

Zephaniah  
Philippians  
Haggai

Bible Notes  
July - September 2012

50p

July 1<sup>st</sup>

Zephaniah 1<sup>1</sup>

I thought we would have a look at three of the shorter books of the Bible, this quarter, perhaps some which are less well known. I've gone for Zephaniah to start with because the subject came up at our Christian Aid Supper and because we've discussed it at our services at Cuxton.

The Book of the Twelve is a collection of the twelve minor prophets. "Minor" means shorter, not less important. Zephaniah is one of these twelve and they form the last twelve books of the English Old Testament. In the Hebrew Bible, they are grouped with the prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah & Ezekiel and the books Joshua – II Kings {except Ruth}). Joshua – II Kings count as "the former prophets" because they include the stories of prophets like Samuel and Elijah and because they reveal the out-working of the Word of God in human history. In the Hebrew Bible, the prophets are preceded by the Law (Torah, Genesis – Deuteronomy) as they are in our Bibles, but the Book of the Twelve is followed by the Writings – which is Ruth and all the OT books I've not mentioned so far.

Zephaniah was active in the reign of King Josiah. He was King of Judah (the southern kingdom) after Northern Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians, but before Judah succumbed to the Babylonians (C7BC). Josiah was one of the good kings. During his reign, the Book of the Law was rediscovered when they were renovating the Temple and Josiah attempted to lead the people back to God. Zephaniah may well have been of the royal family himself.

July 2<sup>nd</sup>

Zephaniah 1<sup>2-6</sup>

Maybe Zephaniah is preaching before Josiah's reforms or in support of them. The Judaeans had turned to worshipping Baal – the god of Canaan, Malcham, a foreign god, the god of Ammon, and the "host of heaven" – the sun, moon and stars or divine beings these somehow represented. It is easy to see why people would adopt the religion of the people they live among. Who wants to be different? It is easy to understand why people might be impressed by some exotic eastern religion. It's easy to be impressed by the wonders of astronomy and astrology which were not distinguished in those days. English people,

even church people, find it very easy to adopt materialism which is increasingly the religion of the West. Some English people, apparently disillusioned with Christianity, take up “foreign” religions. I read today of a Roman Catholic priest who is secretly a Moslem. Some of us pretty well worship science and technology and too many of us are still mired in superstitions like astrology. But to worship anything less than the one, true God can only lead to disaster, because He is the fount of all that is – the cosmos, the nation, the Church, justice, mercy, love. Without Him you can do nothing, you are nothing.

July 3<sup>rd</sup>

Zephaniah 1<sup>7-11</sup>

When human beings turn their backs on God the Father, they dissolve the brotherhood of man. No longer recognising one another as fellow children of God, we put number one first, doing whatever it takes to get what we want. The consequences are violence and bloodshed; lying, stealing and cheating; infidelity to family; greed and selfishness. The results are war and crime; family breakdown; poverty and hardship. There is a judgment on all this because God is a God of love. Judgment means punishment for impenitent sinners. We ought to be in awe (not to say fear) of God’s judgment. Zephaniah says that judgment will encompass the royal household and the wealthy and their servants, all those who pursue pagan practices. There is no escape.

July 4<sup>th</sup>

Zephaniah 1<sup>12</sup>

There is no escape. God will find you wherever you are. There is no escape for the lazy. People may have said then as people say today that God makes no difference, that He doesn’t answer prayer, that He doesn’t act in the world, that there is neither punishment for the wicked nor reward for the righteous. They are in for a nasty shock!

On the other hand, those of us who have faith will find that God is faithful. He forgives the sins of all those who truly repent. He hears our prayers every day. He holds our whole lives in His Hands. We may cast all our cares on Him. It is right always to be thankful for what He does in the world and to praise Him for Who He is. He has prepared a place in Heaven for all who love Him.

July 5<sup>th</sup>

Zephaniah 1<sup>13</sup>

Build houses but you won't dwell in them. Plant vineyards but you won't drink the wine. You work hard but you have nothing at the end of it. What's going on? Well, you're working for the wrong things. The work of God is to believe in Jesus Christ Whom He has sent. If faith is the work of your life, all your other endeavours fall into place. If you put the things of this world in the place of faith, you will never be satisfied.

Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. Ps 127<sup>1</sup>

July 6<sup>th</sup>

Zephaniah 1<sup>14-17</sup>

The Day of the Lord. What does it mean? In the Old Testament it seems to mean the day when God will act decisively in the history of Israel. He will visit and redeem His people. Probably the people expected that such a day would be their vindication. Their enemies would be defeated and Israel would be top nation. The prophets warn them that they are dangerously misinformed. Judgment begins with the household of God. The first to feel God's wrath will be the faithless Israelites who worship false gods, spill blood in the streets, cheat their customers, accept bribes in the courts and generally oppress the poor. As the people of God, they should have known better. They have no excuse. They have the Law and the Prophets. Judgment will start with faithless Israel. In the New Testament the Day of the Lord becomes the Last Day, the Day that Heaven and earth shall pass away, the time when time shall be no more. In the New Testament, the Day of the Lord is a day of wrath. We read all about it last quarter in the Revelation, but St John's vision is not unique to him; it is basic New Testament teaching that at the end there will be the judgment and the wicked will perish. Jesus tells Christians to look up when all these things happen because our redemption draws nigh. It is not that we are not judged or that we should not be found guilty and punished. It is that through repentance and faith we are forgiven. We should never underestimate the seriousness of our sin or the peril in which it puts us or the price of our redemption – the Cross of Jesus Christ.

July 7<sup>th</sup>

Zephaniah 1<sup>18</sup>

*Neither their gold nor their silver shall be able to deliver them.*

We are so funny about money. We know we can't eat it or drink it or live in it. We know it can't buy us love. We repeat that money won't make us happy. And yet it is like an addiction. *The love of money is the root of all evil*, and yet it's so hard not to like it. We devote our hours to earning it. We spend so much of our time spending money. Some of us like to have money and some of us like to have the things that money can buy, but we're all materialists. And yet we know that friendships and family and health and a contented mind matter far more than money. If we are Christians, we know in our heads if not in our hearts, that faith is more important than money. We even know that Jesus said that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. So do we serve God or mammon? Would a good test be a comparison between the amount of money we give to God's Work and the amount we spend on ourselves or save for a rainy day? Are we like the clergyman who was asked how he decided how much of the weekly collection he gave to God and how much he kept for himself? He said, "I toss the collection plate up into the air and what God wants He keeps. I take what falls to the ground."

July 8<sup>th</sup>

Zephaniah 2<sup>1-3</sup>

The people have been warned of the coming wrath. Now they are offered hope. The punishment may be averted. But the only way to escape the wrath to come is sincere repentance and faith. Those who have been mugged or murdered, the cheated customers, the abandoned wives, the abused children, those who have starved in the midst of plenty, the people who have died of curable diseases, the children brought up ignorant for lack of a teacher, the refugees, the inhabitants of besieged or bombed out cities, they are all entitled to justice. They don't need a Judge Who just lets the perpetrators off. They need a merciful Judge and a merciful judge will forgive but justice and mercy first demand honest repentance and faith. If we bring sin down to the level of eating a fresh cream cake (*naughty but nice*), we can no longer take seriously its terrible consequences both for the sinned against and the sinner and indeed for Jesus *the propitiation for our sins*.

July 9<sup>th</sup>

Zephaniah 2<sup>4-7</sup>

The cities referred to here are the home of the Philistines. The Israelites and the Canaanites were Semitic peoples, but the Philistines were Phoenicians, sea peoples. They lived on the Mediterranean coast. They were the same people as the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon in modern Lebanon and Carthage in North Africa. The African branch of the family traded with the ancient Britains on the Cornish coast. Contrary to the modern connotations of the word “Philistine”, they were an artistic and cultured people, skilled metal workers. They declined after the time of King David, but experienced a resurgence later on in the time Zephaniah is prophesying. They come under judgment because they are pagans who persecute the people of God. There is nothing wrong with art and culture, but, like all human endeavour, they only find their true purpose in the context of faith. Art and culture serve humanity, expressing our hopes and aspirations, as well as our fears and anguish, but they cannot be alternatives to faith. Human beings only find their true meaning in their Creator. Art and culture may serve Him and them. But put culture or art in the place of religion and they become idols.

July 10<sup>th</sup>

Zephaniah 2<sup>8-11</sup>

The Ammonites and the Moabites were of the same racial group as the Israelites. They were rivals for the Holy Land, living in the mountainous territories to the east of the River Jordan. As family, they might have been expected to be Israel’s allies, but more often they were enemies. These small kingdoms fought one another, formed on and off alliances with or against the big powers like Babylon, Egypt and Assyria and took advantage of other peoples’ misfortunes to advance their own cause. You can read about their iniquities and the consequent judgment on them in the first couple of chapters of Amos, who prophesied somewhat earlier than Zephaniah. It is noteworthy that in Amos too, God is expected to pour out his wrath on these heathen nations because of their wickedness, but Israel is in even greater danger as the chosen people who should have known better. The fate of Sodom and Gomorrah stands as a warning as to what happens to civilisations which fall into absolute wickedness. Genesis 19<sup>37&38</sup> says that the Ammonites and Moabites are the descendants of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters in the aftermath of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

July 11<sup>th</sup>

Zephaniah 2<sup>12-15</sup>

Ethiopia in v12 may well mean southern Egypt. Assyria and Egypt (or Ethiopia) are the big boys. They are the America and China of their age. They have the money and the military might. We've had the squabble with Judah's western neighbours, the Philistines, and their fellow Semites, the minor kingdoms of Ammon and Moab. Now comes the reckoning with the big boys, the mighty empires which have conquered so much of the ancient middle east, put populations to the sword, levied tribute, forced people into exile, etc. People in places like Judah would have been overawed by their wealthy cities and their trade. They would have feared their armies – the sheer numbers of troops they could put in the field and their technology, chariots and weapons. The superstitious might have thought that the Assyrian and Egyptian gods were greater gods than the LORD. Zephaniah says different. The LORD is God of all the earth and these mighty kingdoms too will be brought down.

