

Samuel

Bible Notes July-September 2019

50p

Psalm 99. *Dominus regnavit*

THE Lord is King, be the people never so unpatient : he sitteth between the cherubims, be the earth never so unquiet.

2. The Lord is great in Sion : and high above all people.

3. They shall give thanks unto thy Name : which is great, wonderful, and holy.

4. The King's power loveth judgement; thou hast prepared equity: thou hast executed judgement and righteousness in Jacob.

5. O magnify the Lord our God : and fall down before his footstool, for he is holy.

6. Moses and Aaron among his priests, and Samuel among such as call upon his Name : these called upon the Lord, and he heard them.

7. He spake unto them out of the cloudy pillar : for they kept his testimonies, and the law that he gave them.

8. Thou heardest them, O Lord our God : thou forgavest them, O God, and punishedst their own inventions.

9. O magnify the Lord our God, and worship him upon his holy hill : for the Lord our God is holy.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen

When I wrote these notes for July, I had June's calendar open in front of me. So I'm a month out in all the festivals, but since the collects fit in with the notes I've prepared, I've left them as they were. I hope it's not too confusing! RIK.

July 1st

I Samuel 1 vv 1-3

Time for some Old Testament! These are the stories we need to know if we are to understand the New Testament. Once they were part of our culture, taught to children from generation to generation. Now they're not so much. This is partly because they no longer go to Sunday School, Religious Education in state schools is no longer simply Christian Scripture and families are less likely than in the past to have family prayers with bible readings. It is also, however, I think because we have become more squeamish. There's quite a lot of sex and violence in the biblical narrative. God Himself is portrayed as doing things we find hard to accept. It's easy to dismiss those parts of Scripture we find hard, to avoid teaching them to children, to leave them out of our readings in Church and not even to bother to read them ourselves. This approach, however, gives rise to three difficulties. One is that, if the Bible isn't seen to have anything to say about the nastier side of life, it quickly becomes irrelevant to the human condition. The second is that, when we edit out the bits of the Bible we don't like, we are presuming to judge the Word of God rather than allowing the Bible to judge us. Thirdly, as I have said, it is not possible to understand Jesus unless we understand Him in the context of the Hebrew Scriptures – our Old Testament. He Himself said, *Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.* So pray for grace to respond to what you read in the Bible. Pray for those who have to interpret the Word professionally, for example in the governance of the Church and in teaching and preaching the Bible. Pray for the Bible to be taught to and received by both children and adults.

July 2nd (Collect Sunday after Ascension)

I Samuel 1 vv 4-8

Elkanah's family worshipped regularly at the shrine at Shiloh. They were not a happy family. It seems to have been permitted to have more than one wife at that time, but it often seems to have brought unhappiness. Hannah was sad because she was childless. Peninnah was nasty to her. Elkanah was powerless to comfort Hannah. Today's collect (see next page) anticipates and prays for the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, if only we were more open to Him, would teach us not to be nasty to one another, would comfort us in our troubles, and

would enable us to show kindness to one another. I often find that when I am praying for people, the key they need to sort out their lives is a closer relationship with God.

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

July 3rd

I Samuel 1 vv 9-11

Hannah does the right thing. In her anguish she prays. We shall see that she doesn't pray in the approved manner, but that isn't the point. The point is to pray. I'm not sure that she should have bargained with God. God needs nothing from us. He gives us what we need because He loves us, not because we promise Him something in return. However, she is right to offer any child she bears to the LORD. Everything we receive comes from God. Other people are God's gift to us. We offer back to Him everything and everyone He gives to us in the knowledge that the whole of Creation (inanimate, animate and human) finds its fulfilment in Him. We are not to be selfish and cling on to what God gives us, but to be prepared to give back to Him in the expectation that He will take care of whatever or whomever and put it or them to better use than we ever could without Him.

July 4th

I Samuel 1 vv 12-18

As we shall see in the next chapter, things had become very disorderly at Shiloh. At least in part, this was because the young priests themselves were misbehaving. They had lost their sense of the holiness of God. They did not fear Him. They were not in awe of Him. They did not love Him. They were not devoted to the people, the flock God had entrusted to them. They were indifferent to their needs and treated them as ripe for exploitation. No doubt many of the worshippers were no better than their priests. Eli thinks Hannah was drunk! But she wasn't. She was a humble, faithful servant of God. She prayed to God and God heard her prayer. Hannah's then is the example we need to follow.

