

The Pastoral Epistles



Bible Notes January - March 2017

January 1st (Circumcision of Christ)

I Timothy 1 v1

On the eight day, a Jewish boy baby has to be circumcised in accordance with the covenant God made with Abraham. This is when the child is given his name. S Luke tells us that *his name was called Jesus, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb*. This Name means the LORD is salvation. S Paul says that God our Saviour and the Lord Jesus Christ our hope commanded him to become an apostle and proclaim the Good News of salvation to the nations. In Philippians, he tells us, that this Name of Jesus is above every other name so that every knee shall bow to Him, whether in heaven or earth or under the earth. It is the Name which as Christians we bear. We bear His Name because we are His family. In the world, the very fact that we are Christians bears witness to Christ. We are saved by God in Christ. We bear that message of salvation to the world.

January 2nd

I Timothy 1 v2

I'm not always sure which books to choose to study in these quarterly notes. I try to select readings from different parts of the bible. I don't always want to choose the obvious and best known. You know all about them! On the other hand, I'm not sure that it would be helpful to pick the more difficult passages of which the application to being a Christian in the world today is not obvious. Neither do I want to repeat myself too soon or too often. On the other hand, there is no part of the bible so well known to us that we can't learn more from it. Neither is there any part of the bible which is not relevant to us today. It is all the Word God. Nevertheless I should be grateful for your suggestions as to what we ought to study together. I see we studied Timothy eight years ago. So, it's not too soon for a fresh look and some of you are new readers anyway. I chose these epistles this quarter because they have meant a lot to me lately in my own reading and preaching.

S Paul was unmarried, but he had come to regard Timothy as a son. Timothy's actual father isn't mentioned, but his mother and grandmother are commended for bringing him up to know God. He accompanied Paul on his journeying and is now in charge of sorting things out in the Church at Ephesus.

January 3rd

I Timothy 1 v3

Churches can be the most frustrating communities. They are both divine and human. It is God's Church. He creates a Church in any particular place by sending preachers to preach the Gospel and by sending the Holy Spirit to open people's ears and eyes to the truth of Jesus and to soften their hearts so that His Word takes root in them and they bear fruit in love and joy and peace. In places like Cuxton and Halling, they pass on the Good News with which they have been entrusted from generation to generation and God constitutes His Church in every age by the work of the Holy Spirit in establishing our fellowship with God and with one another and by the Sacrament of Baptism in which we become members of the Body of Christ and by the Sacrament of Holy Communion in which we are nourished by His Body, and by the preaching of the Gospel to build us up into the full stature of Christ. Yet, it is also our Church. The Church is made up of fallible human beings like us. The Church is us and we fail so often to live up to our calling. What happens in churches only too often brings shame to the holy Name we bear. We see it in the New Testament, churches going off the rails within a very short time of their being founded. We see it in history. We see it in the present day. Thankfully, God is merciful to us. He supplies us with the means of grace to continue in His fellowship. He sends preachers and teachers like Timothy to get us back on the strait and narrow way. We need to pray for our clergy and others in positions of authority in the Church and for ourselves that we may always believe in His Truth, walk in His Way and rejoice in His Life.

January 4th

I Timothy 1 v4

The question is, what is edifying? To edify is to build. What are we building? We are building a temple meet for God. We are building ourselves up into more Christ-like people. We are building up one another into more Christ-like people. We are building up our local Church as the Body of Christ. We are building up the universal Church as the Body of Christ. So, we should all be becoming better people as a result of our membership of the Church. We should also bearing witness to the world so that our numbers may be added to by those whom the Lord is calling. So the test of what goes on in our churches is does it make us and one another better people and does it commend the Gospel to the wider community?

January 5th (Twelfth Night)

I Timothy 1 v5

Traditionally, this is the day the Christmas decorations come down. Lights celebrate the Light of the world. Evergreens celebrate everlasting life in Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life. Bright colours symbolise our joy in Jesus. Precious ornaments passed down from year to year celebrate our continued love for the people with whom we have shared Christmases past and with whom we celebrate the eternal joy of God's love for ever. Every year, we are reminded not to put away the spirit of Christmas in the box with the decorations. The Spirit of Christmas is the Holy Spirit through Whom Mary became the Mother of God. It is the Holy Spirit by Whom we are adopted as the children of God and learn to address God as Abba, Father. The manifestation of the work of the Spirit in us is the end of the commandment in charity out of a pure heart and of a good conscience and of faith unfeigned.

January 6th (Epiphany)

I Timothy 1 v6

It is well known that the name Bedlam for an asylum comes from Bethlehem. I read recently that the Bethlehem Hospital was so called because its founder had been a crusader. Once, when lost in the Judaeen desert, so the story goes, he saw a star over Bethlehem as the wise men had centuries before, and this showed him the way and inspired him to found the hospital. The history of caring for the mentally ill has often been one of starting off with the best intentions and then things going wrong because of lack of resources, the difficulty of recruiting the right staff and the way the sheer magnitude of the task can simply overwhelm everybody concerned. New treatments have brought tremendous improvements in the care of the mentally ill, but, it has to be admitted, some treatments, whatever the intentions of those who administered them, have turned out to be ineffective or even cruel. Well designed facilities have become run down as the money has run out. Good ideas like care in the community have been under resourced with the result that patients have not received the care they needed. It is possible for staff to become callous in the face of very demanding patients and lack of the means to care for them properly, still less to cure them. Mental patients have been treated as though they were possessed by evil spirits, or wicked, or as monsters to be mocked or feared. Instead of turning aside from love (= charity) our attitudes should be drawn to the star of Bethlehem and Him Whom it revealed, love made flesh.

January 7th

I Timothy 1v7

We don't know exactly what these teachers were teaching regarding the law. Probably, they were insisting that people must observe the Law God revealed to Moses on Mt Sinai if they are to be saved. They probably were trying to insist on the men being circumcised and everybody observing the food laws and the religious calendar of the Old Testament. They seemed to be religious, but they were missing the point of the law. The law isn't a series of meaningless rituals by observing which we can make ourselves right with God. God makes us right with Himself through the Death of Jesus on the Cross. We don't have to justify ourselves. We are set free from sin and the fear of death to serve God by obeying His law. The law is summarised in the commandments to love God and our neighbour. The Golden Rule is to do to others what we would like them to do to us. Jesus says, that whatever we do or don't do to one another, we do or don't do to Him. Worth considering in our treatment of mental patients and, indeed, of all human beings.

January 8th (Baptism of Christ)

I Timothy 1 v8

But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully.

How could we use the law unlawfully?

- 1) We could attempt to justify ourselves before God with the law when God alone can justify us. We obey Him because He loves us. We don't obey Him to get Him to love us.
- 2) We could take the law as a standard, realise that we could never attain that standard and despair. We need never despair. God loves as we are. We don't have to justify ourselves before Him.
- 3) We could take the law as our standard and look down on other people who we think are not as good as we are. Jesus said, *Judge not that ye be not judged.*
- 4) We could burden other people with rules and regulations, things to feel embarrassed about, things to feel guilty over, all kinds of obstacles to their ever rejoicing in the freedom of the Spirit which comes only from knowing Jesus Christ as Lord. God welcomes me *just as I am without one plea.* People should be able to feel that the Church too welcomes them just as they are.

January 9th

I Timothy 1 v9

I find this fascinating – that the law is not made for righteous people. If you are good, you don't need the law. If you are a good person, you always behave in a good way. It is your nature to be good if you are good. God makes us good through our relationship with Jesus Christ, a relationship which is deepened by prayer, reading the Bible, enjoying Christian fellowship and public worship, participating in Holy Communion and walking with Jesus in our everyday lives. Practice makes perfect. Good people don't need the law to tell them what they should and should not do. It comes naturally to behave like Jesus. It is because we are not yet perfect that we sometimes need the law to make us aware of how we should behave and occasionally perhaps we need the threat of punishment to motivate us to make the effort to overcome temptation to do wrong.

January 10th

I Timothy 1 v10

I was brought up to believe that the only proper expression of physical love was between a man and a woman in lifelong marriage. If possible for both of them, one of the principal purposes of marriage would be the procreation of children and their nurture. Sex (especially having children) before marriage, adultery and divorce were all wrong and so were relationships other than between a man and a woman. Cross-dressing or transgender were either wrong or to be pitied. The only legitimate alternative to heterosexual, unconditional, life-long marriage was celibacy. All these traditional values have now so far been challenged that people would laugh at you if you referred to cohabitation as *living in sin*, call you unfeeling if you suggested that couples should stick together in unhappy marriages and accuse you of hate crime if you opposed gay marriage. You could argue that strong traditional families were much more necessary when there was no welfare state and rates of infant mortality were high. Society had to be harsh with people who bore fatherless children, abandoned their families or adopted lifestyles which seemed to undermine what was necessarily regarded as normal. Now the problem is over-population rather than excessive mortality and the state is always there to act as a parent of last resort, you could argue, individuals are freer to do what they want rather than what their families require of them. There is no longer any reason to condemn unmarried mothers, divorcees or homosexuals and it is cruel to do so. Or could it be that we vainly seek fulfilment in sex because, having turned our backs on God as a society, we no longer find fulfilment in Him. Is the desperate need for all kinds of sex, indeed of human love, a consequence of our loss of the divine? I've no wish to condemn, still less to be cruel, to those who *live in sin*, have fatherless children, divorce or contract gay relationships, but I do think it would be better if they didn't!

January 11th

I Timothy 1 v11

The truth sets us free. Jesus is the Truth. To be free doesn't mean to be free to do what our human nature (the flesh) might want to do – to envy other people, to get angry with them, to lie to get what we want, to eat and drink to excess, to hit people we don't like and to sleep with anyone we do. To be free is to be free to do what Jesus would do. That's not a burden. Quite the reverse. Our inclination to do what we know is wrong is a burden. Sin is destructive, destructive of our own peace, destructive of other people's lives, destructive of the world within which we live. There is no freedom in choosing to be a slave of sin. Jesus sets us free from sin so that we are free to serve Him, to serve Him in the freedom of the Spirit. That is our fulfilment as human beings made in the image of God.

January 12th

I Timothy 1 vv 12-14

This is the startling point. It is Paul's own experience which enables him to appreciate just how astonishing it is, what God has done in Christ. Paul was one of the greatest opponents of Jesus and His Church. Paul connived in the death of the first martyr, Stephen. He intended to chain and imprison the Christians in Damascus. He was a fanatic against the faith. And yet Christ made Himself known to Paul. He redeemed him. He cleansed him. He set him free from, sin, the world and the devil. Paul was baptised in Christ's Name and received His free gift of the Holy Spirit whereby he addressed God as *Abba*, Father. That this could be true for Paul – the arch-persecutor! Yet, surely it is Paul's own experience that enables him to comprehend the way it is for everyone. None of us deserves the love of God. We have all fallen very far short, so far short that there is no way that we could help ourselves, but God loves us as we are and has done everything necessary for us. And yet Christ made Himself known to Roger. He redeemed him. He cleansed him. He set him free from, sin, the world and the devil. Roger was baptised in Christ's Name and received His free gift of the Holy Spirit whereby he addressed God as *Abba*, Father. If you're a Christian, that's true for you too. Insert your own name. This is Good News for you and me and for the world and it our commission as the Church of God to proclaim this Good News to the world. You can't stand in your own strength. You don't have to. Christ has done it all for you. Put your faith in Him.