It's worth remembering. At least since the Second World War, we've both admired and envied the Americans, depended on American wealth, relied on American military power. We are now trying to develop relations with China, expand our trade with them, maybe get them to bail out the Euro, while slightly fearing their possible hegemonic ambitions to dominate their own region and much of Africa. We play down Chinese human rights abuses because we want their friendship and fear their power. Well America and China are under God too. They too will be judged. Their civilisations will come to an end if (like all human civilisations) they don't govern themselves according to God's perfect Law of Love. Whose side should we be on, the side of earthly power (Egypt, Assyria, the USA or China) or the side of God, of justice, mercy and peace?

July 12<sup>th</sup>

Zephaniah 3<sup>1&2</sup>

I've just been reading the *Church Times* supplement for 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Book of Common Prayer. It's made up of a number of articles, some praising the 1662 prayer book and maintaining that it is important to keep it at the heart of our worship and others suggesting that it is now outmoded and far inferior to Common Worship with

regard to the needs of modern congregations. One article in the latter category was by a clergyman who objected to 1662's emphasis on sin and repentance. He said we don't feel that badly about sin and so we can't sincerely say things like the confession at Morning & Evening Prayer.

**ALMIGHTY** and most merciful Father; We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou them, O God, who confess their faults. Restore thou them that are penitent; According to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake; That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.

His article mildly shocked me. I know that he is right in saying that we often don't feel that badly about sin, but I drew the opposite conclusion to his. He suggested we should stop saying what we don't really mean. I say that we should learn to mean what we say. Surely when we think of the holiness of God and the depth of His love and of our unworthiness to come into His presence, whether in this life in our prayers or to enter heaven in the life which is to come, we cannot but be conscious of the seriousness of our sin and of our absolute dependence on God's mercy to forgive us. It is only if we can take sin seriously enough that we can understand why Jesus had to die on the Cross and enter fully into the joy of our Lord. The theory that a reasonably nice middleclass Englishman naturally just about passes muster in God's court is a parody of religion. It demeans God. It demeans justice. It demeans mercy. It demeans the victims of our sin. It demeans the ethical demands placed upon us by our religion. No wonder people don't bother to come to Church anymore! Examine your life against the life of Jesus. Jesus is the standard and anything less than Jesus is sin and sin makes you unfit to stand in the presence of God. It's only through the mercy of Jesus that God hears our prayers, comes to us in bread and wine and in the fellowship, and the Bible, and opens to us the Kingdom of Heaven. We are here by grace, not by right. To be in God's presence is our privilege and one not to be taken casually or lightly.



July 13<sup>th</sup>

Zephaniah 3<sup>3&4</sup>

The people at the top ought to give a lead. Politicians, wealthy business men, celebrities, sports personalities. If you are privileged in this life, if people look up to you, you have a responsibility. The same must be true for people such as parents, teachers, policemen, officials, youth club leaders. Privilege, position and power bring responsibility towards God and towards those over whom you exercise authority or influence. If you are in such a roll, it is only fair to expect of you the highest standards of integrity. It is doubly disgraceful if you use your position and power to advance our own ends at the expense of others – footballers who exploit star struck young women; officials who do favours for their friends; politicians or businessmen who feather their own nests.

Much more so for the clergy. What a responsibility to be ministers of the Word of God. Not only ought our personal lives to be above reproach; it is our task faithfully and fearlessly to preach the authentic Word of God, despite our own inadequacies in discerning the Word and the resistance we may meet in the Church as well as in the world. We need your prayers!

July 14<sup>th</sup>

Zephaniah 3<sup>5</sup>

We were talking the other day about the two ways of being. A child asks you, “Where did I come from?” “From Mummy and Daddy,” you say. “And where did Mummy & Daddy come from?” says the child. And you say, “From their Mummy and Daddy” and you keep going back till eventually you get to God. And the child says, Where did God come from?” And you say, “Ask the rector.” The truth is that there are two kinds of being – being which depends for its existence on something else, a being which just is, being which exists in itself. All the dependent (or contingent) beings depend on that essential or necessary being. There is only one Being which exists in Himself – God, Father Son and Holy Spirit. Everything else depends on Him for its existence – material things like rocks and stars, living things like plants and animals and us, souls like us alone, spirits like angels and abstracts like justice and mercy. Justice is as secure as the mountains because, like them, it derives its very nature from God Who is.

July 15<sup>th</sup>

Zephaniah 3<sup>6&7</sup>

I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.  
And on the pedestal these words appear --  
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.' Percy Bysshe Shelley

All over the world you can see the remains of great men and great civilisations founded on military might, wealth, exploitation, slavery, all kinds of injustice. They all thought that they owed their success to themselves, to their own cleverness or prowess, their strength, their wisdom, their gods of gold and silver, their science or technology. When will we ever learn? Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. Ps 127<sup>1</sup>

July 16<sup>th</sup>

Zephaniah 3<sup>8-12</sup>

It's a common thought in both the Old and the New Testaments that God will judge all the nations. The pagans with their bloodshed and dishonesty, their cruelty and injustice, and especially their persecution of the people of God, will be destroyed. On the other hand, the redeemed of the Lord (Israel in the OT, the Christian Church in the NT) will be sought out by God wherever they live on earth and preserved for everlasting bliss. Judgment and mercy. Our choice. And yet it is by the grace of God that we are saved, by His grace that we have faith for salvation. It is all of God, of His mercy and justice. It is not His Will that any sinner should be lost. It is His Will that all should be saved. Yet there is judgment and we are free, free to choose for Him or against Him and to take the consequences. The "pagans" become the people of God.

July 17<sup>th</sup>

Zephaniah 3<sup>13-16</sup>

So when is this idyllic state going to come into being? When will the people of God lead these virtuous lives in conformity to God's perfect law of love – honest, peaceable, generous, prosperous and safe from invasion? Zephaniah's original hearers probably looked for fulfilment of his words in the Land of Israel in the reasonably near future. Maybe the expectation was that the people of Israel would repent of worshipping false gods, repent of their unjust and unmerciful treatment of their fellow Israelites and the strangers who dwelt among them, that they would keep to the Law the Book of the Law having been rediscovered during the renovation of the Temple and that God would protect them from the Egyptians and the Babylonians and all the expansionist powers of the Ancient Near East. Obviously, it didn't work out like that. A generation later, the prophet Jeremiah was still warning the Jews that there would be consequences because of their failure to the LORD with all their hearts and their neighbours as themselves. The Babylonians would come and destroy their Temple and the Holy City and all this came to pass.

So maybe you spiritualise these verses and say that we shall only live like this – virtuous and under God's protection – when this life is over and when we get to Heaven. The right answer, however, is that by the grace of the Holy Spirit seek to live the life of Heaven here on earth.

July 18<sup>th</sup>

Zephaniah 3<sup>17</sup>

This is the verse our Christian Aid speaker valued so much. *The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty.* Do you ever think how wonderful it is that God is among us? Do you ever think about that when we gather for worship, spend time in the place designated as His House, when we read His Word together, share in the Holy Sacrament. *The Lord is here.* The Lord is mighty. *He will rejoice over thee with joy.* God loves you and me that much. What a thought that is. If we know that, nothing should unsettle us. *He will rest in his love.* The Hebrew is hard to translate but it associates our rest and peace with God's love for us just as you peacefully rested in your loving mother's arms when you were a young child.

July 19<sup>th</sup>

Zephaniah 3<sup>18-20</sup>

Jewish people living outside the Holy Land are known as the Diaspora. A great many Jews were expelled from Judaea by the Romans and often this is seen as the beginning of the Diaspora, but in reality, for many centuries before that, Jews had lived “abroad”, sometimes from choice as traders or economic migrants, sometimes forced into exile by invaders, sometimes as refugees from oppressors. The focus of the Jewish religion is very much the Promised Land and, even for the Diaspora, it remains home even if only in theory. So the prophets see God’s great act of salvation in terms of bringing the Jews home to Israel. As Christians, we are granted a deeper and more marvellous understanding of this. What God does in Jesus is to open up the Old Testament promises to people of all nations who come to Him in faith. All faithful people are children of Abraham and all the baptised belong to the people of God. Christians are dispersed throughout the world in every land. It is our mission to bring the Good News of Jesus to all the nations (= gentiles in biblical Hebrew and Greek). The final ingathering is not merely to bring the people of Israel back to the Holy Land (which would be fraught with difficulty as it is also the legitimate homeland of many non-Jews) but to open the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers.

July 20<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 1<sup>1</sup>

After Jesus had risen from the dead, He commissioned His Church to preach the Gospel to every nation. He ascended into Heaven and He sent the Holy Spirit onto the Church to enable us to complete that task. It is Good News for all the peoples of the world. God loves you. He is just and merciful. He calls you to repent of the sins which divide you from Him and from other people. He calls you to a life of *love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance*. He wants you to be one with Him as a woman is one with her husband. He wants to dwell in you eternally and that you should dwell in Him. This is Good News for you and for your family, for your friends, neighbours and work colleagues. It is Good News for the whole world. It is good News for you and Good News for you to share. Paul had established a Church at Philippi and now he writes to the Philippian Christians.