July 5th

I Samuel 1 vv 19-23

I heard a story similar to this much nearer home and in much more recent times. About 20 years ago, I should think, there was a woman at Borstal Church who had been unable to conceive and had been praying for a child. Like Eli in this story, an archdeacon visiting from Africa, told her that her prayers had been answered and she would next year have a child, which she did. I don't know why sometimes God answers our prayers as we would like, giving us what we ask for, and sometimes doesn't. I don't know whether this woman at Borstal was the beneficiary of a miracle or if it happened by ordinary means or if it was just what some people would call a coincidence. I have heard Christians say that there seem to be a lot off happy coincidences when you start praying. I am sure, however, that, if we offer our lives and all our concerns to God in prayer, there is peace and joy and love. There is fulfilment.

July 6th

I Samuel 1 vv 24-28

In those days, the child would have been getting on for three when he was weaned. (There was no baby food and you couldn't trust the drinking water.) It still seems very young for him to leave home and to be entrusted to the care of a relative stranger – especially an old man. Maybe there were women in the shrine who would have cared for the child. Hannah does keep in touch with at least the yearly visit and gift of a coat.

I have lent him to the LORD has been a theme for Christian mothers whose sons have entered the ministry. It is a wonderful calling and families may feel privileged that God has called one of their own to serve Him in this special way. On the other hand, it means your son giving up on living a “normal” life. He might not earn as much money as he could have done or own his own house. He might be called to serve God far from home. In some churches or particular callings, he'll never be able to marry and give you grandchildren. So it can seem to be something of a sacrifice as well as a blessing if your son is chosen to be a priest or minister. There are moves to make ordained ministry more like a “normal” job, but, personally, I think that these are a mistake. It is special to be a priest. What do you think?

July 7th

I Samuel 2 vv 1-11

Hannah's song is very like Mary's song – the Magnificat. God is sovereign. God is just. The arrogant, powerful and rich must expect to be punished for their indifference to the poor. The poor can trust what former cricketer Bishop David Sheppard called *God's Bias to the Poor*. Wrongs will be righted. Evil will be punished. The victims of violence, oppression and hardship will be vindicated.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!

Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his Name!

Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age to same;
his holy Name--the Lord, the Mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!

Powers and dominions lay their glory by.
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!

Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and for evermore!

A little anecdote about the author of these words – Timothy Dudley-Smith. He was very surprised to read his obituary notice in the *Times* about thirty years ago. I understand he is still alive.

July 8th

I Samuel 2 vv 12-17

The priesthood in Israel was hereditary. Eli's two sons were very bad priests. They took what they could get from the people they were supposed to care for. Ministers of religion are in a strong position. My freehold makes it hard to sack me. My bible scholarship makes it hard to argue religion with me. It is I who dispense the sacraments & pronounce the absolution and blessing. I deal with vulnerable people and people in the most difficult periods in their lives. Much of what I'm involved in is confidential. As a minister of the Established Church, I have some legal authority. It isn't surprising that some clergy abuse their position, but all the more terrible when you consider their very high calling. We need your prayers! And, I'm sorry to say, your vigilance in case things do go very wrong.

July 9th (Collect Whitsunday)

I Samuel 2 vv 18-21

We're planning a family meal today. It's good for families to get together. Human love is important. The birth of a child is a joy. I'm writing this just after the birth of the young royal prince. As Christians, we are the family of God. As on every Sunday, we, the Christian family, share our family meal together, the one Jesus told us to have. Whitsun is often thought of as the Church's birthday. God's gift of the Holy Spirit empowers us to get going and do the work Jesus gave us to do. It is something we do together as a family and something we do alone as individuals. But, when you hear someone say, you can be a Christian without going to Church, just remind them, *It is not good for the man to be alone.*

GOD, who as at this time didst teach the hearts of thy faithful people, by the sending to them the light of thy Holy Spirit; Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgement in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. *Amen.*

July 10th

I Samuel 2 vv 22-26

Honour thy father and thy mother is one of the Ten Commandments. Hophni and Phinehas, even though they were grown up and working, ought to have respected their father. Given their age and upbringing, they ought to have known themselves the difference between right and wrong. Eli must have been very sad when his sons let him down so badly. They behaved badly towards God and towards the people they were supposed to look after. But what was Eli supposed to do about it? What was his responsibility? What could he have done now they were old enough to get away with defying him? What's the use of having authority if you're not respected? And what can you do about it? Obviously your own conduct has to be such as deserves respect, but then what, if you still don't receive it? In some cases punishment might be possible and the best way forward. But punishment isn't always possible and, when it is, it doesn't always have the effect of making the transgressor a better person. Sometimes it has the reverse effect. No wonder we're told to pray for those in authority and to give respect where it is due. (Romans 13, I Timothy 2).

