused by all these men – father, brothers, Shechemites – and that she has to take drastic action as we shall see later. The Israelites could not merge with a pagan tribe without being unfaithful to God. Dinah's defilement shouldn't go unpunished, but the punishment was deceitful, cruel and likely to lead to continued strife between the tribes.

June 7th

Genesis 35 vv 1-15

Just before the incident with the Shechemites, Jacob built an altar which he called Elohe Israel. That means God of Israel. In this chapter he builds an altar at Beth El, which means House of God. His name is changed from Jacob to Israel. Israel's household are made to get rid of all strange gods. They are not to compromise with the ways of the world, with the worship of that which is not God. They are to be holy to the LORD, separated out from the nations as the people of God. The different names of God speak of different aspects of His majesty. El and Elohim were very likely used by other tribes than the Israelites. They knew something of God, but they did not know Him by His Name the LORD. Even the Israelites worshipped images and false gods. El Elyon is God Almighty, another Name for God used widely in the Ancient Middle East. In time, it was realised that these are not different gods, but different names for the same God. Some claims about God shared across different religions are all true. God is one. He is just and merciful. Christians, Jews and Muslims all share these truths. Some claims about God are not true. It is not appropriate to call God Baal (though some early Israelites did so). It is not appropriate to think of God as requiring human sacrifice as some of the pagans thought of their gods as wanting. God makes Himself known to Israel as the LORD (Yahweh) and then to all humanity as Jesus. What Jesus is, God is. What Jesus is not, God is not.

June 8th

Genesis 35 vv 16-29

Jacob's second and favourite wife died near Bethlehem while giving birth to his last son, Benjamin. This fact explains some things about the Christmas story. It is why the place Jesus was born is called Bethlehem Ephrata. It is that one where Rachel died. There was another Bethlehem, which incidentally means house of bread, and is therefore an appropriate birthplace for the Bread of Life. Rachel died in the pain of childhood. Later on, Jeremiah pictures her weeping for her children when the land is being ravaged by the Babylonians centuries later, Rachel's descendants being the people of the Holy Land. Matthew sees Jeremiah's words as a prophecy of the mothers of Bethlehem lamenting their sons when Herod murders them in his attempt to prevent a new king Jesus growing up in his realm.

June 9th

Genesis 37 vv 1-4

Read chapter 36 if you like. It tells you what happened to Jacob's brother's family and is the background for the subsequent strained relationship between Israel and Edom (which is the country where Petra was much later built east of the Dead Sea). Chapter 37 is more central to our Salvation History, (though, as I've said, no part of the Word of God should be discounted). Despite the problems in his own family with Isaac preferring Esau and Rebekah preferring him, Jacob spoils Joseph. Maybe, it was because of his own upbringing. Our childhood makes us the people we are and, sadly, the children of alcoholics or abusers or criminals are more likely than others to make the same mistakes their parents made. The sins of the fathers are visited on the children down the generations. The cycle has to be broken.

Governments talk about early intervention in problem families. That's good so long as social workers, teachers, etc., respect the people in whose lives they are intervening. Interfering do-gooders are more likely to be resented than to do much good. In the end, it's character that counts. Our character is more likely to develop properly if we are treated with love and respect than if we are treated as somebody's caseload. Above all, of course, it is the love of God alone which can save us and the Church's mission is about much more than intervention in the material circumstances of people's lives. One of the things I like about Christians Against Poverty (the debt charity) is that, while they help people with money problems unconditionally, they are also ready to pray for their clients and share their faith with them.

June 10th

Genesis 37 vv 5-11

I do remember being taught this story in school. Dreams are a feature of what scholars call the wisdom literature in the Old Testament. It is often through dreams in these stories that God makes His ways known. The characters learn wisdom from the vicissitudes they go through and from their encounters with God. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.* It is interesting that Jacob rebukes Joseph for the dream but, nevertheless, takes it to heart. A feature of the Christian story is that God works through our imperfections. He doesn't depend on perfect people, who always do the right thing. Our lives are quite messy, but God works in us and with us and through us to achieve His purposes.