July 21<sup>st</sup>

Philippians 1<sup>1&2</sup>

Paul and his co-worker Timothy are servants (slaves in the Greek because we belong to Jesus and our time and talents are entirely at His disposal, at the disposal of Him Whose service is perfect freedom!) and they greet the Christians at Philippi as saints, as holy people. We are made holy by the Blood of Christ. Set free from sin, by His Death, we are called to live holy lives, *free to serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our lives*. The Philippian Church has already identified its leaders and ministers (bishops and deacons in the Greek and in traditional English translations, though they didn't live in palaces or sit in the House of Lords! What does it mean to be a bishop {leader, overseer} or deacon {minister} in the New Testament sense in the Church today?) The Church is the Body of Christ and all we Christians have different functions in it, according to the talents and opportunities God has given us. We all have the ministry of supporting one another's ministries. We bless one another in the Name of Him from Whom alone come all blessings.

July 22<sup>nd</sup> (S Mary Magdalene)

Philippians 1<sup>3</sup>

*I thank my God upon every remembrance of you.*

That can be hard to do. Other Christians are so frustrating. They don't see things my way. They have irritating habits. They're not people we would naturally choose as friends. They're needy. They're too self-centred. The list could go on and on. We can all think of reasons why other members of our fellowship get on our nerves.

*I thank my God upon every remembrance of you.* It would be better for our own soul's peace and for the harmony of our fellowship if we thought instead of the reasons for thanking God for one another. We might start by thinking how *The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty*, how *He will rejoice over thee with joy* and how *He will rest in his love*. God is with us wherever two or three are gathered together in His Name. He rejoices over every lost sheep which He has sought out and returned to the fold. His love is the source of our peace. We can thank God for one another and pray for one another, even (especially!) for those who don't seem to like us and get on our nerves the most!

July 23<sup>rd</sup>

Philippians 1<sup>4</sup>

*Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy.*

Again, it is not always easy to rejoice in prayer for the Church.

Sometimes it seems that even our own members are indifferent to what we are trying to do. The magnitude of our financial problems seems to call even our survival into question. It is a hard job to get people even to listen to, let alone to put their faith in, the Gospel. Then the national and international Church frustrates us with its divisions and arguments. We feel like we are flogging a dead horse. And yet the Bible tells us that *the joy of the LORD shall be your strength* (Nehemiah 8<sup>10</sup>). We have plenty of reasons to be joyful if we just think about Who God is. He has accomplished great wonders in the past and there is no reason to suppose that He will not do so in the present. Faith & hope & love! If we rejoice in the Lord, our morale infinitely improves. We accomplish much more. Our fellowship is much more attractive to outsiders and we achieve genuine growth both in number and in stature.

July 24<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 1<sup>5</sup>

*For your fellowship in the Gospel from the first day until now.*

Paul is giving thanks for and praying for God's blessing on (the same thing I guess) their fellowship in the Gospel. What is our fellowship in the Gospel? The word for fellowship is κοινωνία which is sometimes translated as communion and sometimes just left as koinonia. What does it mean, however? In Philippi I expect it meant meeting regularly at least every Lord's Day, to break bread, sing, pray and hear the Word preached and taught. Surely these worship events were filled with joy. The Philippian Christians would have faced opposition and persecution together. They would have supported one another in need. They would have prayed for one another and supported the Church in other places and the mission of people like Paul who travelled from place to place preaching the Gospel. That was fellowship in Paul's time – a minority faith in a pagan culture, newly come to the knowledge of Christ and excited by that newness. What does fellowship mean in a Church in a land where the Gospel has been known for 1500 years and more, there is indifference rather than persecution, we are looked after in time of need by government agencies and many people think our services are not particularly enjoyable and don't value Christian company?

July 25<sup>th</sup> (S James)

Philippians 1<sup>6</sup>

*Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it unto the day of Jesus Christ.*

We can rejoice in praying and giving thanks for our fellowship. I'm sure Paul's confidence for the Philippian Church applies equally to ours. We are God's Church. Jesus promised that the Gates of Hell would not prevail against. *The joy of the LORD shall be your strength.* Holy Communion is at the centre of our fellowship. It is our communion with God and therefore with all of God's people. Holy Communion cannot be a private or individual thing. Holy Communion is a corporate act celebrated by the Body of Christ (even when we bring Communion to a sick person alone in body at home). It is the focus and foundation of our corporate life, our fellowship, our mission to the world, our pastoral care, our social life, our financial responsibilities towards the Church, our offering of our time and talents in God's service, *our offering of ourselves, our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice.* Eucharist means thanksgiving. I'm sure the key to growth lies in our recovery of the sense of what fellowship truly means. Those churches which seldom celebrate the Eucharist but are experiencing strong growth have found a substitute focus for fellowship (Why?) and those churches which regularly celebrate the Eucharist but are not experiencing strong fellowship are far from understanding what Holy Communion truly is.

July 26<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 1<sup>7&8</sup>

Think back to when you were first in love (if you ever have been). You longed to spend time with your lover. You would hurry home from work or school, dress up and dash out to meet him. You didn't mind walking home having missed the last bus to spend another half hour with her. You thought about the person you were so in love with when you were apart and perhaps supposed to be concentrating on other things. Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter and understandably he longed for the fellowship of the Philippian Christians. This was the romance that those early Christians had with Jesus and with one another. They lived for their Christian fellowship in the breaking of bread on the Lord's Day. They looked forward to it the whole week,

got up early for it, risked persecution. Why do so many of us not feel the same about God and about one another?

July 27<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 1<sup>9</sup>

*And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment.*

Love is the characteristic of the Christian, love for God, love for one another in the fellowship of the Church, love for the world which God so loved. You can never have enough of love. So Paul prays for the Philippians' love to grow, their love for God and their love for one another. This is the secret of joy, joy which abounds whatever happens to us in life, that joy of the LORD which is our strength. Love is, however, much more than a feeling or an emotion. It is much more than a passion. Passionate love is something you can fall in and then fall out of. Christian love is love experienced by and manifested in body, mind and spirit. It includes the intellect as well as the emotions, the brain as well as the heart. Like proper married love, Christian love is *for better, for worse; for richer for poorer; in sickness and in health*. Unlike married love, Christian love is not *till death us do part*, but expects to be consummated in the beatific vision.

July 28<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 1<sup>10</sup>

*That you may discern what is truly important and be sincerely pure and above reproach for the day of Christ.*

There I've had a go at translating this difficult verse myself. This is my attempt to understand and explain it. Christians ought to seek the grace of God to discern what really matters in life. The test of what really matters, the measure, is love – the love of God (His for us and ours for Him) and the love of other people. Love sets the standard for what we ought to think, for the words that should come out of our mouths, for the way we ought always to act. It is the standard in the Church and in our everyday lives of work, family, socialising, politics and community involvement. So our conduct should (in all humility) be such as impresses other people with our virtue, whether this draws them or repels them. This can be very difficult! The day of Christ is the day of the LORD, for which God's people should always be ready in holiness.



July 29<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 1<sup>11</sup>

*Because your sins are forgiven in Jesus Christ, you are made righteous. As God has made you righteous, you are free of guilt and defilement and bound by chains of love to do the things that righteous people do, which, quite naturally, abounds to the praise of the righteous God.*  
That's my attempt to translate and paraphrase this verse. I hope it makes sense to you. I'm sure Paul means something like this!

July 30<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 1<sup>12-14</sup>

The Will of God in the world. We pray *thy will be done*, and yet it may often feel that our prayers are not answered. Things happen which surely cannot be God's Will. Wicked people do wicked things with apparent impunity. Good people contract dreadful diseases. Towns and villages, good people and bad people alike, are wiped out by natural disasters. People like Paul go to prison for their faithfulness to the Gospel. Is it that God doesn't hear our prayers? Is it that God can't act in the world (He is not after all omnipotent?) or that He chooses not to (respecting Creation's freedom too much to intervene?) or that perhaps He is not after all a good God? No, no, no and definitely not!

These questions are too hard for us to answer, although that doesn't stop us asking them and we do make some progress towards understanding. I'm not sure how, but I believe we have to hold together in our minds the thoughts that God is all loving and all powerful; that not a sparrow falls to the earth outside of His providence, but that He does respect the freedom of Creation (in particular His human Creation) to go its own way; that there is a right way to live, which we are free to choose or reject, and that our choices have consequences, but also that God is working His purpose out.

One clue is what Paul says here. Bad men have locked him up for preaching the Gospel. That's nasty for Paul. His enemies have done wrong and will be answerable for it on the day of Judgment. But the effect has been that the imperial household has heard about Paul and, much more importantly, Jesus, and that others have been emboldened to preach the Good News. The ultimate answer is Jesus Who accomplishes God's plan to vanquish evil by submitting to evil.

July 31<sup>st</sup>

Philippians 1<sup>15-18</sup>

Some people are emboldened by Paul's sufferings to support him in his mission by preaching the Gospel. But it also seems that people who don't like Paul are using his imprisonment to preach their version of the faith. Division in the Church is very sad. It's a terrible thing when a Christian fellowship, a congregation, is divided. It is not something to be proud of that there are separate Christian denominations, considering that Jesus prayed that we should be one! Yet Christians are human. So long as we remain on this earth, the flesh lusts against the spirit. We are sometimes unable to see how we can live in love and charity with our neighbours. Maybe the fault is with them. Maybe it is with us. Often it is six of one and half a dozen of the other. After all, whatever they've done, we ought to be ready to forgive, but maybe they don't think they need us to forgive them because they think we need them to forgive us! But God can use even this unsatisfactory state of affairs and sometimes more people get to hear the Gospel because there are different denominations with different ways of doing things in a particular town or village. Congregations may only be able to grow when malcontents finally leave, however sad that is for all concerned. There's a point for prayer!