January 13th

I Timothy 1 v15

Those of you familiar with the 1662 Communion service will recognise this as one of the Comfortable Words which the priest says after pronouncing the absolution when we have confessed our sins. It is in Common Worship as well, but harder to find. One of the strengths of Common Worship is also one of its weaknesses. There is so much good stuff in it, but there's just too much there to handle. When we read this verse at that point in the service, we leave off the last words *of whom I am chief*, but I often think of them. Paul was a great sinner. So am I. So are you. But *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*. If we don't know that we are sinners, we don't know our need for Christ. If we don't understand why Christ matters so much to us, our lukewarm love for Him is readily explained. Are we really such great sinners that we need God to send His Son to offer Himself upon the Cross as our sacrifice for us? Or are we more or less acceptable as we are and Jesus' death is just a sad event which happened a long time ago? The law is that we should love God wholeheartedly and our neighbours as ourselves. The law is that we should be holy as He is holy. Anything less is sin and requires forgiveness, forgiveness which is only available through Christ's propitiatory sacrifice. The next of the Comfortable Words is I John 2¹: *If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins.*

January 14th

I Timothy 1 v16

Paul has this sense that his extraordinary story – the persecutor of the Church who became an apostle – is one way in which God shows the world what He is doing in Christ.

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood!

To every believer the promise of God.

The vilest offender who truly believes,

That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Those who don't acknowledge their need for God's forgiveness, for atonement, cannot experience what it means to be a Christian, but all those who do come to Jesus in penitence and faith receive His forgiveness and experience the freedom of the Holy Spirit.

January 15th (Epiphany 2)

I Timothy 1 v17

That we being delivered out of the hands of our enemies might serve him without fear. Those words are from the Benedictus, the song Zacharias sang at the circumcision and naming of his son, John the Baptist. *Delivered out of the hands of our enemies.* Yes, delivered out of the hands of our various human oppressors, in Zacharias' case the Romans, perhaps, but more importantly delivered out of the hands of our spiritual enemies, sin, the world and the devil. *That we might serve him without fear.* There is a purpose in our deliverance. We are set free to live joyful, faithful, fearless lives. We are set free to serve God. Serving God might mean anything: praying, helping people in need, preaching the Gospel, ministering to the sick, teaching, doing what ever we do for our living to the best of our ability, looking after our families, our neighbours, and other people, singing in a church choir, being a Christian presence in politics or in community organisations, school governors, etc.. Fundamental to serving God, however, is worship. Worship is the offering of self to God. It is what we were made for. It is the only way we can be fulfilled as human beings. Our whole lives may be an act of worship. They ought to be. We can certainly worship alone. However, I am sure that, normally speaking, a Christian life is incomplete if we don't assemble ourselves together with other Christians on the Lord's Day for the service the Lord gave us, to break bread, to hear the Word, to be attentive to the apostles' teaching, united in prayer. There seems to be a growing idea that going to church is an optional extra in the Christian life. I'm sure that such a view is ultimately fatal both to our individual walk with God and to the Church we belong to. After the war, more and more English people decided that they could be Christians without going to Church. Every generation of children growing up knew less about Jesus until we suddenly found ourselves a multi-cultural, secular, post-Christian country. Meanwhile church congregations have got smaller and older and it has become harder and harder to do anything in the community to proclaim the faith and to help people in need. People still go to Church when they are threatened with persecution. People still go to Church when they have to walk many miles through harsh landscapes. Poor people in many countries give generously of the little time and money they have. They obviously know something we don't when we're just too busy to find time for public worship, we put our time and talents at the disposal of every institution other than the Church and our offering of money compares badly with what we spend on leisure activities and consumer goods we don't need.

January 16th

I Timothy 1 vv 18-20

Timothy's got a hard job at Ephesus. Paul and his co-workers believe that Timothy is God's choice for this work. The reference to *prophecies* presumably means the ways God has made known His Word for Timothy. There were prophets in the early Church who conveyed the word of God, though, what purported to be the Word of God, had then (as it does today) to be assessed by the whole Christian community in the light of the Scriptures and the experience of all the faithful. The Church in every generation must be attentive to the Word of God. What is God telling us to do now? Whom is He calling to serve Him? What are His promises to us? What purports to be the Word of God we examine prayerfully in the light of Scripture and in the fellowship of the Church. God has chosen Timothy to go and sort things out at Ephesus and God provides him with the gifts he needs. God doesn't promise to make it easy for Timothy, but He does make it possible. What is required of Timothy is that he remains faithful. The sadness is that churches contain people like Alexander and Hymenaeus, who come up with strange ideas, divide fellowships and undermine leaderships. I don't think we know what these two had done. Paul has imposed a serious sanction on them. The aim would be that they should repent and be restored to full fellowship. If they remained recalcitrant, however, they could not have been allowed to return and put the whole Church in Ephesus at risk of false-teaching or schism (either a division within the Ephesus Church or a break between Ephesus and the other Churches Paul had founded.)

January 17th

I Timothy 2 v1

Again, those of you familiar with the 1662 prayer book will recognise that these words shape the first sentence of the prayer for the whole state of Christ's Church militant here in earth. If you read Paul carefully, however, you will notice that he is telling the Church to pray for the whole world, not just for Christians. We do have a special duty to pray for other Christians and for the Church of God. They are family. Charity begins at home. *As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.* (Galatians 6¹⁰). Charity does not, however, stay at home. Just as the love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit which binds together the Holy Trinity flows out into Creation, so authentic Christian love encompasses the whole universe and all who dwell in it.

January 18th

I Timothy 2 v2

Ironically, it could be pointed at that, while 1662, quotes Paul at this point, it is Common Worship which does what he says, *Rejoicing in the fellowship of all your saints, we commend ourselves and the whole creation to your unfailing love.* 1662 prays for all Christian kings, princes and governors. Europe at that time is nominally part of Christendom, a world in which everybody from the king on his throne to the humblest peasant is assumed to be a Christian. Every baby is supposed to be baptised and therefore a member of God's Church. In England Richard Hooker affirmed that the Church [of England] is the commonwealth [by which he means the nation]. Whether or not all English and European people were Christians in C17 is at the very least debatable. It seems unlikely to me! The conduct of many kings, princes and governors fell very far short of what one would expect of Christians.

Many people would question how far the commonwealth (state) should be identified with the Church. Holding power in the world tends to corrupt the Church. If the Church and the state are one, non-conformists, non-believers and members of other faiths are second class citizens. On the other hand, a government untrammelled by Christian ethics is susceptible to becoming an even worse tyranny (witness Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany) and a genuinely multi-cultural society may finally lack social cohesion. If Moslem values, Jewish values, Sikh values, Hindu values and Christian values are, at some points, incompatible with one another and incompatible with the secular values of the state, how can we decide on laws which would be binding on everyone? Eg, Catholic doctors and nurses are not obliged to carry out abortions. Sikh motor-cyclists don't have to wear crash helmets. Anglican clergy don't have to conduct gay weddings, but Catholic adoption agencies are not allowed to opt out of providing children for gay couples. Where are the limits to diversity and where should they be? Are we replacing Anglican hegemony with secular hegemony, at risk of treating people who don't share contemporary society's opinions about sexuality, gender roles, the place of faith in society, etc., as heretics to be excluded from positions of power and influence, punished or compulsorily re-indoctrinated, rather as non-conformists were treated by the Anglican state when Charles II was restored to the throne after the English Civil War?

January 19th

I Timothy 2 v2

Having spent yesterday thinking about what Paul didn't say, now let's look at what he did say. There were no Christian countries in Paul's time, only Christian communities (churches) within the Holy Land itself and (much more flourishing) in the pagan world of the Roman Empire and beyond. These communities were small and vulnerable and often made up of poor people. There, almost certainly, were no *Christian kings, princes and governors*. Paul is telling Christians to pray for their pagan rulers, many of whom were cruel and ruthless and some of whom persecuted the Church. There are three reasons for praying for pagan rulers. First of all, there is the prayer we offer for everyone who doesn't yet know Jesus that he or she may come to know Christ and thereby receive the blessings of eternal life. Paul himself said to King Herod Agrippa (when the king and the Roman governor Festus were trying to decide what to do with him), *I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost and altogether such as I am [a Christian], except these bonds.* (Acts 26²⁹). Secondly, efficient government (no matter how bad) is almost always better than anarchy and chaos. We need law and order to live in any community. Christian individuals and the Church in general are no exceptions. We can't live decent lives if we're at risk of being murdered or robbed because law and order have broken down. Thirdly, of course, we pray that we will be permitted by the state to meet for worship, to possess and read the Scriptures, to live our lives in accordance with Gospel principles and to share our faith with unbelievers.

January 20th

I Timothy 2 vv 3&4

I Tim 3⁴ is the great text for universalists. Most of the Bible speaks of judgment. Good and evil are realities. To choose good is to choose life. To choose evil is to choose death. First and foremost, God is just and we can expect to get what we deserve. By and large, humanity chooses evil and deserves death. It will be an astonishing manifestation of God's mercy if even a remnant is saved. Nobody actually deserves life. We can only escape eternal death through faith in Jesus Christ, Who has paid the price for our sins by His death on the Cross. It is because God is love that He is just. Love is meaningless if we are not good towards those whom we claim to love. There can be no love without justice. Justice necessitates the vindication of the innocent and the punishment of the wicked.

January 21st

I Timothy 2 vv 3&4

And yet, how can a loving God condemn the bulk of humanity to eternal death? It is true that we have chosen evil and therefore have deserved death, but surely it isn't God's Will that any sinner should perish. Plenty of passages in both the Old and the New Testament speak of God's mercy, His faithfulness in the face of our faithlessness, His longing to restore the sinner to the blessings of membership of the people of God. Universalists believe that God will somehow save everyone – even Hitler. I Tim 3⁴ says that God will have all men to be saved. Isn't it true that God's Will always prevails in the end? Surely, then, all men must be saved.