June 11th (Trinity Sunday)

Genesis 37 vv 12-17

So here is Joseph, 17 years old or thereabouts, sent to wander looking for his brothers, nomadic shepherds. He doesn't know where they are for certain. There are no maps. The countryside is largely empty and to an extent perilous. He might run out of water and food. There are wild beasts and unfriendly tribesmen. He might well have felt lonely, lost and afraid. Seeking God. Some people feel lonely, lost and afraid of life. God is the answer, if they but knew it. Do they seek Him? Jesus promises that those who seek will find.

For many Christians, the Trinity is a puzzle. That's not the point, however. The point is that God totally makes Himself known in Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We don't have to understand God, the Holy Trinity, only to worship Him.

Almighty and everlasting God, who hast given unto us thy servants grace, by the confession of a true faith to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of the Divine Majesty to worship the Unity: We beseech thee, that thou wouldest keep us stedfast in this faith, and evermore defend us from all adversities, who livest and reignest, one God, world without end. Amen.

June 12th (S Barnabas transferred)

Genesis 37 vv 18-22

Trinity Sunday is more important than S Barnabas. I'm sure he would have agreed! So S Barnabas Day comes a day late this year. What a contrast! Barnabas is described as *son of consolation*. He recognises Paul's gifts and smoothes the path for Paul, the former persecutor of Christians to be accepted and used as an apostle and evangelist by the Jerusalem Church. Barnabas accompanies and supports Paul on some of his travels. He himself gives shares his considerable wealth with the whole Church of God. What a contrast with the actions of Joseph's brothers and yet God's purposes are accomplished in both stories. The diocesan Lent course puts it like this: *To be a Christian is to sit lightly to outcomes and objectives, whilst exerting our best energies in kingdom service and witness*. In other words, what is required of us is that we remain faithful. The outcome is in God's Hands. (Prayer next page).

O Lord God Almighty, who didst endue thy holy Apostle Barnabas with singular gifts of the Holy Ghost: Leave us not, we beseech thee, destitute of thy manifold gifts, nor yet of grace to use them alway to thy honour and glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

June 13th

Genesis 37 vv 23-28

Telling this story to a group of children, I remarked that it was a wicked thing to sell your brother into slavery. One boy said it was perfectly understandable if you had a brother like his. I think he was joking. It seems unimaginable that anyone would buy and sell human beings. It seems unimaginable that we would subject men, women and children to the hardships of slavery, beat them, rape them, ill use them in every way. Yet we know that it has gone in history and we know that it goes on in the world today. Even in this country, only last week, there was a case. Even in this country, vulnerable, unemployed men, without friends, maybe homeless, perhaps uneducated are picked up on the streets and made to work for little or nothing and beaten if they refuse or try to escape. Women and children are trafficked as sex slaves. We can rightly be proud of what was done to end slavery in the C19, but there is a long way to go.

June 14th

Genesis 37 vv 29-36

They say that the worst thing that can happen to you is to have a child die. Possibly, it would be worse to lose a child into slavery. I suppose that where there is life there is hope, but precious little hope for many child victims of such human wickedness. These young men commit an evil deed and tell a wicked lie in order to escape blame. I find it unbelievable what people do – the atrocities committed in war, horrific acts of terrorism, murders, rapes, child abuse. Surely we all know the consequences. Don't people have any conscience? Is there no sense of feeling for the victims. In the long run it does the perpetrators no good either. We all know that. So why do people do these things? Why do we do wrong, not such terrible wrong as this, but wrong nevertheless? It's unbelievable, unless, of course, you believe in original sin, the unpopular, but fundamental Christian belief that *all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.*