August 1<sup>st</sup>

Philippians 1<sup>19&20</sup>

Paul's confidence in God is that his ordeal will work out as part of God's plan for Paul's salvation. In God Christians have that sure and certain hope. We are sustained by one another's prayers. Nothing will ever make us ashamed of our faith. If we are faithful, whatever happens to us, will work out to God's praise and glory. Worth remembering in the difficulties we face, which are generally much more trivial than what Paul went through.

August 2<sup>nd</sup>

Philippians 1<sup>21</sup>

*For me to live is Christ to die is gain.*

We used to sing these words set to music when I was at college. Think what they mean. Our life here and now on earth is Christ. When our time on earth is over, what God has laid up for us in Heaven is infinitely better. We don't have to be afraid of what might happen to us in this world. We can welcome death when it comes!

August 3<sup>rd</sup>

Philippians 1<sup>22-26</sup>

Paul wonders which he would choose, to be released from prison or to be executed? I know which I would prefer. Paul, however, contemplates Heaven as the infinitely better option – except that God still has work for him to do on earth. So he thinks he'll continue to live until his work is done.

Let us labour for the Master from the dawn till setting sun,  
Let us talk of all his wondrous love and care;  
Then when all of life is over, and our work on earth is done,  
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.

August 4<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 1<sup>27</sup>

*Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ.*

The Greek verb comes from the same root that we translate as city and citizen. Christians are to live as citizens of heaven. We don't belong to the earth. *But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels.* (Hebrews 12<sup>22</sup>). As citizens of Sion, we live by the Law of Zion, which is love. Suppose you went to live in some barbarous part of the world where they practised slavery or cannibalism, where they pressed young boys into the army, and cut off the limbs of their political opponents, hopefully you wouldn't conform. You'd still try to live by the civilised values of Britain, even if your refusal to conform to savagery cost you your life. The same applies to us as citizens of Heaven living in Britain. Where British culture falls short of the heavenly rule of love, we Christians are called to live by heaven's norms, whatever the cost to us personally. In particular Paul stresses here our faithfulness to the fellowship and our loyalty to the Good News.

August 5<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 1<sup>28-30</sup>

The New Testament Church expects opposition and persecution. They were turning the world upside down. What else could they expect? Persecution was seen as building Christian character and a witness to the world – judgment on the unrepentant, the promise of eternal life to every believer. Is it an indifferent Church which is met with indifference and neither grows spiritually nor evangelises effectively?

August 6<sup>th</sup> (The Transfiguration)

Philippians 2<sup>1&2</sup>

Could any appeal be more powerful than Paul's in these two verses? He beseeches the Philippian Christians to love one another in consideration of the love of Jesus Christ. It quite takes your breath away and, I don't know about you, but it makes me ashamed that I fall so far short.

Holy God, we see your glory in the face of Jesus Christ: may we who are partakers at his table reflect his life in word and deed, that all the world may know his power to change and save.

This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

August 7<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 2<sup>3&4</sup>

Most readers of these notes will know that I have great difficulties with church meetings. There have been so many terrible rows in the past which have been destructive to our congregation and to the faith of individuals including myself that I am quite literally afraid of taking the roll of chairman. If I let people speak freely, some people might say the most awful things, but if I try to suppress discussion, naturally enough that provokes resentment. I am conscious that under my chairmanship our meetings have reached a sort of paralysis in which nothing can be effectively discussed. But how did we get to this point? Why was there so much contention in the past? Why did people raise issues which were bound to lead to arguments and worse? To be honest I think, for some it was vainglory or personal ambition. People were self-important. They wanted to put themselves forward and do down others, especially me. We are, after all, human and subject to the temptations that the Philippian Christians were subject to all those years ago. But some people were not perhaps like this. They genuinely believed that the awkward questions they raised were important and that their controversial ideas were good ones. Just because they disagreed with me, they weren't necessarily wrong. Our Church might be all the poorer for not listening to them. In reality of course, most of us act from mixed motives. We might raise an important question partly because it makes us look smart, or we might draw attention to what needs doing because it makes us look better than the people who've missed it. I have to be careful of my own motives. Am I insisting on something because it's right or to show who's boss or is it both? Something else which needs a lot of prayer!

August 8<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 2<sup>5</sup>

*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.*

What a daring idea and yet it is one which Paul is fond of. In I Corinthians 2<sup>16</sup> he says, *For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.* We can know God and discern God's Will for our lives because we are that close to Him. I don't know how you imagine the relationship between your spirit or soul, your mind or soul, and your body (brain or mind). I don't think anyone can say for certain what is meant by each term, whether they can exist separately and how they interact. But whatever is meant by spirit, soul, mind, body, they all make up you. They are of the essence of what it is to be human. Some heretics believed that the human mind or soul of Christ was replaced by the Holy Spirit or by the divine Nature so that Jesus was a human body animated by the divine Spirit, but that is a heresy. Unless Jesus was in every respect human as we are, the Christian Gospel is untrue. It is only by taking on Himself the whole of our humanity that He can redeem our humanity. It is only as wholly God that He can be the complete and perfect revelation of the Godhead. Jesus is a human body, mind (or soul) and spirit, just as we are - and, within the one person of Jesus Christ, as well as this complete human nature, the complete divine nature also dwells. The Quicunque Vult (Athanasian Creed. See BCP after Evensong) puts it like this:

For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess: that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is both God and Man; God, of the Substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds: and Man, of the substance of his Mother, born in the world; Perfect God, and perfect Man: **of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting.**

His mind is that closely allied with the mind of everyone who responds to His love with faith that our conduct ought to be as His conduct.

August 9<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 2<sup>6-11</sup>

We'll read and meditate on all of this today and analyse over the coming days. Many people these verses constitute an already existing hymn of which Paul made use in understanding and explaining the faith. Do we think enough about the words of hymns and choruses?

August 10<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 2<sup>6</sup>

Remember what we said about the two kinds of being. On the one side, there are stars and planets; time, energy and matter; mountains, oceans, plains and deserts; rocks; plants; animals; people; angels; demons; abstracts such as love, mercy and justice. These are all contingent being. They depend for their existence on other being. Then there is necessary being, being which exists in itself, being which depends on nothing, being on which everything else depends. This is God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is on this side of the line that Jesus belongs. Jesus lives in an eternal unity of love with the Father and the Holy Spirit. All these contingent beings were created by Him, through Him and for Him. He is their alpha and omega. He is their beginning and their end. He is the reason why creation exists. He is the reason for ourselves. He is worshipped by angels and archangels and by all the company of Heaven. He is worshipped by the whole of creation. He is equal to God by right because He is God. This is the One Who becomes the child born to Mary and that is staggering.

August 11<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 2<sup>7</sup>

It's an incredible act of humility for God to become human. The Quicunque Vult goes on *Equal to the Father as touching his Godhead: and inferior to the Father, as touching his Manhood*. Paul's Greek literally means that He emptied Himself. This is what is meant by kenosis (κενωσις). And all that is pretty amazing. But He didn't make Himself a great man. He took the form of a servant, a slave. He was born in a stable and became a member of an ordinary family. There was nothing about Him that would make worldly people admire Him. He wasn't rich. He didn't exercise worldly power. He wasn't a celebrity in the sense of being celebrated for His looks or His singing voice or His acting talent. He had no academic qualifications. This was the Manhood taken into God, as the Quicunque Vult puts it.

Paul is reminding us of this hymn because he says we Christians should be like Christ. So it is fair to ask, in the light of all this, what sort of people do we admire and what sort of people do we aspire to be? If it is Christ we admire and seek to imitate, then His kenosis is the cardinal point to which the compass of our own lives surely inclines.

August 12<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 2<sup>8</sup>

The thing about God is that He is eternal. He is necessary being. He cannot cease to exist. He cannot die. And yet Jesus, perfect God and perfect Man, does die. The early Church wrestled with this and could not explain it. Some people thought that Jesus only seemed to die, but that won't do. The crucifixion wasn't some charade. The Bible is quite clear that Jesus really did die. The death of Jesus is vital to His being the propitiation for our sins. It is vital to our understanding that He was tempted (tested) in all respects that we are. Jesus really did die. So some people made the opposite mistake to assuming that it didn't really happen and insisted that God had died. But it is impossible for God to die and, if God died, the entire universe would have ceased to exist. We depend on God *for our creation, **preservation**, and all the blessings of this life*. The early Church couldn't explain it and neither can I and I don't suppose you can. The Creed can't tell us how, but it does tell us what must be so, because Jesus is both God and Man, the bridge between heaven and earth, the atoning sacrifice, the propitiation for our sins, the One Who opens the kingdom of heaven to all believers, the One Who enables human beings to be made divine – to be recreated in the image of Him in Whose image they were originally made, to come into their inheritance as the sons and daughters of God.

For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man: so God and Man is one Christ; Who suffered for our salvation: descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead. He ascended into heaven, he sitteth on the right hand of the Father, God Almighty: from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

August 13<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 2<sup>9</sup>

Forgive me if you've heard me use this analogy before. The owner of a great corporation has a son and heir who, from his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, has a right to sit in the boardroom, to make decisions for the company and to share in the profits. It is all his by right. However, instead of sitting in the boardroom, he joins the company as factory sweeper. Without any favouritism, by his own talent and hard work, he rises through the company and becomes an equal partner with his father the founder of the firm. He's now earned what was his by right. Likewise Jesus.