I'd like to be a universalist, but there are several objections to that. First, don't all these warnings of judgment in the Bible mean anything at all? If we're all going to receive the reward and nobody is going to be punished whatever we've done with our lives, what's the point of judgment if there is such a thing? Secondly, would it be fair if the wicked went unpunished and, in the end, their victims received no vindication? Thirdly, why did Jesus have to die on the Cross for our sins if our sins don't really matter? Fourthly, if everyone is saved because it is God's Will that everybody should be saved, what happens to human free will? Don't people in the end have any choice about whether they spend eternity with God or not?

I think Paul's main point here is that everyone should be given the opportunity to be saved, that everyone should have the chance to hear the Gospel and to act on it. I'd like to think that, in the end, everybody will be saved. I'm sure that God doesn't desire the death of a sinner. But what of those who finally refuse to turn from their wickedness and live? Won't God respect their choice?

January 22nd (Epiphany 3)

I Timothy 2 v5

Another question of course is what happens to people of other faiths, especially those who have never heard the Christian gospel or who might have rejected it because the Christians they have met were so awful? There is reason to believe that they will be judged according to their conscience. All religions, however, are not the same, different, but equally valid, paths to God. God is as He is revealed in Jesus Christ and Jesus is the only way to God. If people of other faiths and none make it to Heaven, it will still be through Jesus that they come.

January 23rd

I Timothy 2 v6

The 1662 Prayer for the Whole State of Christ's Church Militant Here in Earth finishes with the words, *Grant this, O Father, for Jesus Christ's sake, our only Mediator and Advocate*. Maybe Thomas Cranmer had this epistle at the forefront of his mind when he was writing this prayer. Jesus is our advocate. He speaks to God on our behalf. It is the same word as is used for the Holy Spirit. He is the Paraclete, the Comforter. (The Holy Spirit is *another Paraclete, Comforter, Advocate*, if you read it carefully). Jesus is also the go between between us and God. Our prayers ascend to the Throne of Grace through Him. God pours out His blessings (including the Holy Spirit) on us through Him. This is true even for those who don't know Jesus, because this is Who God is – one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus is not, however, an angel or some mysterious heavenly being, residing somewhere between heaven and earth. He is indeed God. He is also the man Christ Jesus. He bore our flesh. He knows exactly what it is to be human because it is His own experience. He really died on the Cross. He really died in absolute agony. His death, then, was a ransom. Jesus Himself described it as a ransom for many (Mark 10⁴⁵). Paul describes it as a ransom for all. I take the difference to mean that His death is sufficient to cover the sins of the whole world and therefore potentially covers *all*, but in fact it actually covers only *many* because some won't accept it. Hostages or prisoners of war might be ransomed. Perhaps, more to the point here, a slave could be set free on payment of a ransom (manumission). The death of Jesus sets us free from the prison of death. It sets us free from slavery to sin, the world and the devil. It atones for what we owe to God because of our failure to live justly.

January 24th

I Timothy 2 vv 7&8

This is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Paul wants people all over the world to be united in faithful prayer for all the things we have been thinking about. There have always been disagreements in the Church even in NT times. Paul being an apostle to the Gentiles and Peter to the Jews is something of a compromise in a Church that couldn't quite agree. However, they stayed together, whatever their sincere differences about doctrine and practice. Christ Himself prayed that we might be one. It is something not to lose sight of for individual congregations and for the relationships of churches with one another.

January 25th (Conversion of St Paul)

I Timothy 2 vv 9-15

People these days really don't know enough about the Bible. They don't read it themselves often enough. There is resistance to bible preaching and teaching in Church where people seem to want a short sermon rather than a challenging one. One thing people think they know about Paul (however little they know about his teaching and achievements), after years of debates about women priests and women bishops, is that he was a misogynist. That clearly isn't true. It is Paul who points out more than once that men and women are equal in Christ and that we stand before God on the same terms – that Jesus died for our sins. It is also clear that Paul valued the friendship and support of many women in his own ministry and that women held significant roles in both the missionary work of the early Church and in the life and ministry of the churches that were established in the various towns and cities of the ancient world. And yet there are passages like these which clearly assign different places to men and women. There are three ways of looking at these passages. You can say that Paul (or whoever wrote these words) failed to see the implications of what he had said elsewhere about the equality of men and women and the importance of women in working with him as an apostle. If you take this approach, you are effectively saying that some of what the Church has received as Holy Scripture is not authoritative as the Word of God. I should say that approach has dangerous implications for how we regard the rest of the Bible. Are we at risk of saying that anything in the Bible we don't agree with can't be the Word of God? If so, we are putting our own personal ideas above what God has revealed of Himself to the community of faith or we are claiming that He has revealed something new to our generation which conflicts with what He has said in the past. Secondly, we could take the view that, despite the fact that Jesus and the early Church knew that men and women are equal, it was just not possible in the world in which they lived to put women in leadership roles without damaging the credibility of the Church within what was then contemporary society. In that case, you might say, we are now free to put that right. As women's rights have been recognised in countries influenced by 2,000 years of Christian teaching, we now can and should welcome women into leadership roles in the Church. Or you could say (as I would) that what Paul writes here is probably true for all time. Men and women are equal, but God has made them different so that some roles are better filled by women and some (like church minister) by men.

January 26th

I Timothy 3 v1

If a man desire the office of a bishop.

Other translations say *overseer* rather than *bishop*. It is hard to hit on the right English word for this office. Obviously, bishops in those days didn't live in palaces or big houses and sit in the House of Lords. It is unlikely that they wore special vestments. They did, however, have authority in the local Church. They were responsible for sound teaching and preaching. They were leaders. They were responsible for discipline and unity. Presumably, they had a leadership role in the celebration of the Eucharist, though, in the early Church, this was more like a fellowship meal than what we do today when we celebrate Holy Communion. We tend to think that it is not a good thing to desire the office of a bishop. As the Church became established, and bishops became wealthy and wielded a great deal of power in the world as well as in the Church, it is obvious that some men might be tempted to become bishops for all the wrong reasons. Ambitious for self-advancement, they might make themselves out to be better than they were or scheme to achieve high office at the expense of better, less worldly, men. The ideal bishop is someone who recognises his own unworthiness for the task and his total reliance on God. It is wrong, however, to be falsely modest. If God has given us the talents required to serve Him as a bishop (or in any other capacity) and if there is a vacancy we might be able to fill, we should be willing to put ourselves forward, even to desire the office in question, that not to be too disappointed if a better candidate comes along.

January 27th

I Timothy 3 vv 2&3

These are obviously some of the qualities of a good candidate for episcopacy. The bit about having one wife probably is meant to rule out men who marry more than once – divorcees and widowers. There probably were never many polygamists who wanted to become bishops. Paul's advice elsewhere to Christians is to remain single if possible so as not to be too much entangled in the affairs of this world to do the work of God.

Hospitality was very important as an aspect of love. We share ourselves with people when we invite them into our homes. Moreover, travelling missionaries and evangelists depend on the local Church to put them up.

January 28th

I Timothy 3 vv 4-7

There's quite a lot of discussion about whether politicians are entitled to a private life. What would it matter, say some, if the prime minister were an adulteress (not that there is any reason to think that she is!), so long as she does a good job as PM? How can we trust a person to rule the country, others might say, if she has such a basic character flaw? It is obvious that we wouldn't have any politicians or clergy at all if we only allowed perfect people to hold office. It is also true that some good people may be put off standing for office for fear of the scrutiny of their private lives and the lives of their families and friends to which they would be subject. Nobody would want the spotlight turned onto every aspect of his life. On the other hand, given that behaviour is the product of character, if people behave badly in one area of their life, it is probably wise not to trust them too much in any aspect of their lives. This probably applies more to clergy even than to politicians. It is significant that the church leader should be someone who can be respected by the world outside as well as by the Church. People outside often decide what they think about Jesus based on how Christian people behave and ministers are more in the public gaze than most.

January 29th (Epiphany 4)

I Timothy 3 v8

Likewise must the deacons.

In the Church of England (and the RC and Orthodox Churches), we are used to speaking of a threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons. A man is ordained deacon in the Church of England, almost always with the expectation of subsequently being ordained priest. A deacon is not allowed to preside at the Sacraments, to bless or to absolve. The diaconate (when you are a deacon) is treated as an apprenticeship for priesthood. The word deacon means servant. Deacons have rather more authority in churches like the Baptist Church, but it still means servant. So does minister. Some people think that there ought to be more permanent deacons (never expecting to become priests) in the C of E. Christian priests are not priests in the sense of priesthood in the OT or in pagan religions. We have come to use the word priest for the NT presbyter or elder. Bishops and presbyters seem to have had very similar functions in the NT. Only gradually do they sort themselves out so that a bishop leads a whole diocese and priests the parish churches which make it up as his co-workers.

January 30th

I Timothy 3 vv 9-13

The character requirements of deacons are much the same as those for bishops and priests. Their role seems to have been visiting the sick, looking after the poor, taking Communion to the housebound, that sort of thing. Obviously, the Church needs people like that to be servants, to serve God, to serve the Church, to serve the needs of the world. So I can see where the idea of permanent deacons comes from. On the other hand, all the baptised are servants of God and of one another and of the world. I don't see the need to ordain people to do what all the baptised ought to be doing. If people are called to ordained ministry, I don't see why they should be restricted to the role of deacon and therefore unable to administer the sacraments. Churches need sacramental ministry and they therefore need men authorised and recognised to administer it, whether you call them priests, elders, presbyters or ministers. Every member of the Christian congregation should be engaged in caring for the sick and the poor, looking after the children, sharing the faith with unbelievers. The authorised ministry is necessary for leadership, especially at the Eucharist and in preaching. I don't see the point of a permanent diaconate who are only doing what we should all be doing and can't do what Church leaders are needed to do.

January 31st

I Timothy 3 vv 14-16

Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes, most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days, almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unchanging, and silent as light, nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might; thy justice like mountains high soaring above thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all, life thou givest, to both great and small; in all life thou livest, the true life of all; we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree, and wither and perish, but naught changeth thee.

Thou reignest in glory; thou dwellest in light; thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight; all laud we would render: O help us to see 'tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.

February 1st

I Timothy 4 v1

What does Paul mean by the “latter times”? Christians live in the expectation that Christ will come again. Heaven and earth, as we know them, will pass away. There will be a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. All the peoples of the world will come under judgment. For those who are His, there will be an eternity in His Presence, the presence of eternal love, the Beatific Vision of the Blessed Trinity. The dead will rise and those who are still alive on earth will, with them, meet Jesus as He returns in glory. It is the latter times now. The latter times began when Jesus was crucified. His Death is the beginning of God’s new creation, which will be consummated by His return. In the in between period, between our Lord’s first and second comings, the devil seeks to disrupt the Kingdom of God, to deceive individual Christians and to derail the Church. His purpose is to hinder the Gospel and to prevent the coming of God’s Kingdom of justice, mercy and peace. He cannot succeed, of course. The victory must be God’s, but we are called to be vigilant. A great comfort is something that Rowan Williams said: Mission is not a human endeavour which can succeed or fail, but an action of God in which we participate.