June 15th

Genesis 38 vv 1-30

This is another story you probably didn't read in Sunday School, but one which feminists have brought back to our notice because it speaks of the ill treatment of women by powerful but conscienceless men and a brave, strong and clever woman who managed to provide for herself despite the way she was misused by the men who ought to have looked after her. Judah's relationships with the opposite sex are hardly above reproach even at the beginning of the story. According to the custom of the time, when Tamar's husband Er died, his brother Onan should have taken her to wife and looked after her and given her children. Instead of that he made a fool of her. The family should still have looked after her, but apparently neglected her and she was reduced to doing what she did to get noticed and cared for. Despite all this sordidness, Tamar was great, great, great...grandmother to Jesus and is one of only four women mentioned in his ancestry. She has her own place with Rahab, Ruth and the Blessed Virgin Mary. And that's how God works.

June 16th

Genesis 39 vv 1-6

God was with Joseph. When the time came for him to be sold, he was sold to the Egyptian officer of Pharaoh's guard Potiphar. He was an able young man and worked hard and soon rose to an important position in Potiphar's household. These are themes in the wisdom literature. You learn by your sufferings. Wisdom, intelligence, prudence and sheer hard work help you to get on in the world.

June 17th

Genesis 39 vv 7-23

But Joseph's troubles weren't over yet. He still had a lot to learn. The incident with Potiphar's wife led him to be wrongly accused of a terrible crime and he was sent to prison. It's hard to know the truth when there are allegations of sexual impropriety. There are usually only two people present, whether it's a man accused of raping a woman or an adult accused of abusing a child. It's terrible if a villain gets away with it. It's terrible if an innocent person is convicted. How do you know which one to believe? I'd hate to be on a jury in such a case. There is the presumption of innocence unless guilt can be proved beyond reasonable doubt, but it would be dreadful to let a rapist or an abuser go free for lack of conclusive evidence.

June 18th (Trinity 1)

Genesis 40 vv 1-4

“This is where we came” is what people used to say in the cinema when films were repeatedly shown and you could come in and out any time. I tend to feel like that at this point in reading the bible. This is the first passage we attempted in Hebrew classes. If you are reading a traditional translation of the Bible which follows the rhythm of the original*, you will see what a beautifully straightforward language Hebrew is. They reckon it goes better into English (which also has a fairly loose structure) than it does into classical Latin (with its rigid grammatical rules and preferred word order). So The English translators at the Reformation had an easier task and made a better job of it than S Jerome’s Latin (Vulgate) Bible which was the only version people were allowed to read throughout the Middle Ages. It is best, if you can, to read it in the original languages, but it is a great gift that the Bible is now freely available in so many of the languages of the earth. Pray for the Work of the Bible Society and others in translating the Scriptures and making them available and pray for people where they are too poor to buy bibles, the state persecutes those who have bibles or bibles are not yet available in their own languages.

*Should bible translations should be as close as possible to the original Hebrew and Greek or should they be cast in more familiar English forms? Is it better to be as near as possible to the original or is it better to make it easier for English readers to understand? We have both kinds of translation into English and both are worth reading if you have time.

June 19th

Genesis 40 vv 5-8

In this wisdom literature, God often speaks to people through dreams. Some people believe that God still speaks to us through dreams. In C20, psychologists like Freud and Jung made a great deal of the meaning of dreams for our personality, our mental health, and, in the case of Jung, for our collective consciousness, what we share at a psychological level with other people. Other scientists believe that dreams have no special meaning. They just happen. Maybe they are the way our brains make sense of our experiences, lay down our long term memories and catalogue what we have learnt. Some dreams seem to be significant. Some may trouble us. Some recur. Some are common to us and other people. I keep an open mind about the possible significance of dreams. Maybe God does still use them to speak to us.