August 14<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 2<sup>10&11</sup>

Paul is probably quoting a well known C1 hymn. His last two verses are quite definitely the inspiration for a much loved C19 hymn, which is often sung to a C20 tune. So we are linked by the faith across the generations. The giving of self in love earns Jesus a place at the Right Hand of God. This is the place from which He offers Himself. So He sets us an example and provides us with a standard. Measured against that standard, we fall so far short that we would be without hope of attaining Heaven, except that His giving of Himself is our propitiation - and in Him, baptised into His death and resurrection, we are exalted with Him to God's Right Hand.

August 15<sup>th</sup> (the Blessed Virgin Mary)

Philippians 2<sup>12&13</sup>

Paul asks for obedience to the Word of God. He invites his readers to cooperate with the Holy Spirit. It takes effort from us to be Christians. But God supplies us with both the will to succeed and the means, His grace, the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Open to God and His Will for our lives, we can flourish in our Christian calling. Isn't this precisely what Mary did at the Annunciation? She was obedient. She accepted God's Will for her life and the Holy Spirit came upon her and made possible what God had called her to do.

August 16<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 2<sup>14&15</sup>

I attended a Church conference at which a bishop remarked he sometimes despaired of the way the Church does business, until he compared it with the way business is done in other organisations. They can be just as inefficient as we are. Their performance can be just as lacklustre. Their management styles can be just as ineffective and their debates equally futile. Indeed they are often worse. The Church isn't as open to the Holy Spirit as we ought to be, but other organisations are often not open to the Spirit at all. We ought to shine as lights of the world in what is a crooked and perverse nation. We ought not to be motivated by money. We ought not to seek power for its own sake. We ought to be unfailingly courteous. We ought to be more concerned about people than about things. We ought to look at all our problems and opportunities in the light of eternity. I think the Church generally does do better than the world, but we could do much better!



August 17<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 2<sup>16</sup>

The pastor's life is obviously bound up with Christ's. Therefore it is bound up with the life of his congregation. We are one in the Spirit. We are the Body of Christ. It is that personal. We all belong to the fellowship and we share in one another's highs and lows. Perhaps this is especially so for the pastor. The focus of our communion and fellowship is Jesus and the pastor says the words of Jesus in the Eucharist. As one of Christ's family sharing in Christ's family meal, the pastor also carries out the actions of the unseen Host – taking the bread and breaking it and saying, *Take eat. This is my Body*, before sharing it with Christ's disciples, one of the family, but humbly deputising for its absent Head (absent only of course in body, present in every other particular). A congregation is not an audience. Worshippers are not customers. Being a minister of religion is very much more than doing a job or practising a profession. We have to be very careful that we don't allow secular models derived from industry and commerce to displace our understanding of who we are as Christians. We are a body, a temple, a fellowship, a bride, a vine, a congregation, an assembly, a priesthood, a people, a nation. We are all members, clergy and people, members of Christ, members of one another. What we are not I hope it is unnecessary to say.

August 18<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 2<sup>17&18</sup>

The greatest proof of love is to give your life – whether as a martyr for your religion or your political views, as soldier in battle or as a parent risking everything to save a child. To yield up your life is the greatest act of love. The Christian belief is that love and joy are inextricably bound up with one another. Perfect love is therefore perfect joy. It follows, therefore, that the most joyful thing you can do is the most loving thing you can do. Martyrdom is actually the greatest joy – to give your life for Jesus, the One you love with all your heart, and for His people, your brothers and sisters in the faith. Moreover, your troubles on earth and all the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil vanish at that moment when you enter fully into the joy of your Lord. The rest of the Church shares therefore in the joy of the martyr and the power of his witness even as it experiences the pain and sorrow of bereavement. The early Church actually had to stop people courting martyrdom.

August 19<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 2<sup>19&20</sup>

I am a great believer in the parish system in this country. My personal view is that the best way to organise the Church is locally. Every community ought to have worship at its heart, specifically the fellowship meal of Holy Communion. Local people are obviously the best placed to care for neighbours in need and to witness to their faith. I strongly believe that the rector or vicar becomes a member of the local community and that he is one of that community in evangelism and pastoral care and the natural worship leader – particularly at the Eucharist. I do not see the parish priest as an outsider come in to do something to a community and certainly I have no sympathy at all with those clergy who seem to regard each appointment as a rung on their career ladder. I believe, therefore, in long incumbencies – though not necessarily so long as mine here! However, the vicar is not a one man band. All the baptised are ministers. Neither is the parish spiritually self-sufficient. We are members of a diocese, of a national church and of the worldwide church *militant here in earth*, not to mention the communion of saints in glory. Within a given congregation we depend on one another. Congregations mutually depend on other congregations. Parish ministry is not the only form of ministry necessary to do God's work in the world. We therefore welcome help from others outside the local community as the Philippians welcomed Timothy and we play our part in supporting other congregations and other ministries in the wider Church – including by paying our parish share, supporting CMS, Christian Aid, etc.

August 20<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 2<sup>21</sup>

Paul is sending Timothy at least in part because he is disappointed in some of the other people he might have sent. We mustn't idealise the early Church. They were subject to temptation just as we are. They made mistakes. They sinned. We may well be disappointed in other people in our churches today. Why don't they see the importance of faithful participation in weekly worship? Why don't they take on the tasks of evangelism and pastoral care? Why is the average offering in the cash collection the price of two second class stamps? We might be disappointed in our own Christian commitment. The point is that we can be better, just as they could be better and somehow were.

August 21<sup>st</sup>

Philippians 2<sup>23</sup>

Paul describes his relationship to Timothy as like father and son. Some modern English versions of the Bible, wherever possible, would change *father* to parent (especially when referring to God) and *son* to *child* (especially when referring to us in relation to God). What I am asking you to think about is this. Are these analogies gender specific? Could Paul, for example, have said his relationship with Timothy was like mother/daughter? All right Paul & Timothy were both men. So it would have sounded odd to say that. But are father/son relationships the same as mother/daughter, mother/son or father/daughter? If not (and I don't think they are) can it be right to replace them all with a generic parent/child? My view is that that would be dishonest and inaccurate. In one analogy, Jesus speaks of God longing to gather His people as a mother hen gathers her chicks. The analogy obviously requires a hen, not a cock. When Jesus uses another analogy and invites us to call God *Father*, would it be the same if we said, *Mother* or *Parent*? If not, I suggest, we should be cautious in ride roughshod over these ancient texts in our politically correct riding boots. In some ways God is like a Mother too us (Isaiah 49<sup>15</sup>) in others like a Father – and infinitely more than either!

August 22<sup>nd</sup>

Philippians 2<sup>24</sup>

The Church of England did a big survey into the public's attitude to church weddings. One of the findings was that members of the public wanting to book a wedding mostly want to talk to the vicar, not to a parish administrator, secretary or lay reader – however nice those people might be. Paul intends to visit Philippi in person. There is something personal about ministry. So Christian ministers are not just interchangeable. In a big parish with many ministers, if a member of the congregation falls sick, he is likely to be visited by the vicar as well as the curate and the pastoral assistant. He rightly expects it. Ministers are friends, not merely professionals with a job to do. You may not mind who drives the bus you're on so long as he is qualified. You may not mind having a locum doctor. But your parish priest is your friend as well as a professional. There may be a ministry team and different members may have different talents and availability, but they are friends!

August 23<sup>rd</sup>

Philippians 2<sup>25-30</sup>

Epaphroditus had taken gifts to support Paul's ministry from Philippi. He had also apparently helped Paul in ways in which the Philippians might have been expected to help but had failed. He had then fallen dangerously ill and everyone was concerned for him. Now he was recovered, Paul was sending him back to Philippi. Epaphroditus wanted to go home. They longed to see him again. Paul felt that he owed Epaphroditus something and that Epaphroditus would be a blessing to the Philippian Church. It is all so personal. These people were friends. They knew and loved one another. They faced challenges together. They rejoiced together. Sometimes, being human, they let one another down. But they remained friends. The early Church supplies us with a model of what it means to be the Church.

August 24<sup>th</sup> (S Bartholomew)

Philippians 3<sup>1</sup>

*Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord.*

Today is the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the introduction of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer – still something of a controversial event. The English Prayer Book had already had a bumpy ride. Henry VIII allowed a little bit of English – mainly the Litany. Otherwise, till then, it was all in Latin. In the reign of Edward VI, Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, issued two prayer books, one in 1549, one in 1552, the latter much more radically revised than the former. Under Queen Mary, England reverted to the Latin Mass and the English Prayer Book was brought back under Elizabeth I, James I and Charles I. When they won the Civil War, parliament abolished the Prayer Book – making it an offence even to use it in one's own home. At the Restoration of Charles II it was decided to bring back the English Prayer Book with a certain amount of revision. The Puritans and the Anglicans were unable to agree and most of the Puritans left the Church of England and became Congregationalists. The issues were that Protestants believed that ordinary worshippers should understand the words of the services so that they could participate fully. They therefore thought that services should be in English in England. Also Protestants believed that the Latin Mass in its various forms was no longer true to the Bible in its Theology of justification and of the nature of Holy Communion. So they did not merely translate the Latin into English. They revised it.