February 2nd (The Purification of the BVM)

I Timothy 4 vv 2&3

We don’t know exactly what the troublemakers in the Church at Ephesus were saying. They probably believed that spiritual people should not have anything to do with what the body might enjoy – food, drink, sex, etc.. When God saw the material world which He had made, however, He declared that it was good. He made our human bodies and breathed into them the breath of life so that we should be living souls. The body is not insignificant. We believe in the resurrection of the Body. It is not sinful to enter into a Christian marriage. Neither is it sinful to eat and drink nice things or to enjoy walking in the countryside or playing games or listening to music or going to the theatre.

It is remarkable how often, however, human beings have wanted to reject and prohibit simple pleasures sometimes for religious reasons as at Ephesus 2,000 years ago, but also for the supposed health benefits of abstinence, or to promote a personal spirituality and feeling of superiority to the common herd or a feigned aestheticism which looks down on popular culture.

February 3rd

I Timothy 4 vv 4&5

Obviously, indulgence in worldly pleasures such as food and drink, games, leisure activities and even family life have to be kept in proportion. This is how you achieve proportionality. Accept all these things thankfully as the gift of God. If you do so, you aren’t greedy or selfish with them. You consider other people as well as yourself in how you use your time, your skills and all the material goods which you enjoy. You bear in mind your responsibility to keep yourself as healthy as you can so that you can be a useful member of society. Don’t forget that one of the commandments is to have a day of rest one day a week. We don’t have to be doing something productive all the time. On the other hand, a life based on self-indulgence will never be a fulfilled life. It is more blessed to give than to receive, said Jesus.

February 4th

I Timothy 4 vv 6&7

Timothy himself has to regulate his life by these principles, biblical principles. Everything he does in life, his words and even his thoughts are rooted in his relationship with Jesus. This is the calling of a Christian minister. It is also the calling of all Christian people, to live our lives in intimate relationship with Christ. Jesus reveals Himself to us in the Scriptures, in the fellowship of the Church (especially around the Communion table) and in our personal daily conversation with Him. The minister is called to model the daily walk with God for his congregation. Insofar as we ministers fail, we ask you to forgive us and to look to Jesus for your inspiration rather than to His unworthy servants.

February 5th (Epiphany 5)

I Timothy 4 vv 7&8

On Sunday mornings, you can see scores of people out and about, often quite early: walking, running, cycling, playing football. There’s no whingeing about 9.30 being too early, seats being uncomfortable, an awkward location with insufficient parking, not liking the leader, preferring a different way of doing things. Our bodies are our temples and we must keep fit by exercise, diet and whatever it takes. And yet isn’t what St Paul says correct?

O Lord, we beseech thee to keep thy Church and household continually in thy true religion; that they who do lean only upon the hope of thy heavenly grace may evermore be defended by thy mighty power; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

February 6th (Accession HM Queen)

I Timothy 4 vv 9-11

One of the nice things about the celebration of her majesty's 90th birthday in 2016 was the illustrated book produced in which she spoke of her own personal faith. The privileges which the Queen enjoys and the responsibilities she has to bear are unique to her. In a way, of course, everybody's life is unique. Nobody else has exactly the same needs or opportunities as you or I. Whatever the circumstances of our lives, however, the only way to live is to live in conversation with Jesus. The word "conversation" here means much more than talking to someone, though it does mean that. It is about our relationship with Jesus. It is about where our citizenship is – in heaven. It is about whence we derive our status and where all our resources come from and where all our duties lie. It is living our lives in Christ and by Christ and with Christ and through Christ and for Christ and it is the only way truly to live.

February 7th

I Timothy 4 v12

Let no man despise thy youth.

When I was a young clergyman, I sometimes thought that might apply to me. Members of the congregation who assumed because they were older or because they had been here longer would assume that they must necessarily be wiser than me just because I was young and naive. That's probably less of a risk now I'm nearly 62. I suppose they now think I'm an old fool or a dinosaur and set in my ways. It's only too easy to dismiss people. I'm afraid I do it too: too young, too old, too stupid, too ignorant, too poor, too ugly, too common, too stuck up, too whatever to have a worthwhile contribution to make. If we are attentive to people, we will learn from them and their unique experience of life, whoever they are. Everybody has a contribution and the right to offer it for our consideration. Some people are, however, more qualified than others in particular areas of discourse and their expertise should be respected. If the Church is discussing worship or doctrine or pastoral care, for example, while we all have a contribution which should be heard, the minister's training and experience and the grace he received at ordination should be respected. When other subjects come up, maybe other members of the fellowship have a particular expertise which should be respected. Nobody should be ignored or put down because of age or social status or for any reason at all really. We are all belong to God.

February 8th

I Timothy 4 vv 13&14

The laying on of hands with prayer has a very long history as the means by which the Church of God sets apart an individual for a particular service. Confirmation involves the laying on of the bishop's hand with prayer. The ordination of bishops, priests and deacons is the laying on of hands with prayer. Sometimes the same rite is used for other ministries. The sequence is this. God calls an individual to a particular ministry. The individual himself and the whole Church recognises God's calling. There may then be a period of training and other forms of preparation such as prayer. The call is publicly recognised by the laying on of hands by ministers already recognised as such by the Church. God honours what the Church does in ordination by making the person a bishop, priest or deacon and God supplies the grace that person will need to fulfil his vocation. In churches that have bishops, it is the bishops who perform the laying on of hands on behalf of the whole Church, the Body of Christ, and of Christ Himself. Paul writes here about the *presbytery* laying hands on Timothy in the KJV. In the NIV the same word is translated *body of elders*. Remember in the language of the Christian Church, elder, presbyter and priest are the same thing. They are co-workers with the bishop or overseer. The custom of being ordained by the laying on of hands by all the presbyters present at an ordination, rather than the bishop alone, has been revived in recent years. It helps to make the point that the whole Church is involved in setting ministers apart for their particular service, that we are members one of another, and that the ordained ministry is a fellowship in God's service, not an ego trip for especially gifted individuals.

February 9th

I Timothy 4 vv 15&16

Timothy's personal Christian life is sustained by the grace God gives him through prayer and meditation, through his familiarity with the Scriptures, and by the fellowship of the Church – the local Church in Ephesus and the fellowship of Christians in other churches in other places, all part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, which is the Bride of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit. The example of Timothy's conversation with God will inspire his Church to walk in the same pathway.

O for a closer walk with God, a calm and heavenly frame,
a light to shine upon the road that leads me to the Lamb!

February 10th

I Timothy 5 vv 1&2

I do tend to hold an idealised view of the Church in which everyone behaves as he or she ought to behave, always in love and charity with one another, firm in a biblical faith, faithful to taking part in public worship, especially Holy Communion, prayerful, enthusiastic about sharing our faith with others, committed to looking after one another, active in the community, etc., etc.. And do you know what? It isn't always like that. You might have noticed that I don't always behave like that. To be honest, I've noticed that some of you have your faults too. So, how do we deal with church members who fail to live up to their Christian calling? Do we say nothing in which case they might not realise where they are going wrong? Do we allow their uncharitable behaviour to undermine other Christians or perhaps even the whole fellowship? Especially, those of us trusted with authority and responsibility in the Church, what do we do when members of our congregation act in an unchristian manner? And what does the Church do about us when we go wrong? Paul's counsel to Timothy is that we treat people with respect. The goal is to bring them back, not to push them out. We're subject to the same temptations as they are. We're not to be the big I am, lauding it over other people. Whatever influence we might have with people, whatever authority we have over them, it is to be exercised humbly for their good as well as for the good of the whole fellowship and never for the selfish ends of the guy in charge. On the other hand, we all have a responsibility for one another, to build one another up in the Lord at that sometimes means being brave enough to tell someone that he or she is wrong as respectfully as we can.

February 11th

I Timothy 5 vv 3-16

The early Church pooled its resources and looked after its poor. Quite right too, but such a policy always risks allowing people who could provide for themselves and their families to off-load their responsibilities onto the Church (or, in our times, the state or charitable organisations). Having nothing to do then because the Church is looking after them they get into mischief and cause trouble. There seems to have been a sort of order of widows who were kept by the Church and spent their time in prayer and Christian service. But other unemployed widows might spend their time making nuisances of themselves. So Paul offers a solution to this intractable problem, but I suspect there is no way of helping everyone who needs help without creating an incentive to people who just don't want to work.

February 12th (Septuagesima)

I Timothy 5 vv 17&18

Why do we pay people to work for us? The obvious answer is to give them an incentive to do what we want them to do. I don't suppose my cleaner would carry on cleaning for me if I didn't pay him. But a family member would clean for me for nothing but love and a friend might do so. What people are paid only loosely correlates with the difficulty of the work or the essential value of what they do. Some of the highest paid people are doing what many of us do for fun – like playing football or singing. An amateur is someone who does things for love like most people who work in or for the Church. I am concerned when we are told that people like NHS managers and local authority chief executives have to be paid vast salaries in order to attract good people. Surely good people would be pleased to work for the good of the general public without any other reward. Good people wouldn't be motivated by greed. Clergy love what they do. We believe we are called to it by God. So why should we be paid? After all, most of us would do our jobs for nothing and much of what we do (pastoral care, witnessing, community involvement) plenty of people are doing for nothing but love. You pay us so that you can have our undivided attention because we don't have to work to earn a living. But how much should we be paid? Should our pay reflect honour for our status? Is that what Paul means here? Should we be paid by results? How could you possibly work out the monetary value of what the clergy try to do? Or should we be happy with the minimum it is possible to live on. Paul said he'd learnt to be content if he just had food and clothes. What do you think? You pay us!

February 13th

I Timothy 5 v19

Accusations against presbyters (= elders = priests). Lots of people fall out with their vicars. They subconsciously take it out on God's representatives when they're bitter against God. They don't like being told what to do or having their failings pointed out. They blame the clergy for what they don't like about the Church or about themselves. They set the clergy impossibly high standards and condemn them when they fail to live up to them. So people like Timothy and present day bishops and archdeacons, who are responsible for clergy discipline, have to be very careful not to believe all they are told sometimes by unbalanced or malicious people. On the other hand, some clergy are guilty of the most terrible wrong-doing and their victims should have been believed. Getting it right, a topic for deep prayer.