June 20th

Genesis 40 vv 9-23

You may well remember the dreams of the butler and the baker from primary school. I do. Their dreams certainly troubled them. Under God's providence, Joseph had acquired a trusted status in the prison and got out of his cell to serve the breakfasts. He more or less ran the prison. He was learning his lesson. As a wise man, Joseph attributes the interpretation of dreams to God. There is nothing we can do unless God enables us to do it and that would be especially obvious with something like the interpretation of dreams. The butler had good news and the baker bad. Joseph told his story and hoped the butler would speak up for him when he was restored to Pharaoh's service, but he soon forgot the person who was kind to him in adversity. We do compartmentalise and not think about people we used to know when we move onto something new, especially if the old is something we'd rather forget.

O God, the strength of all them that put their trust in thee, mercifully accept our prayers; and because through the weakness of our mortal nature we can do no good thing without thee, grant us the help of thy grace, that in keeping of thy commandments we may please thee, both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

June 21st

Genesis 41 vv 1-13

The bible usually tells stories in very few words. Indeed, one of the problems taking a Sunday School lesson or telling a bible story in church, is that they are usually so short. They take hardly any time to tell and you have to resist the temptation to make up things that aren't there to pad them out. But we are told the story of Pharaoh's dreams at great length because they are so important. This is how it comes about that Israel comes to live in Egypt. In years to come, the Israelites will be enslaved. Then God will redeem His firstborn son (the people of Israel) at the expense of Pharaoh's firstborn. They will be redeemed by the Blood of the Passover Lamb. The angel of death will pass over their homes. They will be baptised in the Red Sea. They will be the people of God, a holy nation, a kingdom of priests. They will feed on the bread of heaven and drink water from the Rock which is Christ. The flame of the Holy Spirit will protect and lead them to the Promised Land. This is Salvation History, fulfilled in Christ and the redemption of Creation.

June 22nd

Genesis 41 vv 14-36

I do like the mundane note that Joseph needed to shave and change his clothes when he was summoned into Pharaoh's presence. Relying on God, Joseph could do what the Egyptian magicians couldn't do; Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream and, of course, it was then obvious what they had to do.

June 23rd

Genesis 41 vv 37-45

So Joseph, the spoilt brat, was sold into slavery. He became chief steward in his master's house. Falsely accused of a terrible crime, he again faced degradation and was sent to prison. There he rose once again to become second in command. Now he becomes second in command to Pharaoh. The wise man advances by being honest and faithful and working hard. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. Bad boys like Joseph (and good boys like you and me) learn wisdom through hardship as well as through more comfortable times. Romans 5 1 Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: ² By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³ And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; ⁴ And patience, experience; and experience, hope: ⁵ And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.

June 24th (Nativity of S John the Baptist)

Genesis 41 vv 46-47

Joseph prepared the Land of Egypt for the seven years of famine. John the Baptist prepared people for the coming of the Kingdom of God. He prepared the way for Jesus. Joseph prepared by hoarding food supplies. John prepared by preaching a Baptism of repentance. Joseph saved mortal lives. John prepared us for immortality.

Almighty God, by whose providence thy servant John Baptist was wonderfully born, and sent to prepare the way of thy Son our Saviour, by preaching of repentance: Make us so to follow his doctrine and holy life, that we may truly repent according to his preaching; and after his example constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

June 25th (Trinity 2)

Genesis 42 vv 1-8

Prosopagnosia is a good word. It means not recognising faces. Mary Magdalene didn't recognise the Risen Christ in the garden after His Resurrection. Neither did Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus. Sometimes, we don't recognise people because we can't see very well. I succumbed to getting glasses when I failed to recognise my mother across the road. Some people are just poor at recognising faces. I'm a bit like that myself. I'm better with voices. We very often fail to recognise people when we see them out of their usual context. We might buy our paper from the same vendor every day and then not recognise him on the bus. Joseph's brothers certainly didn't expect to see him in this context! It's quite embarrassing, however, to fail to recognise somebody you know perfectly well. It's also embarrassing to be recognised by people who think you know them when you don't, but you ought to. This happens a lot to clergy, teachers and doctors. As always, these awkward situations have to be handled with mutual love and respect.