This brings us to the state of affairs in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Some Protestants, however, believed that the English Prayer Book had not gone far enough in a Protestant direction and some believed that we should not read set prayers written for us by somebody else, but pray extempore as the Spirit moves us. This is what led to the division during the Civil War period and its aftermath. After 1662, many people came to love the English Prayer Book, beautifully written, doctrinally sound and comprehensive enough to encompass people of a wide variety of opinions. There were lots of suggestions for revising 1662 in either a Protestant or Catholic direction or to bring it up to date, but there was no consensus on doing this until the 1960s, since when we've had a variety of "experimental rites" culminating in Common Worship (2000) which is mostly in modern language and caters for every shade of Anglican opinion by providing alternatives which cover pretty well everything it is permissible for Anglicans to believe. 1662 is still controversial. Some people would like to get rid of it – an anachronistic irrelevance to the Church's mission in the modern world. Some people think it was a great mistake to revise it so radically and that the Prayer Book's beauty and clarity have the power to put over the Gospel more effectively than its modern alternatives. My own belief is that the BCP is a great treasure. I am very thankful for our inheritance of it. It has played a very big part in my Christian formation. On the other hand, I doubt that it would be suitable for much of what we are trying to do in the Church nowadays and most churches are probably better off doing what we do, which is mostly to use Common Worship. Some Church of England churches do seem to have given up on any kind of authorised liturgy. That can be a great liberation and make it possible to organise services tailor made for your congregation. It can also result in you going your own way and gradually drifting away from the worldwide Church. In C19 many Congregationalists became Unitarians, no longer believing in the divinity of Christ. Anyway I hope you will join us to celebrate 350 years of 1662, to mourn its demise or to bury it, or even just out of curiosity this evening at 7.30 pm at St Michael's.

Cranmer's Understanding

"In fact he thought worship had no ulterior purpose. Worship was its own justification. His approach to liturgy assumed that human beings needed to worship in order to be human beings. Just as birds have to fly and fish have to swim, so the children of God have to worship."

August 25<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 3<sup>1&2</sup>

We're rightly horrified by Christians falling out with one another. The Church is meant to be a fellowship of love. When we think of what went on in the days of the Tudors and Stuarts, the burning of heretics, torture, mutilations and decapitations, excommunication, imprisonment, removal from office, we are even more scandalised. It ought not to be like this. But Paul is pretty harsh on his opponents within the Church here in the New Testament. Rightly recoiling from persecuting our opponents doesn't mean that doctrinal issues don't matter. It doesn't mean that anything goes. The art is to distinguish what matters from what doesn't and to be able to make a stand on what matters without losing the ability to love the people who disagree with you.

August 26<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 3<sup>1-3</sup>

When God confirmed His promises to Abraham, He gave Abraham a sign to show that he and his people were the people of the covenant, the people of God. This was circumcision of the all the males. Boy babies were circumcised at 8 days. Adult males wishing to become Jews, to join the people of God, also had to be circumcised. It distinguished the Jews (and some other nations) from the gentiles. One way of looking at things is that Jesus set out to reform Judaism. Part of that reform was to admit gentiles. Looked at that way, you might well suppose that male converts would have to be circumcised and that Christians would have to undertake obedience to Torah. In practical terms, these conditions would be off-putting to gentile converts. More seriously, such a policy underestimates just how much difference Jesus made. His Death transformed the relationship between God and the human race (and the whole of creation) and was in absolute accordance with God's eternal purpose for the redemption of Creation. In Christ God has done everything to effect atonement. All we need is faith, itself the gift of God.

August 27<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 3<sup>4</sup>

If there was anything about anyone that would guarantee God's favour, Paul had it all. He was born into the right family. Everything was done for him as it should have been. He tried his utmost to live a righteous life. But Paul has been shown by God that that is not the way.

August 28<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 3<sup>5</sup>

Paul gives details. He was born a Jew. (He wasn't a convert.) His parents had him circumcised on the right day. He was a son of the commandment (which is what Bar mitzvah means). He was a Pharisee, which means he tried as hard as he could to meet all the law's demands. But none of those things was what God required of him. There was a new covenant, an eternal covenant, a covenant which was always meant to fulfil the old. This was the covenant in the Blood of Christ, a covenant offered to the whole human family, irrespective of race, class, education or background, a covenant wholly dependent on what God has done in Christ, apprehended by faith alone, faith available solely through grace.

August 29<sup>th</sup> (Beheading of St John the Baptist)

Philippians 3<sup>6</sup>

If you believed what Paul believed before he was converted, Jesus was a serious threat. In practical terms His proclamation of the Kingdom presented a risk that the Romans would intervene militarily in anticipation of a Jewish revolt. Our Lord's fellowship with *publicans and sinners* was a threat to those who believed that the only way to please God was to keep pure by not associating with that sort of person. His generous interpretations of the Law (*the Sabbath was made for man. There is nothing from without a man, that entering in, can defile him: but the things that come out of a man, those are they that defile the man.*) undermined those who taught that only the strictest observance of all the Law's minutiae could avert the wrath of God. Indeed Jesus made clear that strict observance of the minutiae sometimes ran counter to the main point of the Law – which is love. So Jesus was a threat and Christianity needed to be stamped out before it took root.

August 30<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 3<sup>7</sup>

*But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.* When the scales fell from Paul's eyes (or rather 3 days previously) Paul realised that only Christ mattered and nothing else did. This was a tremendous liberation, an enormous relief. Paul was set free. Ask yourself. Are you and I free? Do we really know deep down inside that only Christ matters and everything else as found in Him? Or do we still cling to the values of unredeemed humanity, position, wealth & power?

August 31<sup>st</sup>

Philippians 3<sup>8</sup>

I was once told a story about a clergyman who somewhat relished preaching on this verse because it gave him the opportunity to say *dung* (or one of its synonyms) from the pulpit. Maybe that story might make us pause and realise what an extraordinary metaphor this is. Paul equates everything he valued before he became a Christian to dung. What are we supposed to make of that?

September 1<sup>st</sup>

Philippians 3<sup>8&9</sup>

OK. What truly matters is our relationship with God. He is the source of our life. He made us. He gives us everything we have. He sustains us every day of our lives. Without Him we should quite literally be nothing. But all the blessings of this life, wonderful as they are, are simply a foretaste of what He has in store for us in Heaven. God is the source of our life, our love, our joy. Ultimately our relationship with Him is the only thing that matters, eternal life. That relationship depends solely on what Jesus has done for us on the Cross. We cannot earn God's favour and we don't have to. It doesn't matter who or what we are. God loves us just as we are. Paul now knows this and it is such a liberation. Paul wants to share this Good News with the whole of creation. This is our freedom too and our Good News to share. It's not that home and family, work and leisure, money, physical and mental health, human friendships, etc., don't matter. It's that they are only truly appreciated in the light of God's love.

September 2<sup>nd</sup>

Philippians 3<sup>10</sup>

*That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death.* I've copied this out of the KJV because it's a pretty literal translation of Paul's Greek. To know Jesus. That's an amazing thought. He is my friend. To know the power (the Greek δυναμις, from which we get dynamite!) of His resurrection. The risen Christ dwells in us and we in Him, His Spirit in communion with our spirit. The fellowship of His sufferings. The Christian isn't promised an easy life, far from it, but we share our sufferings with Him and He with us. Being made conformable unto His death. Jesus said: *Let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me. Whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall find it.*



September 3<sup>rd</sup>

Philippians 3<sup>11</sup>

*If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.*

The evidence of I Corinthians is that some people in the early Church thought that the Resurrection was already past. I guess they meant that our present experience of faith is all that there is, our present joy in the Lord, the gifts of the Holy Spirit we have already received, the fruits of the Spirit we already bear - *love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance* – that there is no more to look forward to. It is wonderful being a Christian. Knowing God and Jesus Christ Whom He has sent, we have eternal life. However Paul says that, if it were true that this is all there is, we should be of all men the most miserable. We should have based our lives on a lie, a delusion. The fact is that the best is yet to come when we are delivered from the burden of the flesh. This is God's promise to us and God's promises are sure.

I have a suspicion that some modern Christians are like those Corinthians. They know that being a Christian here and now on earth is a good thing. They find it hard to believe in life beyond the grave. So their Church is a pleasant club to belong to which does a certain amount of good in this world – a bit like the Rotarians only with hymns. But they are selling themselves short. The Church is that, but it is so much more. The Church is a supernatural society created and sustained by a supernatural God Who does supernatural things. Paul's words indicate that Resurrection is not easy, but we can have faith because our belief is in an omnipotent God!

September 4<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 3<sup>12</sup>

*If that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended in Christ Jesus.*

Paul knows very well that the best is yet to come. He pursues that best. It is the purpose of his life. The word here translated *apprehended* implies understanding, reaching out for, holding onto, winning, attaining. It's so personal. Paul is personally holding on. Jesus has personally taken hold of Paul. And so it is for us and for all Christians. I can say that Jesus is my personal Saviour. He does love me as an individual. I am individually responsible to Him and so are you.

September 5<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 3<sup>13&14</sup>

Imagine you're a young woman, maybe in a Victorian novel or a mediaeval romance, or possibly in real life. (How would I know?) The hero of the story sets out to woo you. He does everything he can for you. In time you recognise how much he loves you. There is a wedding and, given that this is a happy story, your father is delighted to give you both his blessing and lays on a tremendous marriage feast. And you all live happily ever after. Your new husband loves you so much that you can take him for granted. You don't have to put anything into the marriage. Because you can depend on him, you don't have to bother. Your love means very little to you personally, just a meal ticket, a roof over your head, a companion and a possible father for your babies. Do you think you would be happily married? Do you think you could be happy in yourself treating like that your loving husband who has given you everything? So, surely, considering what Jesus has done for us, our Christian life should be passionate rather than indifferent. Knowing how much He loves us, knowing what He has sacrificed for us, how is it possible that our love for Him could be complacent or merely formal and conventional?