July 11th (Collect S Barnabas)

I Samuel 2 vv 27-36

Barnabas was of the tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe, but how different from Phinehas and Hophni. He's been called the son of consolation. We first meet him selling his land and entrusting the money to the Jerusalem Church where Christians held all things in common, cared for the poor, met daily for worship and the breaking of bread and were attentive to the apostles' teaching and, so doing, experienced rapid church growth. It was Barnabas who brought Paul into fellowship with the other apostles and accompanied him very effectively as a missionary. And so we pray for our clergy and for all Christians that we may receive and use God's gifts – our time, our talents, our money, our opportunities, our all – in the right way.

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

July 12th

I Samuel 3 vv 1-10

This is a story parents are wary of telling to young children. Children quite easily imagine things which send them running terrified into their parents' rooms at night. In this case, however, God was calling Samuel. God is sovereign and He acts in the way which pleases Him. There was a famine of the Word of God in those godless days, no vision. Could that be said of our world today? There are plenty of churches where the Word is preached and proclaimed but is it heard? Where is the vision? God might surprise us by speaking to us in ways we don't expect. Here He uses the child Samuel to proclaim the Word. Samuel becomes a prophet, God's messenger. Another warning that we should not think that we can confine God to working through the bureaucratic procedures of the Church. We can't expect God to abide by our rules. Samuel needs to learn to recognise God's call. Don't we all? God speaks to us through Scripture, through friends and family, through nature, in prayer, through the things that happen to us in our lives. We need to learn to recognise His Voice. It is the Voice of Jesus, Who is the Word of God. So we know that God's Word is a word of love. That's a very good start in discerning what God is saying.

July 14th

I Samuel 3 vv 11-21

The word of love in this case is actually a word of judgment. Evil has to be dealt with. It cannot be past over. Evil is dealt with on the Cross and therefore can be forgiven. Justice and mercy are two sides of the coin which is love. Evil does, however, have to be confronted and punished if there is no forgiveness through repentance and faith.

What a task for the infant Samuel to deliver this dreadful message, but God doesn't call us to do what we can't do. God gives us the grace to fulfil His will for our lives however hard the task might be.

This hymn was chosen at one of our *Songs of Praise* evenings.

1 Hushed was the evening hymn,
the temple courts were dark,
the lamp was burning dim
before the sacred ark,
when suddenly a voice divine
rang through the silence of the shrine.

each whisper of thy word;
like him to answer at thy call,
and to obey thee first of all.

2 The old man, meek and mild,
the priest of Israel, slept;
his watch, the temple-child,
the little Levite, kept;
and what from Eli's sense was sealed,
the Lord to Hannah's son revealed.

4 O give me Samuel's heart!
A lowly heart that waits
where in thy house thou art,
or watches at thy gates
by day and night, a heart that still
moves at the breathing of thy will.

3 O give me Samuel's ear!
The open ear, O Lord,
alive and quick to hear

5 O give me Samuel's mind!
A sweet, unmuttering faith,
obedient and resigned
to thee in life and death,
that I may read with childlike eyes
truths that are hidden from the wise.

July 15th

I Samuel 4 vv 1-9

If we walk with the LORD, it doesn't necessarily follow that we get what we would want for ourselves. It does follow, however, that, if we walk with the LORD, He is with us in whatever we have to confront and our lives are fulfilled as we play our part in achieving His Will for the world. The Israelites were correct in recognising that disaster had befallen them because they no longer had God with them (they having forsaken Him). They got the remedy wrong, however. Having the outward trappings of religion (in this case the Ark) was useless so long as their hearts weren't right with God. *God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.*

July 16th (Collect Trinity Sunday)

I Samuel 4 vv 10-22

The order in which the messenger enumerates the calamities which have befallen Israel is their order of seriousness in the mind of the venerable priest Eli: the army, his own family, the Ark, all lost. The horror of it all brings on Phinehas' wife's labour. She dies in childbirth, naming the infant *The Glory has Departed* – Ichabod. Everything has gone wrong because the people of Israel have not kept faith with God. What is needed is repentance. God doesn't promise His people trouble free lives, but He does promise to be with us and to bring us through. The victory is ours because God has raised Jesus from the dead. The Trinity isn't a mathematical puzzle for us to solve. It is the mystery of divine love for us to adore.