O Lord, who never failest to help and govern them who thou dost bring up in thy stedfast fear and love: Keep us, we beseech thee, under the protection of thy good providence, and make us to have a perpetual fear and love of thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

June 26th

Genesis 42 vv 9-20

Joseph isn't going to let off his brothers lightly. As Christians, we know that we must always be prepared to forgive whatever wrong is done us, but we mustn't be too glib about it. Forgiving a serious injury isn't laughing it off or just forgetting about it. The victim deserves justice. It certainly isn't right to blame other people who have been the victims of serious wrong doing because they can't or won't forgive the person who hurt them. We injure them again if we try to deny them justice in our desire to rehabilitate the offender. If our relationship with them is good enough, we might be able to point out to them sensitively that they will never completely heal unless they can forgive the wrongdoer, but we can't forgive on their behalf or blame them because they can't forgive. The best kind of forgiveness is when the wrongdoer acknowledges his crime and sincerely repents. Joseph's brothers haven't got to that stage yet.

June 27th

Genesis 42 vv 21-24

I told you so never comes over very well. The brothers are coming round to acknowledging that they deserve what is coming to them because of the way they have treated Joseph. Reuben had cautioned the others against killing the boy and had been absent when they sold him into slavery. Now he can say *I told you so*, but it doesn't really help matters.

June 28th

Genesis 42 vv 25-34

The brothers now think that they will be taken for thieves because their money is in their sacks. Joseph has arranged this to keep them even more worried. Joseph has learnt his lesson. Now his brothers are learning theirs. Our actions do have consequences. While there is not a straightforward connection, things do generally go better when we do well than when we don't. The innocent do suffer and the wicked prosper, but that is not the general rule. And, anyway, justice is done in the end. The wicked can't afford to be complacent. The innocent may be sure that they are never forgotten.

June 29th (S Peter or S Peter & S Paul)

Genesis 42 vv 35-38

In the Gospel for today (Matthew 16 vv 13-19), Peter recognises and confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus tells him that he is blessed. It is God the Father Who has taught Peter Who Jesus is, just as it is God Who teaches all believers to know Him in Jesus Christ. Jesus names Peter the Rock. He gives him the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus builds His Church on Peter the Rock and promises that the gates of hell will not prevail against it. When Jesus goes on to explain that He will die on the Cross, Peter won't have it. He cannot accept the death of Jesus, his Lord and his friend. And Jesus says to Peter, *Get thee behind me Satan*. He goes on to explain that the Cross is necessary and that all of us who follow Him must be prepared to take up our cross and follow Him. Paradoxically, if we cling on to life, we shall lose it, but if we relinquish our lives we shall save them. Jacob cannot face risking the life of his youngest son, Benjamin. We can all understand that. Yet, as we have seen, many families have allowed their sons to lay their lives on the line. Death is not the end but a new beginning. The fear of death doesn't have the ultimate say. PTO prayer.

O Almighty God, who by thy Son Jesus Christ didst give to thy Apostle Saint Peter many excellent gifts, and commandedst him earnestly to feed thy flock: Make, we beseech thee, all Bishops and Pastors diligently to preach thy holy Word, and the people obediently to follow the same, that they may receive the crown of everlasting glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

June 30th

Genesis 43 vv 1-14

The famine got worse and they had no alternative but to return to Egypt. Despite Jacob's fears, Benjamin had to go. It's surprising what we can face up to when we have to.

You probably know the rest of the story. If not, read on in the bible. After further trials, Joseph and his brothers are reconciled. Israel comes down to Egypt and makes his home there. So the Israelites aren't wiped out in the famine. Joseph explains that God is behind everything which has happened and, despite the terrible way in which they've all behaved, God is using these events to save His people. They never lose sight, however, of the fact that their inheritance is in the Promised Land, the Land of Canaan, and that one day they will return there.