September 6<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 3<sup>15&16</sup>

Because of what Christ has accomplished on the Cross, you are not slaves to sin any more. You are no longer subject to the universal human fear of death. So live as free men and women who will live for ever in the love of God.

September 7<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 3<sup>17-19</sup>

Sadly, in St Paul's day, there were bad examples in the church, some of them in positions of influence and authority. No doubt the same thing is true today. There are people who try to take control of a local church by rallying support behind the scenes, undermining what has been decided openly, or by thrusting themselves and their views forward in meetings. There are leaders and opinion formers in the national Church and internationally whose behaviour and teaching is not worthy of the Gospel. We have to decide which voices to listen to. The ones to hear are the ones who follow Christ and the surest guide to recognising the Word Incarnate is the Word written in the Holy Scriptures.

September 8<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 3<sup>20&21</sup>

It is safe to say that many of the malcontents in the Church are people whose *conversation, citizenship, true home, business* (translate Paul's word πολιτευμα as best you can) is in this world. They seek power or influence for worldly reasons. They want their own way, rather than God's way. They think they know better than the Bible or the Holy Spirit or the consensus of Christian teaching down through the ages and across the world. They wish to accommodate the Church to the spirit of the age. They seek to be popular in the world rather than of service to the world. They are entirely missing the point. The point is that for Christians our *conversation, citizenship, true home, business*, is in Heaven. The Church, Christian people are called to live by heavenly values - *love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance*. These are the values we pursue. This is how we aim to live, the lifestyle we seek to apprehend. We live in anticipation. We look to Jesus Who will bring us home to heaven and make us like Himself in glory, solely by His grace.

September 9<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 4<sup>1</sup>

*Stand fast in the Lord.*

The enemies are opposition from other people, indifference on our own part and materialism - allowing the affairs of this passing world to obscure the eternal values of Heaven. Faith can have no fellowship with complacency. Every generation, every Church throughout the world, every Christian individual has to *stand fast in the Lord*.

September 10<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 4<sup>2</sup>

When Christians quarrel, they inflict harm on themselves and they also damage the Church. We know this perfectly well, but we've always done it. We are, after all, only too human. We spoil our own lives when we can't or won't forgive, when we refuse to be friends, when (God forbid) we seek vengeance. We're not free so long as we don't forgive. We diminish ourselves, considering that we are called to be Christ like. Obviously we hurt the people we won't forgive as they hurt us. And such quarrels diminish the Christian fellowship of our Church and impair its witness to the neighbourhood.

*Whose names are in the book of life.*

There is a great satisfaction in knowing that your name is in the book of life. How do you know whether it is? Well, do you know Jesus as Lord? Do you know God as your Father? Are you baptised in repentance and faith? If you can answer “yes” to any of those questions, you can answer “yes” to them all and your name definitely is in the book of life. By God’s grace we will meet in Heaven. Paul exhorts the Philippian Christians to help those people who are doing Christian work. There are obviously pragmatic reasons for assisting people who are labouring on your behalf. But there is also a principle at stake. They are the same as you. Their names are in the book of life.

These verses are set for the epistle on 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent in the BCP. (For some reason they come at Advent 3 in Common Worship). In the BCP they are of course in the incomparable King James translation of the Bible. An old friend of mine, who I don’t think is sure whether he is a Christian or not, knows this reading by heart, having learnt it years ago. There is something to be said for memorising Scripture, for internalising it, so that it becomes a resource you can draw upon. It seems to me that learning by heart went out of fashion at much the same time as we were updating our prayer books and Bible translations and that, therefore, most people who can quote from memory quote from the KJV or BCP, but perhaps other translations are as memorable if we make the effort. I think my friend draws strength from knowing this Scripture, despite his uncertainties about a lot of things. It is worth trying to remember. I would say in whatever translation you find easiest, except that opens another debate. If you use different English translations of the Bible you gain different perspectives on the sacred text. On the other hand, you never get to know any of them well. There is also the danger of selecting for each passage the translation which you find most congenial, rather than the more challenging one. My suggestion is choose one translation for general reading (a respectable translation like KJV, RSV, NEB, NIB, JB and their revisions, not a paraphrase) and compare it with other translations for a broader insight.

*Rejoice in the Lord always.*

There's a popular tendency nowadays to refer to funerals as a *celebration of the life of*. It is sometimes stipulated that people should come in bright clothes and that no one should look sad. Cheerful music and readings are chosen and the eulogy is upbeat, accentuating the positive. Well, fair enough, but is it entirely honest? The upbeat and the positive are a big part of the truth, especially if you are a Christian confident that the deceased has gone to a better place, but they aren't the whole truth. You are going to miss your loved one terribly. You are sad and sorry that they are gone. It is dishonest to pretend otherwise. If you can't express your grief at the funeral, when can you express it? Are you supposed to be ashamed of your sadness and only cry alone? Surely not. Your sadness at losing your loved one is the natural result of loving him or her. We want to be with the people we love.

It sometimes seems that Paul is falling into this trap, that he is saying you've got to look cheerful whatever happens and however you feel. It's the same when he says, *In everything give thanks* in I Thessalonians 5<sup>18</sup>. Can you give thanks, can you rejoice when everything is going wrong for you? Is it reasonable to be cheerful, no matter what. What Paul is actually saying is something much more profound. He is saying that because of the strength on which you can draw from your relationship with God in Christ you can rejoice and be thankful even when you are grieving, lost or fearful. However dark the night, God is with you always and *joy cometh in the morning*.

*Let your moderation be known unto men. The Lord is at hand.*

Moderation, gentleness, forbearing spirit. These are all attempts to translate St Paul's Greek. We know what he means. People should see in us people who know Jesus. We don't have to be afraid of the world. *The Lord is at hand*. We want to live always as would please Him. *The Lord is at hand*.

September 15<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 4<sup>6</sup>

*Be careful for nothing.*

Jesus teaches us that our heavenly Father knows what we need before we even ask Him. He is all powerful and all loving and we can trust Him no matter what. We can talk to Him wherever we are about absolutely anything which is on our minds. If we make our supplications with thanksgiving we are expressing our faith in God Who always hears our prayers and is therefore always to be thanked. We can ask anything we think would be good, any prayer to which we can add *thy will be done*, and God always hears our prayers. Because He is good, He may not give us what we think is good, because He knows so much better than we do. It isn't that He can't give us what we want or that He is withholding His love from us. He can do anything and He is perfect love. What He does will always be in accord with His perfect love. So we continue to trust Him even when He doesn't do what we think would be right – like heal a sick person or avert a tsunami.

My soul bear thou thy part, triumph in God above,  
And with a well-tuned heart sing thou the songs of love.  
Let all thy days till life shall end, whate'er he send,  
Be filled with praise.

September 16<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 4<sup>7</sup>

*The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.*

In Philippians this is indicative, a statement of fact. People who follow Christ do know God's peace. In our communion services we change the mood of the verb to the subjunctive (if English has the subjunctive) *The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.* It becomes a prayer, a blessing. God's peace is what we seek, what we implore, what we are confident He will give to all the faithful, what His ministers can pronounce on God's people, in the certainty that this peace which passes our understanding is His Will for us now and in all eternity.

September 17<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 4<sup>8</sup>

The BCP Advent epistle stops at v7, but v8 is also very inspiring, something you might well want to learn by heart. I think if we get into the way of thinking holy thoughts, we become holy and *vice versa*. There is so much in the world which is sordid – violence and illicit sex, bad language, greed, revenge. So much of this is presented as entertainment. Obviously nasty things have to be faced. We should be liars if tried to live as if these things didn't exist and useless in relating to other people because we all have to face up to them. Drama, film, music, art, they can all help us to come to terms with the sheer nastiness in the world. I am always saying that one of the great strengths of the Bible is that it includes all the nastiness as well as the niceness human beings are capable of. If it didn't, it would be useless in the real world. But the nasty stories in the Bible are told in the context of faith. We make sense of the nastiness by referring it back to the love of God, the God Whose Son suffered all the evil of which human beings are capable and thereby redeemed Creation. I think there is a danger for us in enjoying sordid TV programmes, books, etc. – not that you'd watch or read anything (except things meant for children) if you didn't look at anything with bad language, explicit sex or gratuitous violence. So be careful and look at everything in the context of the Christian faith.

September 18<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 4<sup>9</sup>

Whose example has inspired you? I guess your parents and maybe grandparents and other family members? A great teacher? Good friends? Someone in public life? A clergyman? We've all been inspired by people, wanted to learn from them, to follow their examples. Some people would be much better examples than others. We worry that young people might take celebrities and footballers as roll models when these people take drugs or cheat on their wives. St Paul would be a great example to follow. In I Corinthians 11<sup>1</sup> he says, *Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ*. Jesus is the ultimate example to follow. He lives as human beings are meant to live. We are only truly fulfilled insofar as we are like Him. Anything else is less than our human potential. Christ is the perfect example and other human lives are measured against His. He is the standard by Whom we judge ourselves and evaluate those whom we might think of taking as roll models.

September 19<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 4<sup>10</sup>

Dean Alford (author of *Come Ye Thankful People Come* and Dean of Canterbury) makes the point that when Epaphroditus did for Paul what the Philippians failed to do, it wasn't because the Philippians didn't want to help Paul. They didn't have the opportunity. He stresses the point. We shouldn't feel bad or guilty when we just can't do what we would like to do. I know some people are unsettled by charity appeals. They are good causes, but there is a limit to how many you can support. In fact it is generally better to support a few charities with reasonable sums of money than it is to support a plethora with small amounts. The administrative cost of processing £1 is very likely as much as that of processing £10 or £100. Carefully consider how much God has blessed you and how much of what you have received you can share with others. A tithe is a good figure to start from and biblical.