February 14th

I Timothy 5 v20

Normally, when somebody in the Church wrongs somebody else, the first course of action is to sort it out between them; if that fails, to take it to the elders; and, if that too fails, to take the matter to the whole Church. The problems in Ephesus are so serious that the worst cases have to be made public from the outset. It is of the essence of Christianity that we are forgiven by God and it follows from that that we must forgive those who trespass against us. If we don't, we can't expect to be forgiven either. The Church is a community of people who love one another and that means forgiving one another's faults. However, that does not mean that our faults don't matter. We, as individuals, are called to be holy. The Church, as a body, is called to be holy. It is so much easier not to make a fuss and to let things slide when people in a Christian community behave badly, but, in the long run, it is a terrible mistake to let things go on in a bad way. It is not good for the person who gossips, or who always insists on having his own way, or who puts down other people, or who steals from the collection, or whatever it is, to be allowed to get away with it and it is damaging to the Church if Christian people and the work of the Church are constantly undermined by the uncharitable behaviour of some. So there is a need for discipline, always administered in love and with the goal of restoring the offender, even if it means some awkward confrontations. Unfortunately for me, a great part of that burden falls on the clergy. Again prayer.

February 15th

I Timothy 5 v21

Impartiality is obviously important in the courts. I shouldn't get a longer sentence because the judge doesn't like me. You shouldn't be acquitted even though you're guilty because you've got a couple of mates on the jury. It's true in central and local government too. Whether or not you get planning permission for your extension shouldn't depend on whether or not some council officer likes you. But in the Church? Is it likely that we do things in the Church because they please our friends or displease people we don't like? Are some people treated with more respect than others when it comes to decision making? I'm afraid so. Everybody ought to be heard with respect and decisions taken on their merits, not on the basis of the status of individuals within the community or because we always vote with our friends. Mature Christians ought to be able to accept it when their friends think they are wrong and say so openly.

February 16th

I Timothy 5 v21

I want to continue with this theme today, thinking about clergy appointments. Traditionally, rectors and vicars in the C of E were appointed by the patrons of the parish. So long as the men were suitably qualified, the bishop would normally institute them to the living. Who patrons are is a matter of the history of the parish. Originally, they were the wealthy landowners who established the local church for the benefit of the community and provided an endowment for the rector's maintenance. The right to present a rector is called an advowson and it can be inherited by the descendants of the original patron or it can belong to the crown or the bishop or the vicar of another parish or to a corporate body such as a cathedral or a college. Some belong to commercial firms because they now own the land which belonged to the original patron. There are also patronage societies who have acquired advowsons with a view to providing clergy who they think will be right for a particular parish. Although obviously open to abuse, the system tended to work because if people had become patrons who weren't interested in the Church they tended to let someone who did take it responsibly to choose clergy on their behalf. The two real faults with this system are that it might not involve the parishioners in any way in the decision about who their vicar should be. Also, naturally enough, patrons and bishops tended to choose men they knew, including friends and family members. Sometimes these were not the best man for the job and of course it was unfair to people who might have been the right choice but who were unknown to those responsible for filling the vacancy.

We've now moved to a more impartial system of clergy appointments. The parish gets more say in the matter – not a total say because wardens and PCCs don't always know best what's good for a parish – and positions are advertised and suitably qualified people are invited to apply. This is intended to introduce more impartiality. Appointments are not made on the basis of whom you know. But it's not perfect. The process is time-consuming and parishes may wait for months or even years to fill a vacancy. More importantly, in the old days, bishops and patrons felt able to approach people whom they knew, whom they thought God might be calling to a particular parish. Rather than being impartial, they did appoint people they knew to be good. Again, thought and prayer needed. Can we use our personal knowledge of people without becoming partial?

February 17th

I Timothy 5 v22

Lay hands suddenly on no man.

In the KJV, this verse sounds strange. Paul isn't cautioning Timothy against mugging people. What he means is, Don't ordain men unless you are quite sure that God is calling them to this ministry. Discerning vocation includes recognising God's call and suitable preparation – knowledge of the Scriptures, a prayerful relationship with God, a charitable relationship with other people, the kinds of things we have read about for deacons and bishops earlier in the epistle. The 1662 prayer book includes this rather odd phrase in one of its prayers for the Ember Days (days when we specially pray for vocations and for those about to be ordained). I include both of them because of their wonderful elucidation of what clergy are for and the grace we need!

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who hast purchased to thyself an universal Church by the precious blood of thy dear Son: Mercifully look upon the same, and at this time so guide and govern the minds of thy servants the Bishops and Pastors of thy flock, that they may lay hands suddenly on no man, but faithfully and wisely make choice of fit persons to serve in the sacred Ministry of thy Church. And to those which shall be ordained to any holy function give thy grace and heavenly benediction; that both by their life and doctrine they may set forth thy glory, and set forward the salvation of all men; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Almighty God, the giver of all good gifts, who of thy divine providence hast appointed divers Orders in thy Church: Give thy grace, we humbly beseech thee, to all those who are to be called to any office and administration in the same; and so replenish them with the truth of thy doctrine, and endue them with innocency of life, that they may faithfully serve before thee, to the glory of thy great Name, and the benefit of thy holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

February 18th

I Timothy 5 v23

Take a little wine for thy stomach's sake.

Quite a well known verse. Paul is telling Timothy to look after himself. Don't ruin your health by being excessively abstemious. You need to keep strong to do the work to which God has called you.

February 19th (Sexagesima)

I Timothy 5 vv 24 & 25

On a beautiful day on the top of Box Hill, we came across a group of teenagers doing one of those exercises in which you learn to work together as a team and to trust one another. I couldn't resist a cynical joke about it being better to teach them to trust nobody! I didn't mean it, though! We do need to work together. We do need to be able to trust one another. That depends on us ourselves being trustworthy. You can't live on the basis that you can't trust other people. It's better on occasion to be deceived and disappointed than to be constantly suspicious. You ought to be able to trust fellow members of the Church. You ought to be able to trust family and friends. I don't think it's healthy to begin with a distrust of strangers and outsiders. People do tend to behave the way we expect them to behave. Why would they trust us if we obviously don't trust them? Why bother to be honest if everybody thinks you're lying anyway? Even if we are let down sometimes, that's still better than shutting yourself in within a small circle of the few people you feel you can trust. It doesn't do to be totally naive, however, and Paul warns Timothy accordingly. O Lord God, who seest that we put not our trust in any thing that we do: Mercifully grant that by thy power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

February 20th

I Timothy 6 v1

The Christian Gospel is liberation. We are set free from sin, the world and the devil. We are set free from the fear of death. We understand that it is the things of eternity which really matter, our spiritual life, our relationship with God and our membership of the fellowship of our Church. The things of this world are ultimately unimportant. In any case, Jesus could return at any moment and heaven and earth pass away to be replaced by new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Many early Christians were servants or slaves. Many were poor. They might think that, now they were free in Christ, now the things of this world were passing away, they could afford no longer to treat their masters with respect. But, for all that it is true that we have eternal life from the moment we know Jesus, we still have to live in this world. If we are lazy or disrespectful towards our employers, we bring our faith into disrepute. We might also find ourselves being punished or out on the streets with no livelihood. Inside, we know that we are freemen in Christ. We really work for Him. So we should not mind having to do our job in this world.

February 21st

I Timothy 6 v2

Suppose you are a slave and you and your master both become Christians. Now you are brothers, equal in the Lord. So do you still have to obey him and work for him? Can he still punish you if you don't? It was regarded as the right thing to do to free your slaves if you were a Christian slave-owner. However, you weren't forced to do so. In Graeco-Roman society at the time slavery was taken for granted. It was a big part of the economy. It would have been hard for people brought up in that culture to see what was wrong with it. This is a reminder that we all see things from the point of view of the culture in which we live but human cultures always fall short of the values of the Kingdom of God. We really need to be open to Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church and the world and pray for grace to recognise when what we regard as normal is actually wrong. In an ideal world, the Christian slave-owner would have set his slaves free. Where he didn't the slave had to accept the situation, remembering his real freedom in the Lord. Elsewhere, Paul reminds Christian masters and employers that their Master is Jesus and that they will be answerable to Him for the way they treat the people who work for them.

February 22nd

I Timothy 6 vv 3-5

I considered trying to imagine what the causes of arguments in Ephesus in C1 might have been. What was it that Christians were falling out over? What were the problems Timothy was sent to sort out? But it would be more to the point for us to consider the sort of things Christians fall out over in our own fellowships. If you think about it, you probably have as good an idea as I have of the things that cause trouble within the fellowship. If we drew up a list of things, it would also be helpful if we could mark them out of ten in terms of importance. Do the things we argue about really matter? How much do they matter? At what point do they matter enough to fall out with other members of the congregation? Do they ever matter enough to leave or to split the fellowship or excommunicate the people we disagree with? The Church has always tried to distinguish between things indifferent and matters which are crucial to the faith and our mission. But there is a whole area of moderately important questions which have to be resolved and which it ought to be possible to decide without falling out. In order to do so, we would have to listen to one another respect, but, at some point, we would have to accept that somebody or group has the authority to decide.

February 23rd

I Timothy 6 vv 6-8

Wouldn't it be interesting to have these words carved on the pillars which flank the entrance to Bluewater? Wouldn't it be a good thing to paint them on the wall behind the chair on which your school career adviser sits? Shouldn't they be the screensaver on your work computer? How about tattooing them on the foreheads of chancellors of the exchequer? Because Paul is so right about this and the world has just got it so wrong.

February 24th (S Matthias)

I Timothy 6 vv 9&10

S Matthias is commemorated today in the 1662 BCP. He comes on 14th May in Common Worship, which changed the traditional date in order to cut down the number of festivals which might occur in Lent and so detract from the period of penitence before Easter. The thirty pieces of silver seems to have been at least part of Judas' motivation in betraying Jesus, though I think most people think that there was probably more to it than that. Yet people do betray their friends and even their families for money. People commit crimes for monetary gain. "Respectable" commercial organisations like banks and insurance companies behave unethically and sometimes illegally in pursuit of profit. Supposed Christians let themselves down and their faith for the desire for worldly wealth. Even an apostle, Judas, lost his position in the Church at least partly as a result of greed and the better man Matthias was chosen to replace him. O Almighty God, who into the place of the traitor Judas didst choose thy faithful servant Matthias to be of the number of the twelve Apostles: Grant that thy Church, being alway preserved from false Apostles, may be ordered and guided by faithful and true pastors; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

February 25th

I Timothy 6 vv 11&12

One of my favourite hymns is *Onward Christian Soldiers*. Some people object to it because they believe that Christians should have nothing to do with warfare. But we're not seeking to establish the Kingdom of God by violence – or by dishonesty, or by worldly wealth, or by human power. To be a soldier of Christ is not to have powerful muscles, a sharp sword or a machine gun or a nuclear weapon. To be a soldier of Christ is to possess the qualities Paul urges Timothy to cultivate. To cultivate these, we must stay close to Jesus so that we reflect His Light in the world.