As we have seen, these stories stand on their own as basic to the human condition. They teach us about God and about our human nature and about how people relate to God and to one another. They are about the justice and mercy, the love, which underpin the cosmos. They are about providence, the working out of God's plan for us. They are about sin and its consequences. They are about mercy and faith. Everybody ought to know them. Which means that we have a duty to teach them.

They are obviously especially precious to Jewish people because they are the story of their people. They are precious to us because the story of Jesus is rooted in the story of God's people. It's hard to see what people can make of reading the New Testament if they haven't first learnt the basic principles set out in the Old Testament.

I hope these notes have been useful. If you have any suggestions for future studies, please let me know. RIK.

Psalm 105. O give thanks unto the Lord, and call upon his Name : tell the people what things he hath done. 2 O let your songs be of him, and praise him : and let your talking be of all his wondrous works. 3 Rejoice in his holy Name : let the heart of them rejoice that seek the Lord. 4 Seek the Lord and his strength : seek his face evermore. 5 Remember the marvellous works that he hath done : his wonders, and the judgements of his mouth, 6 O ye seed of Abraham his servant : ye children of Jacob his chosen. 7 He is the Lord our God : his judgements are in all the world. 8 He hath been alway mindful of his covenant and promise : that he made to a thousand generations; 9 Even the covenant that he made with Abraham: and the oath that he sware unto Isaac; 10 And appointed the same unto Jacob for a law : and to Israel for an everlasting testament; 11 Saying, Unto thee will I give the land of Canaan : the lot of your inheritance; 12 When there were yet but a few of them : and they strangers in the land; 13 What time as they went from one nation to another : from one kingdom to another people; 14 He suffered no man to do them wrong : but reprov'd even kings for their sakes; 15 Touch not mine Anointed : and do my prophets no harm. 16 Moreover, he called for a dearth upon the land : and destroyed all the provision of bread. 17 But he had sent a man before them : even Joseph, who was sold to be a bond-servant; 18 Whose feet they hurt in the stocks : the iron entered into his soul; 19 Until the time came that his cause was known: the word of the Lord tried him. 20 The king sent, and delivered him : the prince of the people let him go free. 21 He made him lord also of his house : and ruler of all his substance; 22 That he might inform his princes after his will : and teach his senators wisdom. 23 Israel also came into Egypt : and Jacob was a stranger in the land of Ham. 24 And he increased his people exceedingly : and made them stronger than their enemies; 25 Whose heart turned, so that they hated his people : and dealt untruly with his servants. 26 Then sent he Moses his servant : and Aaron whom he had chosen. 27 And these shewed his tokens among them : and wonders in the land of Ham. 28 He sent darkness, and it was dark : and they were not obedient unto his word. 29 He turned their waters into blood : and slew their fish. 30 Their land brought forth frogs : yea, even in their kings' chambers. 31 He spake the word, and there came all manner of flies : and lice in all their quarters. 32 He gave them hail-stones for rain : and flames of fire in their land. 33 He smote their vines also and fig-trees : and destroyed the trees that were in their coasts. 34 He spake the word, and the grasshoppers came, and caterpillars innumerable : and did eat up all the grass in their land, and devoured the fruit of their ground. 35 He smote all the first-born in their land : even the chief of all their strength. 36 He brought them forth also with silver and gold : there was not one feeble person among their tribes. 37 Egypt was glad at their departing : for they were afraid of them. 38 He spread out a cloud to be a covering : and fire to give light in the night-season. 39 At their desire he brought quails : and he filled them with the bread of heaven. 40 He opened the rock of stone, and the waters flowed out : so that rivers ran in the dry places. 41 For why? he remembered his holy promise : and Abraham his servant. 42 And he brought forth his people with joy : and his chosen with gladness; 43 And gave them the lands of the heathen : and they took the labours of the people in possession; 44 That they might keep his statutes : and observe his laws.