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

July 17th

I Samuel 5 vv 1-5

Dagon was a fish god. The Philistines were sea people, trading all across the Mediterranean from Carthage in North Africa to the Western coasts of what we now call Israel, Lebanon & Syria. Despite the modern connotations of the word, the Philistines were a highly civilised people with well-developed arts and crafts. They were prosperous and powerful, but they were also pagans. Their god Dagon was a mere idol, vanity, nothing. He didn't exist except in their imaginations. Their god was the work of their own hands. Instead of worshipping the One Who created us and everything else that exists, the peoples of the world have worshipped the things which He has created. In effect, many of us worship ourselves, taking such pride in our human achievements that we fail to see our need of God and fall flat on our faces.

Psalm 115. NOT unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy Name give the praise : for thy loving mercy and for thy truth's sake. Wherefore shall the heathen say : Where is now their God? As for our God, he is in heaven : he hath done whatsoever pleased him. Their idols are silver and gold : even the work of men's hands. They have mouths, and speak not : eyes have they, and see not. They have ears, and hear not : noses have they, and smell not. They have hands, and handle not; feet have they, and walk not : neither speak they through their throat. They that make them are like unto them ; and so are all such as put their trust in them.

July 18th

I Samuel 5 vv 6-12

Be careful how you handle holy things. In my last church, we had a nave altar down in the body of the church, where the people sit, but the church also doubled as a hall which was sometimes used for jumble sales. A lot of people felt very uncomfortable if they found the altar being used as a stall. I find it very hard to throw old bibles or prayer books in the trash. It somehow seems worse if people swear or indulge in malicious gossip in church than if they do so anywhere else. Yet we don't quite expect God to strike us down with plague if we do these things. It could be superstitious to reverence objects or books or places, even idolatrous. During the Blitz, there were priests who bravely entered burning churches to rescue the reserved Sacrament (the bread & wine consecrated for Holy Communion). They were brave, but were they wise? My own view is that a sense that some places (church buildings, places of pilgrimage, etc.), that some times (Sundays & other holy days, my daily prayer time), and some objects (such as the consecrated Bread & Wine, bibles & prayer books, church furnishings) are specially holy opens up our minds to the reality of holiness and encourages us to consecrate the whole of our lives, to recognise the holiness in everything which God has created. If I mustn't gossip in church, I mustn't gossip anywhere. If I treat bibles with respect, it is because the Word of God is to be revered and obeyed. If God and family and friends and recreation take priority on Sundays, I'm reminded that on weekdays too work isn't the most important thing. Ideally, we'd treat everything and everyday as holy, but if we don't make a distinction between the holy and the ordinary, the danger is that we treat everything as ordinary.

July 19th

I Samuel 6 vv 1-9

Milk cows wouldn't voluntarily leave their calves. So the Philistines regard it as a sign that God is at work that they do leave their calves on this occasion and take the Ark back towards Israel. I'm interested that they raise the possibility that these things could have happened by chance. Can there be chance in a world governed by the omnipotent, omniscient God? Doesn't everything happen in accordance with His Will? Is creation free to act apart from God? These questions also have a bearing on our understanding of human free will.

July 20th

I Samuel 6 vv 10-12

If you have a quantity of any radioactive element, a scientist could tell you the half life. The half life is the time it takes for half the nuclei of the atoms in the sample to decay into something else. He can tell you exactly how long this will be. What he cannot tell you is which of the atomic nuclei will decay in this time. It is possible to know how many nuclei will decay in this time, but not which ones. They are all identical. Our categories of chance and necessity are inadequate for Quantum Physics. There is something going on here which is beyond our conception. I suggest that something similar is going on in Theology. What is happening is beyond our conception. The Philistines chose of their own free will to send back the Ark and to adopt this method of doing so. Whatever goes on in cows' brains when they apparently make decisions went on in the brains of these cows. Creation was free. And yet God's purposes were accomplished. The Ark was returned. *And the kine took the straight way to the way of Bethshemesh, and went along the highway, lowing as they went, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left; and the lords of the Philistines went after them unto the border of Bethshemesh.*

July 21st

I Samuel 6 vv 13-21

So everybody rejoices. The Philistines have relieved themselves of the Ark which had proved too hot to handle. The people of Bethshemesh were delighted to have it back. Only it isn't entirely a happy ending. The men of Bethshemesh don't treat the Ark with the respect it deserves and they too suffer a great plague. I told you that we'd find that God Himself is portrayed as doing things we find hard to accept. Some people just write off these difficult Scriptures as the product of uncivilised times and as having no relevance to us today. I'm very uncomfortable with that. It makes us judges of the Word rather than accepting the Word's judgment on us. Are we free just to excise any part of the Bible or element of Christian teaching we don't agree with? Who gave us the authority to judge the Bible or our fellow Christians who have treasured this Word down through the millennia? We do have to read these passages in the light of Jesus, but I don't think we can just discount them. Incidentally *Bethshemesh* means *house of the sun* and today is a month since the longest day!