February 26th (Quinquagesima)

I Timothy 6 vv 11&12

OK, so what is love? We sing about love in church and we sing about it in popular songs. We acknowledge that love is vitally important. We read love stories. We read I Corinthians XIII. We love our parents, our children, our brothers and sisters, our husbands or wives, maybe our friends, fellow Christians, God and Jesus and we love them all in different ways, don't we? We are commanded to love God and our neighbour. We expect romantic love to be spontaneous. We know that we can learn to love other people. Most of us just do love our families without even thinking about it or knowing how or when we first started to love them. We love our dogs. Our dogs love us, but is their love for us the same as our love for them? It is their nature to love unconditionally. They can't help it. We human beings aspire to love unconditionally (our children, our spouses), but we don't always succeed. God loves us unconditionally. It His Nature, but God loves freely. He doesn't have to. Moreover, God is love. Many languages use the same word for *love* and *like*. We make a distinction between the two, although I'm not sure I can really go along with the idea that you can love people you don't like. Greek, famously has three words where we English say *love*: επος, eros, romantic love; φιλαδελφια, philadelphia, brotherly love; and αγαπη, agape, Christian love. God is agape. Obviously, love is a very deep subject, but it literally is what makes the world go round. God is love and love is what we are supposed to be, given that we are made in His image. Our life is our relationship with God. Our life is love. Our life is our relationships with other people. Our life is love. Our eternal home is eternal love, caught up in the Beatific Vision of the eternal Trinity, three persons and one God, everlastingly love. I'm happy to use other words like *charity* to take into account the vast field of meaning covered by the one word *love*, as it seeks to express what is beyond our comprehension and yet is of the very greatest significance.

O Lord, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth: Send thy Holy Ghost, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee. Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

February 27th

I Timothy 6 v 13

Jesus witnessed a good confession before Pontius Pilate. The word in Greek is the word from which we get the word martyr. It is God Who gives life to everything that lives in any sense at all – life here on earth, plants, animals, people, and eternal life. God and Jesus really matter. Christians are commissioned in their sight, in their name. Life in the C of E seems quite discouraging at the present moment. Our congregations are typical of most, declining in number and aging. It threatens to become a vicious circle. We can't put on the things which might attract more people because there are too few of us. Meanwhile many people who call themselves Christians think they have better things to do with their time, talents and money than to support the Church. Maybe they assume that the Church will somehow always be there for them if they ever need it. The Church is, however, the sum of Christian people. If Christian people see no need to come together for worship, if their charitable giving and their voluntary work are exclusively devoted to secular causes, if they don't take their part in maintaining their local Church, they mustn't be surprised if it ceases to exist. Sometimes I think it would serve them right. In the past in this country and in other countries today, people risk their lives for the privilege of possessing and reading a Bible, of meeting together to pray and to celebrate Holy Communion, and to share their faith with their families and their neighbours. If we don't think those things matter any more, surely we deserve to lose them. I have no doubt that the Church will do far more than survive. The Church will triumph eternally because she is God's Church. I have no doubt that it doesn't matter how few or how old we are if we are doing God's work. It's all the same to Him whether He saves by few or by many. If, however, the people who call themselves Christians in a particular community are indifferent to God, they really ought not to be surprised when they experience the consequences.

My God, and is thy table spread, and doth thy cup with love o'erflow?
Thither be all thy children led, and let them thy sweetness know.
Hail, sacred feast, which Jesus makes, rich banquet of his Flesh and Blood!
Thrice happy he who here partakes that sacred stream, that heavenly food.

Why are its bounties all in vain before unwilling hearts displayed?
Was not for them the Victim slain? Are they forbid the children's bread?
O let thy table honoured be, and furnished well with joyful guests;
and may each soul salvation see that here its sacred pledges tastes.

February 28th

I Timothy 6 vv 14-16

It's a bit unclear whether the paean of praise offered in v15 is addressed to Jesus or God, but it doesn't really matter. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God, worthy of all, praise, worship and thanksgiving. Given that God is, what should we be? If we are what we should be, then what we do and say will please God and accomplish His purposes for our lives.

Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes, most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days, almighty, victorious, thy great Name we praise.

Unresting, unchanging, and silent as light, nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;

thy justice like mountains high soaring above thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all life thou givest, to both great and small; in all life thou livest, the true life of all;

we blossom and flourish, like leaves on the tree, then wither and perish; but nought changeth thee.

Great Father of glory, pure Father of light, thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;

all laud we would render: O help us to see 'tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.

March 1st (Ash Wednesday)

I Timothy 6 vv 17-19

What is the purpose of giving something up for Lent? Fasting may be a sign of penitence. It may be a very intense form of petitionary prayer. Some people say that fasting brings them closer to God and opens up new perceptions of Him. Voluntarily going without may also be a statement that we don't need all these material things which clutter up our lives. It might be an expression of solidarity with those who involuntarily have to go without because of poverty. Giving things up ourselves may set us free to give to other people in much greater material need than we are. Fasting is sometimes used as a sign to people in power of our determination to see the right thing done.

Almighty and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made, and dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we worthily lamenting our sins, and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

March 2nd

I Timothy 6 vv20 & 21

Science falsely so called.

This KJV translation is often used in arguments about science and religion. Many people, both scientists and Christians, regard science and religion as being in conflict. This verse isn't directly about that. More modern versions have *what is falsely called knowledge*. The word *science* comes from the Latin *scientia*, which means knowledge. When the King James Bible was translated, that's what science meant in English, simply knowledge. What we now called science was then called natural philosophy. Paul's word in Greek is *gnosis γνῶσις*, which means *knowledge*. What he is warning Timothy against is a body of belief about angels and other beings and the relationship between the physical and the spiritual which people called Gnostics believed to be a special kind of knowledge revealed only to them. From a particular point of view, it looks plausible, but it's tripe. It imagines an uncrossable gulf between God and His material creation, it denies the essential goodness of the universe God has made and restricts salvation to a narrow circle of initiates who have mastered the Gnostic system of belief. In other words, it is pretty much the opposite of what the Bible teaches about God Who is made flesh and dwells among us and opens the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. Gnosticism was, however, very popular at the time Paul was writing and the church had to be on her guard against its influence. Gnosticism was to early Christianity what New Age and post Modernism are to the Church today.

Such movements threaten both Christian faith and what we now call Science. Faith and Science are united in the belief that Truth exists. It is not a question of what is true for you or me. It is a question of what is true in the absolute and what is false. There are many different ways to seek Truth. The ultimate truth is God, but scientific laws are also true. So is mathematics. Beauty is truth. Faithful human relationships are true. The truth is very often not easy to discern. Socrates used the word *philosopher*, lover of wisdom, in preference to *sophist*, someone who thinks he is wise. The humble seeker after truth is more honest and more likely to find it than the arrogant man who is sure about everything he thinks he knows. *Natural philosophy* is a good phrase for science, seeking wisdom about the natural world. Faith too seeks wisdom. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*. Science and religion and art and maths are all allies in the quest.

March 3rd

II Timothy 1 v1

The Promise of Life Which Is In Christ Jesus

I'm writing this on the day before All Souls Day. Tomorrow I shall be conducting two services in which we remember the faithful departed by name and which will probably be attended by recently bereaved people and some who have been bereaved for many years. The loss of a loved one is hard to take. We miss them so much. There may be many things that we regret – good times which won't be coming back, times when perhaps we could have treated them more kindly than we did, the fact that they didn't leave to see their children grow up, etc. There will also be much to be thankful for, the good times we shared, their support in difficult times in the past, the joy of loving and of being loved. Where we can be confident as Christians is that we don't sorrow as those with no hope for them that sleep in Him (I Thessalonians 4¹³). We know that all those who have died in the Lord are with him forever, as we shall be too if we too trust in Him.

Moreover, we know that: *Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.* (I Corinthians 2⁹). The Promise of Life in Christ is good here on earth, but infinitely greater for when our time on earth is over.

March 4th

II Timothy 1 v2

I'm very fond of emails. They are less laborious to produce and delivered much quicker than letters and they are much less intrusive than the telephone. The same could probably said of texts, but I haven't yet succumbed to the attractions of texting. The etiquette of texts and emails is yet to settle down. Indeed, one of the risks of email is that it is only too easy to offend people because the polite conventions which prevent us from unwittingly giving offence are not yet fully evolved. There is a correct way to start a letter and a correct way to sign off. It is only polite to start with a greeting and to sign off with best wishes, kind thoughts or even a prayer. The convention in NT epistles is to start off with a beautiful, Christian greeting. I am sure it is more than mere convention though. I am sure these formal greetings at the beginnings of letters really do reflect what people said about the Church: *See how these Christians love one another.* It might be worth reflecting on how we greet people in letters, emails, on the 'phone or face to face. Are we invariably polite? And are we sincere in our kind words?

March 5th (Lent 1)

II Timothy 1 v3

Paul says he prays without ceasing for Timothy. Elsewhere, Paul commends constant prayer to all Christians (I Thessalonians 5¹⁷). How can we pray constantly? We'd never get anything else done. We do know, however, that Jesus is always with us wherever we are, whatever we do, whatever happens to us. Our lives are a conversation with God if we remember that we walk in His Presence. Our thoughts are always shared with Him and, when we remember that, our thoughts become prayers. O Lord, who for our sake didst fast forty days and forty nights: Give us grace to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey thy godly motions in righteousness and true holiness, to thy honour and glory, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

March 6th

II Timothy 1 vv 4&5

Timothy was brought up by his mother and grandmother to know the Lord. It doesn't say anything about the men in his life. Maybe Lois and Eunice were both widowed young or their husbands didn't believe. Either way, they gave Timothy the greatest gift they could give him and helped to make him the man he was, able to take on the leadership of the Church in Ephesus. They would have prayed for him and with him, taught him the Scriptures, accompanied him to worship and shown him by example what it means to live as God would have us live, the only way to live if we are to fulfil our human potential.

March 7th

II Timothy 1 vv 6&7

For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love and of a sound mind. That verse has meant a lot to me. I suppose I am quite a timorous person, really, too ready to doubt my ability to deal with difficult situations, too fearful of other people whom I find it hard to win over to the cause I am trying to advance. Yet God has given us Christians not fear, but power; not fear, but love; not fear, but prudence. We are told elsewhere *perfect love casteth out fear* (I John 4¹⁸). I don't have to be afraid. Neither do you. We are not fearful of God – awe-inspiring and awfully holy as He is – because He loves us and we love Him. We are not afraid of anything we may have to face in this world because He is with us and supplies us with everything we need to cope whatever happens and whatever we have to do.

March 8th

II Timothy 1 v8

I've sometimes been a little bit surprised when people have told me they can't or won't visit a sick friend or relative because they don't like hospitals. The moralist in me says, *It really doesn't matter what you like; your duty is to visit your sick.* So it is. We have become only too used as a society to think that it is all about me, that my first duty is to myself, that I've got to get the best for myself out of my life. Maybe, it is because people are no longer confident that there is life after death that we have become so selfish in the way we live our lives on earth. Ironically, of course, it is in giving that we receive. A self-centred life will always leave a person feeling unfulfilled. It is only in serving God and other people that we achieve what we were put on this earth for.