September 20<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 4<sup>11</sup>

*I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.* I think this is a wonderful thought, one which we ought to be able to take on ourselves. To be content whatever state we are in. Such a state of contentment arises from our relationship with Jesus Christ, His dwelling in us and our dwelling in Him, knowing Him Whom to know is eternal life. It is the relationship through which we can *rejoice in the Lord alway* and *in everything give thanks*. It is the opposite of the *must have* culture we live in, our world in which advertisers imply that the secret of happiness is to buy whatever they are selling. None of these things can satisfy. That's why so many people have wardrobes stuffed full of clothes they will probably never wear again. Material goods can't satisfy; neither can worldly success. Only the peace of God can give us peace.

September 21<sup>st</sup> (S Mathew):

Philippians 4<sup>12</sup>

O Almighty God, who by the blessed Son didst call Matthew from the receipt of custom to be an Apostle and Evangelist; Grant us grace to forsake all covetous desires, and the inordinate love of riches, and to follow the same thy Son Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.



September 22<sup>nd</sup>

Philippians 4<sup>13</sup>

*I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.*

I wonder if there are times when you feel you can't cope? When we were younger, we might have worried about passing exams. Perhaps there is something we have to do at work which we feel is beyond us. Relationships, with family, friends or colleagues, can be difficult and there may be people we'd rather not have to face. Perhaps we've been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. Do you panic? I'm afraid (as many of you know) some things make me panic. I should remember Paul's words here and *in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving make my requests known unto God.*

September 23<sup>rd</sup>

Philippians 4<sup>14</sup>

An old friend at Ramsgate was going to have *I can manage* inscribed on my tombstone. I do tend to turn down offers of help, perhaps sometimes ungraciously. It could be that if we believe *I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me*, we might become arrogant and dismissive of others' sincere and friendly offers of help. *Every man for himself* is much of a motto for a fellowship. Rather, *Bear one another's burdens*, as St Paul also said. (Galatians 6<sup>2</sup>). The Church is the Body of Christ. Love is of God. When I say, *I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me*, maybe I need to consider that He is strengthening me through other people, other Christians, who are comforting me and helping me.

Brother let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you;

Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.

September 24<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 4<sup>15-19</sup>

Paul (and other evangelists) are supported on their missionary journeys by the churches, just as we try to support our mission partners in the Philippines, Paul and Charitas Cho. When Paul is writing to Philippi, it appears that through Epaphroditus the Philippians have been able to offer more help than other churches. But all this sharing brings blessings to all concerned – to those who receive and to those who give. So we rejoice in the opportunity both to give and to receive and to share both with donors and with recipients. We can afford to be generous because *my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.*

September 25<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 4<sup>20</sup>

*Now unto God and our Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*  
When Christians sing the psalms, we end with a doxology – *Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost*. The same doxology also appears near the beginning of Morning and Evening Prayer, in the Litany and at the end of the Quicunque Vult or Athanasian Creed. Paul's letters generally end with a doxology. So do many hymns. To glorify God! The word doxology comes from the New Testament Greek word doxa (δοξα) which means *glory*. We tend to use the word *orthodoxy* to mean right belief, but the Orthodox theologian Callistos Ware points out that in NT terms, orthodoxy is really right glory. To have faith is to glorify God. Human beings are happiest when they are glorifying God and I'm going to stick to that statement however much anyone may argue with me. Human beings are happiest when they are glorifying God. The trouble is they don't realise that and that's why they're traipsing round Bluewater when they could be taking part in the Eucharistic Feast.

September 26<sup>th</sup>

Philippians 4<sup>21-23</sup>

These verses look like an afterthought after all the sharing of news, the Christian teaching and indeed the doxology, but it isn't really. It's an exchange of greetings within the Body of Christ. Paul wants to send his greetings to all the church members (whom he calls *saints*, people made holy in Jesus Christ) and the Christians at Rome (where he is imprisoned) also want to send their greetings. The Church is a fellowship, friends with one another, brothers and sisters in Christ. As we know from the end of II Corinthians, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, is closely bound up with the love of God, and the fellowship (communion, koinonia, κοινωνία) of the Holy Spirit.

September 27<sup>th</sup>

Haggai 1<sup>1-11</sup>

Back to the Old Testament – specifically to the Book of the Twelve. Haggai is prophesying long after Zephaniah. Zephaniah preached repentance in the time of the relatively good King Josiah, but people paid little attention or, if they did take notice, any improvement in the national life was short-lived. Since Zephaniah, the Babylonians have besieged and taken the Holy City. The Temple has been demolished

and the sacred vessels taken away to Babylon. The better portion of the population of Judah have been forced to live in exile in Babylon and the poorer people who were left have been unable on their own to make a decent living. Many of them have moved down into Egypt. The Bible is quite clear that all this has happened because people have turned their backs on God, worshipped false gods and consequently mistreated other people. The laws God has ordained to govern the cosmos have been broken and His natural order of justice and mercy has been broken.

But God has not abandoned His people. The Babylonian Empire has been conquered by the Medes and the Persians and their kings have allowed the Jews to go home and to rebuild the Temple and the Holy City. It is like the Exodus from Egypt all over again. The Jews have been set free, free to worship God without fear. The two leading men are Zerubbabel the governor or prince and Joshua the high priest.

The problem Haggai is sent to deal with is that the people are dilatory in rebuilding the Temple. They think it more important to meet their own needs, their material needs. They think there will be plenty of time for worship when they've dealt with their more pressing concerns, housing, food, trade. God sends Haggai to warn them they've got it the wrong way round. God has to come first. When you put God first, all your other concerns fall into place. When you try to tackle all the affairs of this life yourself and put God last, then everything will go awry.

September 28<sup>th</sup>

Haggai 1<sup>11-15</sup>

*I am with you, saith the LORD.*

This time the people and their leaders listened to the Word of God as spoken by the prophet. The result was that, when they received the engrafted word, they were enabled to rebuild the Temple, to re-establish worship and so to lay the foundations of the good society.

People speak as though the Church in this country were under threat – too few people, too little money. But there are plenty of people who call themselves Christians and there is plenty of money in the country. (Despite the recession, we are far richer than almost all of our ancestors and most people in the world today.) Rebuilding the Church is only a

matter of putting God first in our lives – offering Him *our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice*, rather than offering Him our spare time and our spare change. Jesus has offered Himself for us. If we offer ourselves back to Him, we shall discover that *I am with you, saith the LORD*. God's Church will be rebuilt in this land, the foundation of the good society. Small wonder we have all sorts of social problems when the Church is so feeble. Small wonder the Church is so feeble when so many people fail to put God first in their lives. But we who call ourselves Christians can turn it all round if only we take to heart the prophetic Word.

September 29<sup>th</sup> (S Michael & All Angels)

Haggai 2<sup>1-9</sup>

After the children of Israel passed through the Red Sea, having been liberated from Egyptian slavery, God called Moses to the top of Mt Sinai. There He gave Moses the Ten Commandments and the other commandments of the Law. He also granted Moses a vision of Heaven and this was the pattern for the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle, the place where God dwelt amongst His people. In turn, the Tabernacle was the pattern for Solomon's Temple, which Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian King destroyed, and this formed the pattern for the second Temple which Zerubbabel and Joshua rebuilt.

So the Temple points us to the reality of Heaven and the New Testament develops the theme that Jesus is both the High Priest and the Atoning Sacrifice, the One Who opens the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. As baptised people we worship now *with angels and archangels and all the company of Heaven*. Through Jesus, our prayers reach Heaven's Throne. Indeed He intercedes for us at God's Right Hand. From Heaven God sends His angels as ministers. From Heaven God pours out His Holy Spirit, *another Comforter (Paraclete)*. We are sustained by the presence of God in our midst and He leads us on to our Promised Land. So all these Old Testament promises and prophecies were wonderful in their day and were marvellously fulfilled, but they are only totally fulfilled, finally consummated, in what God has prepared for us in the Kingdom of Heaven. Referring to the OT saints Hebrews (11<sup>39&40</sup>) says *And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect*.

The prophet continues the theme that things will not come right until God's people give themselves whole-heartedly to Him. God reaches out in love. He promises salvation. He longs for us to accept His offer, to receive the engrafted Word, but we have the choice and our choice has consequences.

Zerubbabel and Joshua had the task of rebuilding the Church in their own day. God had abundantly provided the resources. All that was needed was that the people should use what God had provided wholeheartedly in His service. The paradox is that to serve God is perfect freedom whereas to reject God is to become a slave to sin, a slave whose only wage is death. So, so long as the people *put number one first*, the Temple didn't get rebuilt and the nation didn't prosper. But when they used God's gifts to God's glory, the Temple was built and all the people were richly blessed.

*Back to Church Sunday* is an initiative designed to rebuild the Church in this land. It has been richly blessed in many places and many people have rediscovered their faith or come to faith for the first time through BTCS. What is required is that we are found faithful, that we offer back to God what He has so generously given to us. This means using the resources He has given us to sustain His Church in her mission and for each one of us to do the good works He has prepared for us to walk in as a witness to the world. On BTCS (and all the rest of the time) we each have an opportunity to offer our lives back to God, to rededicate ourselves in His service and for each one of us to play our part in building His Temple.

For all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee. (I Chronicles 29<sup>14</sup>).