March 9th

II Timothy 1 v8

Much harder, for some people, than hospital visiting is visiting a family member or friend in prison. I hope that most prisoners in this country are guilty of some serious crime. That does not mean, however, that God has stopped loving them. If we are Christian people, we don't stop loving them either. To love a criminal is not the same thing as condoning the crime. Because God can't condone sin, sinners are condemned to eternal punishment. Because God loves sinners, Jesus died on the Cross to pay the price of human sin so that all who turn to Him are forgiven and set free from sin to walk in the righteousness of God. If we are to be holy as God is holy, to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, we abhor wickedness, but we still love the sinner and long to play our part in bringing him or her to salvation. That may be through prayer, through maintaining friendships and fellowship, through offering practical help, through offering unconditional love, no matter what. Hard to do and some people might think it is shameful to befriend criminals, but what would Jesus do?

March 10th

II Timothy 1 v8

There are in this country people in prison who have done nothing wrong. I am sure I have visited at least two. Either they were wrongfully convicted on false evidence or what they did, while technically a crime, was not wrong. Things aren't necessarily wrong because they are against the law. There are some bad laws and there is bad implementation of what should be good laws. General speaking, it is our Christian duty to obey the law even when we think it is silly or mistaken, but there are occasions when you just have to do what is right whatever the law says.

In other countries, of course, it is very much worse and people are imprisoned, tortured, even executed, for their religious or political beliefs or just because some public official or politician doesn't like them. Paul is in prison for his faithfulness to Christ. There is no shame in that and there is no shame in Timothy and other people supporting him. Similarly, although Timothy might fall foul of public opinion or even of the law for his adherence to the Gospel, he has nothing to be ashamed of. There are various ways of expressing our solidarity with those who are persecuted or imprisoned unjustly – prayer, membership of organisations like Amnesty, writing letters to prisoners or to the authorities about them, encouraging our government to exert political pressure on their behalf.

March 11th

II Timothy 1 v9

So God hasn't called us because we deserve His love. God calls us in all eternity simply because He loves us. He knows us in all eternity. He holds the world in His Hands, He holds the universe in His Hands in all eternity, and, we, small and insignificant as we feel, each one of us has his or her part to play in God's plans for His creation. On the one hand, we are loved just as we are; we don't have to deserve to be loved. On the other hand, given that He loves us as He does, it makes no sense at all for us not to love Him with all that we are and all that we have. Each one of us has a part to play in God's redemption of the cosmos. He has given us talents according to our abilities. We are all very different and we have very different parts to play but each one of us has his or her part and it would just be wrong not to play that part wholeheartedly.

March 12th (Lent 2)

II Timothy 1 v10

Almighty God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies, and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Today's verse brings home the message that Christ is all in all. He is everything in this life. He is everything in the life to come. He is God's eternal purpose. He is our beginning and our end. There is no real life other than life in Him. Everything else finally is an illusion.

Father, Lord of all Creation,
Ground of Being, Life and Love;
Height and depth beyond description
Only life in you can prove:
You are mortal life's dependence:
Thought, speech, sight are ours by grace;
Yours is every hour's existence,
Sovereign Lord of time and space.

Jesus Christ, the Man for Others,
We, your children, make our prayer:
Give us grace to love as brothers
All whose burdens we can share.
Where your name binds us together
You, Lord Christ, will surely be;
Where no selfishness can sever
There your love may all men see.

Holy Spirit, rushing, burning
Wind and flame of Pentecost,
Fire our hearts afresh with yearning
To regain what we have lost.
May your love unite our action,
Nevermore to speak alone:
God, in us abolish faction,
God, through us your love make known.

March 13th

II Timothy 1 v11

In discharging my vocation to be a preacher, I adopt different modes of working quite deliberately. I think the congregation should hear the Gospel message presented in a variety of ways, the better to understand it, to take it to heart and to act upon it. It is perhaps a pity that we don't have more visiting preachers. When I want to be quite sure to say exactly what I mean, especially if it could be controversial, I write it out verbatim and read my script. I usually put sermons like that on the parish webpage under teaching. Sometimes, I speak from notes. Usually, I just know what I intend to say and say it. Naturally, I pray about what God wants me to say, think about it, check what the Bible has to say about it, read the Bible readings appointed for the day and usually look at the collect and hymns. Usually, the readings appointed for the day are the basis for my sermon, but not always if there is some other urgent topical issue. Sometimes, I've very little idea what I am going to say when Sunday morning comes round. Sometimes I change my mind in the course of the service or between Cuxton and Halling. I believe that God does use me to speak His Word, but I don't believe that everything I say is the Word of God or that I always put it in the most effective way. It's up to you to weigh up whether or not I am proclaiming the Word of God by thinking about it prayerfully in the light of Scripture and the Church's teaching. I'm afraid I can only ask your patience if I don't always put things well. A few weeks ago, on a Sunday morning when part of this wonderful chapter was appointed as the epistle, I felt inspired to preach on it there and then, when I didn't really know what I was going to say, but it would probably have been something different. Divine inspiration? I think so. Presentation – not so sure. I possibly went on too long as I tend to when I'm enthusiastic about what I've got to say.

March 14th

II Timothy 1 v11

Jesus was a Jew. So were all the twelve apostles. All (or nearly all) the first Christians were Jews. The Gospel was preached first to the Jews. When Gospels began to respond to the Gospel, many thought that Gentiles wishing to follow Jesus would effectively have to become Jews. Paul led those who saw clearly that the Gospel was equally for all men and women of all races and of every social class and that was required of us is simply faith. So Paul led the Gentile mission and Peter the mission to the Jews.

March 15th

II Timothy 1 v12

I know whom I have believed.

Isn't that a wonderful thought? Any Christian can say that *I know whom I have believed*. You may feel that you are absolutely at the end of your resources and yet you can always say, *I know whom I have believed*. It is one of those very precious renderings of the original Greek in the KJV which somehow seems to lose out in more translations. Perhaps that is just me, but I always want to say *I know whom I have believed*, whatever happens to me, whatever I have to face.

What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!

What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!

Oh, what peace we often forfeit, Oh, what needless pain we bear,

All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer!

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?

We should never be discouraged—Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Can we find a friend so faithful, Who will all our sorrows share?

Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy-laden, cumbered with a load of care?

Precious Saviour, still our refuge—Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Do thy friends despise, forsake thee? Take it to the Lord in prayer!

In His arms He'll take and shield thee, Thou wilt find a solace there.

Blessed Saviour, Thou hast promised, thou wilt all our burdens bear;

May we ever, Lord, be bringing all to Thee in earnest prayer.

Soon in glory bright, unclouded, there will be no need for prayer—

Rapture, praise, and endless worship will be our sweet portion there.

March 16th

II Timothy 1 vv 13 & 14

In the face of opposition and persecution and, no doubt, in the good times too, Timothy is to hang onto the external and the internal. The external is the preaching and teaching of Paul and other Christians and especially the Bible. The internal is the work of the Holy Spirit in Timothy's heart. What is true of Timothy in this respect is true of all us Christians.

In all time of our tribulation; in all time of our wealth; in the hour of death, and in the day of judgement, **Good Lord, deliver us.**

March 17th (S Patrick)

II Timothy 1 vv 15-18

Patrick was an ancient British lad of good family. When he was 17, he was captured by Irish pirates and sold as a slave in Ireland. As well as this cruelty, he also received kindness at the hands of the Irish and came to hope that he might be chosen by God to bring them the Gospel. He escaped from slavery and, 25 years later, returned as the apostle (one sent) to Ireland. The druids were the religious power in the land and no lights or fires were allowed during the druid spring festival. So people were astonished to see a bright fire blazing on a mountain top. Patrick and his companions were celebrating the Resurrection of Christ with the Easter fire. Many of the people who came to investigate listened to what Patrick had to say about Jesus and became believers. Famously, Patrick used a shamrock to help his converts understand that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three persons, but one God. It was through people who meant him harm and people who were kind to him that God was able to use Patrick as an apostle and evangelist. Similarly Paul and Timothy had both opponents and helpers, as do we, and, in the power of God, both contributed to the growth of God's Kingdom.

March 18th

II Timothy 2 vv 1&2

So, how do we know the story of Jesus? How do we know what He did, what He said and Who He was (or rather, Who He is)? How do we understand the significance of Christ? How do we know about the first couple of generations of Christians: their message; the growth of the Church; their struggle; the way God brought them through persecution, opposition, schism and false teaching? The Word was passed down orally as Paul tells Timothy here. The letters of Paul and other leading Christians were read, kept and passed round the churches. In time, the Gospels were written from eyewitness accounts, tradition, their own personal experience and what the Gospel writers (working under the Holy Spirit) were able to find out and write down. Someone (most likely Luke) wrote up the early history of the Church in Acts and John was granted a vision of the final triumph of good over evil which he wrote down and shared in the Book of Revelation. There were other books too purporting to be the work of apostles or to give true accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus, but it was these that the Church recognised as having canonical authority, the authority of the Word of God, and included them in the New Testament, according them the same status as the original OT Scriptures in our bibles.

March 19th (Lent 3)

II Timothy 2 v3

I was once asked to speak at a secondary school assembly about power. Confronted by row upon row of teenagers, I nearly forgot the name of the German philosopher I meant to refer to. It was Friedrich Nietzsche. His philosophy seems to make Christianity out to be pitiful, something that weakens human beings by undermining their natural human confidence in their ability to overcome. If Nietzsche was right, I suggested, it would be odd to ask a Christian minister (=servant) to talk about power. Nietzsche of course isn't right. Christianity isn't a religion for passive slaves or weaklings. Christ has overcome the world, but He does so by self-sacrificing love. That is the secret of Christianity, that self-sacrificing love is more powerful than anything. Only love can effect the victory of good over evil. Christ offers Himself for us. His love is manifest in that He does this while we were yet sinners. Overwhelmed by Christ's love for us, we offer ourselves to Him in love. It is in this love of Christ that we experience that strength is made perfect in weakness. *And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me* (II Corinthians 2⁹).

We beseech thee, Almighty God, look upon the hearty desires of thy humble servants, and stretch forth the right hand of thy Majesty, to be our defence against all our enemies; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

March 20th

II Timothy 2 v4

The Parable of the Sower is very well known. The sower scatters the seed which is the Word of God. Some falls by the wayside and is soon devoured by the birds as the devil distracts people from the truth. Some falls on stony ground and starts to grow but soon dies off in the face of opposition and persecution. Some seed falls on good ground and produces a rich harvest. But some of the seed is sown among weeds which choke it. Jesus calls these weeds *the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things*. Aren't these the very things making the Word unfruitful in Britain today? Sunday shopping, sport and leisure. Sunday work. Too much to do in the week to have time for Christian things. More important to fit into the world we live in than to behave in accordance with the Gospel. If we want to change the world we have to start with ourselves.

March 21st (First day of Spring)

II Timothy 2 vv 5&6

Today would have been my grandmother's birthday. She would have been 127 today, which would have been quite remarkable. She did, however, always strive lawfully to live the Christian life. We know what the Gospel teaches or, if we don't, it's our own fault. The Bible is accessible to everyone. It's not God's fault if we don't read it. Just in this parish every Sunday there are four churches offering services at four different locations and three different times in the morning plus one in the evening. On two Sundays of the month, there are two more times on offer and another location – the Jubilee Hall. There are three Sunday schools. There are different styles of worship. Within the distance that people happily travel to school, work, shopping and leisure, there are umpteen more churches, each with its own distinct offering. We also offer services at different times on weekdays. Whose fault is it if people don't avail themselves of any of these opportunities to discover how to strive lawfully? Paul speaks of growth and looks forward to sharing the harvest. In Spring, we sow the seed. We weed it, water it if necessary, maybe fertilise it. God makes it grow and we enjoy the harvest in due time. Has God sown the Word in our hearts? Do we want it to grow and produce a rich harvest? Then surely we need to nourish that seed with Christian worship, fellowship and the grace of Word and Sacrament. It's down to us to see that it isn't choked with the weeds - *the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things*.

March 22nd

II Timothy 2 v7

Consider what I say.

One of the favourite sayings of my grandfather on the other side was that you can't tell people. People don't listen to what you say. Not only are they deaf to good advice, they are also blind to other people's experience. They don't seem to learn from other people's mistakes. They don't see the merit of other people's good examples. They don't even learn from their own mistakes. Both Old and New Testaments are full of examples of the Word of God being proclaimed by Moses and the prophets and by Christian preachers and teachers, the Old and New Testaments speak of Jesus enacting, demonstrating, epitomising and incarnating the Word of God and yet people won't listen, they won't obey, despite the fact that they know what will happen if we are good and what will happen if we are bad. *The Lord give us understanding in all things*.

March 23rd

II Timothy 2 v8

How essential is the Resurrection to faith? A lot of people would say that Jesus was a great teacher (even if they don't show much sign of acting on His teaching). Many people would say that Jesus sets us a wonderful example of how human beings ought to live (though nobody follows His example). Many Christians would say that it is the Cross which accomplishes our salvation. Suppose somebody did try to obey Christ's teaching and follow His example, suppose that person believed firmly that all his sins are forgiven because he has faith in Jesus Who died on the Cross, but suppose that person said that he just couldn't believe in the Resurrection. Any miracle is difficult enough to believe in. It's just too much to believe that anyone rose from the dead. Could that person be a Christian? Would that person be saved?

It's not for you or me to say who can be saved. Only God knows the number of His elect. I would say, however, that that person's faith is lacking. The Resurrection is crucial to the Gospel. In the NT, it is indeed the doctrine of the Resurrection of Christ which puts some potential converts off believing. Insisting on the reality of the Resurrection is one of the reasons Christians are persecuted. So there must be a reason why the Church insists on the truth of the Resurrection, even if it loses us members and results in our being persecuted. Given that God is omnipotent, of course He can raise the dead. It is the Resurrection of Jesus which demonstrates the effectiveness of the Cross. Jesus has triumphed over the devil. Life has triumphed over death. Love has overcome the power of sin. The Light of Christ dispels the darkness of human wickedness. The atoning sacrifice breaks down the wall which separates us from God. There is much more to it even than that, however. The Resurrection speaks of the eternal reality which is more real than the reality of the things that we can see and touch. As Christians, we participate in the Resurrection of Jesus, we have eternal life in Him, life that endures for even when Heaven and earth, as we know them, will pass away and there will be a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (II Peter 3¹³).

March 24th

II Timothy 2 v9

But the word of God is not bound.

Paul is bound. He is in prison. He is being treated as an evil-doer, someone who ought to be ashamed of himself and someone whose friends and family ought to be ashamed of him. Paul's actions and ability to communicate with the wider world are restricted. *But the word of God is not bound.* The word of God cannot be bound. It is declared in the glory of creation. It is proclaimed by Christian people, who cannot in their some total, be silenced. The Word of God is proclaimed by the Holy Spirit. The world can lock up Christians. It can mock us, despise us, ignore us, kill us if it wants to *But the word of God is not bound.* And that's why there is a Christian Church throughout the world today despite all opposition. And there always will be. If there comes a time when there is no Church in Cuxton or Halling, it will be because the Christians of these two places thought they had higher priorities than God, *But the word of God is not bound.* As Mordecai said to Esther (4¹⁴), if we hold our peace, God will save His people by some other means, but we shan't escape the wrath to come.

March 25th (The Annunciation)

II Timothy 2 v10

One school of thought, as we saw on S Matthias' Day, seeks to remove major festivals from Advent and Lent because they detract from the penitential character of the seasons in which we prepare for Christmas and Easter. Another school of thought, however, values this festival of the Incarnation as we are coming up to Easter and also valued S Thomas' Day's witness to the Resurrection when we kept it four days before Christmas. The Gospel story is a unity, *Jesus Christ of the seed of David raised from the dead.* Paul speaks of what he endures for the sake of the eternal glory which God gives to all His elect, to all the people of God, to all those of us who believe in Him. Mary had that wonderful experience of the angel Gabriel telling her that she would be the Mother of the Son of God. She would also witness His terrible death and a sword would pierce through her own soul also (Luke 2³⁵). There is suffering for Christian people, suffering in the light of the glory of God.

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that

tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: 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. Romans 5 vv 1-5.

March 26th (Lent 4 Mothering Sunday)

II Timothy 2 v11

Mothering Sunday presents something of a problem for the people who plan the Church's year. The custom that young people working away from home went back to their mother churches on this Sunday and also visited their mothers has given rise to a very good tradition of celebrating our mothers, childhood and all the blessings of home life. This tradition has spread beyond the confines of the Church into the secular Mother's Day. We might be cynical about the commercial exploitation of cards, presents and over-priced cut flowers, but the underlying sentiment of honouring our mothers is one we want to commend and join in. After all, *Honour your father and your mother is the first commandment with a promise attached* (Ephesians 6²). It's an opportunity to make the connection between Christian faith and all the important things in people's lives on earth. It is also called Refreshment Sunday, an easing of the rigours of Lent for those who fast strictly at this season. We don't, however, want to lose entirely the Lenten theme of taking seriously sin and judgment and the need for repentance, of suffering and the coming crucifixion. Just as in December, if the Advent sense of the seriousness of our plight without God is totally lost, and we plunge straight into Christmas Carols (without properly considering their meaning), there is the risk that we portray the Church as something mainly for children which has nothing to say about the harsher realities adults have to face in what appears to them to be the only real world. You come to resurrection through crucifixion. You really celebrate Christmas because you know the significance of death, judgment, heaven and hell.

March 27th

II Timothy 2 v12

If we deny him, he will deny us.

When I was a child and young man, this was a theme that was drummed into us young Christians – at least in the circles I moved in. It's so easy, isn't it, if your school friends, your mates at university, the other guys in the factory or office, don't believe or make fun of you for believing or laugh at you because you don't swear, won't get drunk, don't womanise and insist on going to Church on Sunday, for you to deny that you are a Christian.

March 28th

II Timothy 2 v13

He cannot deny Himself.

This is a nice story. A young man, rather older than I am now, was doing his military service. He'd been brought up on the principles we thought about yesterday. So the first night in the barracks he felt he had to kneel down beside his bunk and say his prayers as usual. He was in trepidation of being mocked or worse. In fact, nobody objected at all. People are much more accepting than we sometimes expect them to be. We are more timid than we need to be about admitting we are Christians, sharing our faith and insisting on upholding proper standards. Sometimes other people are quite grateful to us for standing up for what's right when they themselves were afraid to say anything. If people know you are a Christian, they might ask you to pray for them or to tell them about Jesus. The world isn't always as unfriendly to the Gospel as we might expect it to be. That young man eventually became a bishop. Another young man I know of speaks of how his faith helped him in his most difficult times in the services.

Jesus can't deny Himself. He's always there for us and, when we let Him down, He's always there to meet us and welcome us home when we come to our senses and listen to His voice.

March 29th

II Timothy 2 vv 14-16

As the leader of the Church in Ephesus, Timothy has to bring order. There was heretical teaching to deal with. There were no doubt factions. There were arguments about things that were unimportant. There were unimportant things which some people imagined really mattered. What matters above all things is love.

Anyway, Timothy had a hard job to do. He was only human and so he must have shared in the temptations too. I expect he got tired. He seems to have suffered from a weak stomach. There might have been times when he couldn't see the wood for the trees. What does really matter? Who's right and who's wrong? Am I a member of a faction? Am I a faction on my own? When should I make a stand and when should I give way? Whose authority should I myself respect? Church leaders need our prayers, including this one.

March 30th

II Timothy 2 vv 17&18

We've come across Hymenaeus before as a bad influence. I can think of three possibilities when it says that he said that the resurrection was past. He might have meant that the resurrection of Jesus was the only resurrection. He might have meant that those who were going to rise had already risen. He might have meant that resurrection was only a metaphor for conversion. We are better people for having turned to Christ and our sins are forgiven, but it will be all over for us when our hearts stop beating.

Of course, any of these three ideas would be wrong and fatal to the Gospel. Christ is risen from the dead. We share in His resurrection. We have eternal life here and now but that life is fulfilled not extinguished when we come to stand in His Presence on the Last Day. We shall live in Him for ever.

March 31st

II Timothy v19

The Lord knoweth them that are his.

A complete study of the Pastoral Epistles would finish II Timothy and include Titus. This isn't a bad place to end, however. *The Lord knoweth them that are his.* Jesus tells us that He is the Good Shepherd and that He knows His sheep by name. He really cares for each one of us. He listens to our prayers. He accompanies us on life's journey. He meets our every need. He died for each one of us. We should never feel lonely or bereft or afraid. Read (or sing!) the hymn on the back cover.

And let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

A good note to end on.

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.

Refrain:

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, 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 tho' my heart grows weary I never will despair;
I know that He is leading thro' all the stormy blast,
The day of His appearing will come at last.

Refrain

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, Salvation to impart!
You ask me how I know He lives?
He lives within my heart.

Rejoice, rejoice, O Christian, lift up your voice and sing
Eternal hallelujahs to Jesus Christ the King!
The hope of all who seek Him, the help of all who find,
None other is so loving, so good and kind.

Refrain

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, Salvation to impart!
You ask me how I know He lives?
He lives within my heart.