July 22nd

I Samuel 7 vv 1&2

I was ordained deacon on 22nd June 1980. Deacon means servant and traditionally the office of a deacon was to care for the welfare of parishioners, especially the poor and the sick, and to assist the priest in conducting the services. When a deacon is ordained priest, he doesn't cease to be a deacon. He continues to be a servant caring for the welfare of all parishioners (not just those who go to church). When we think about the role of clergy and their deployment – which towns and villages should get a vicar, which should share clergy, which might also need a curate – we tend to think of things like pastoral visiting, conducting christenings, weddings and funerals, Sunday services, and maybe community involvement in such things as schools and youth clubs and old people's lunches, and support for charities, as what the clergy are for and therefore where they should be deployed. But we can be missing an essential point here. The men of Kirjath-jearim consecrated Eleazar to keep the ark of God. The focus of Christian ministry is God. We owe Him our daily prayers and the weekly celebration of the Eucharist. First and foremost, we minister to God. This beating heart of worship at the centre of any community is the great gift which the Church has to offer. It is this life of prayer and Holy Communion and devotional bible reading which is the foundation of our work in pastoral care, evangelism and community involvement. We mustn't lose sight of the primary importance of ministering to God in worship in these days of busyness, hyperactivity, statistics and accountability. *Be still and know that I am God.*

July 23rd (Collect for Trinity 1)

I Samuel 7 vv 4-17

Psalm 99 on our front cover refers to Samuel's reputation as one who prayed. This passage is the account of one such occasion where Samuel's intercession was highly important. The people have returned at last to the LORD and now they can begin again.

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

July 24th (Collect Nativity of S John the Baptist) I Samuel 8 vv 1-5

It is ironic that Samuel was let down by his sons, considering that his early life was so much moulded by the unworthiness of Eli's sons.

You're in a bad way when the rulers of your country are incompetent, self-serving and corrupt. Hence I Timothy 2¹ *I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; ² For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.*

The giving of thanks and the supplications seem to elide which is as it should be. Thanks and prayer go together. Integrity in public life.

John contended for it and it brought him a martyr's death. It is pretty important, however.

The Israelites, however, made the mistake of wanting to be like the nations. They thought that the answer to their problems was to become like the rest of the world. The true answer, however, was to be faithful to their calling as the people of God. God is our King and it is only by living by His Law that we can expect truly to live.

Ultimately, the sins of Joel and Abiah would lead through Saul to David and to *great David's greater Son*, for Whom John would prepare the way. It was of their own free will that Joel and Abiah *turned aside after lucre, and took bribes, and perverted judgment*, but, in the Providence of God, they played a part in the coming of Jesus.

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

July 25th (S James) I Samuel 8 vv 6-9

God is the King of Israel. In wanting a human king, the people were rejecting God. Good rulers know that they rule under God. Human rulers are God's viceroys, answerable to God and answerable to the people for whom God has made them responsible. Samuel felt that they were rejecting him. They were certainly rejecting his sons, which raises the question, ought we to reject our rulers if they are wicked or even useless? In democracies, it is written in that we have the right to change our government when there is an election. Probably, democracy is the least worst form of government. However, if we are under some kind of a tyranny can rebellion be justified? The classic Christian (and especially Anglican) answer is that it is not. In principle, *the powers that be are ordained of God*. In practice, civil war and subsequent anarchy and a possible future tyranny usually work out as worse than the devil you knew. It also has to be asked, however, whether, if when we reject those God has given us as leaders in the Church and state, we are rejecting God. It is very dangerous if a vicar or a king has delusions that he has the authority of God to do whatever he pleases. On the other hand, it is also dangerous to treat our leaders as if they had no authority from God, especially when they themselves are relying on Sacrament, Scripture and prayer. **GRANT**, O merciful God, that as thine holy Apostle Saint James, leaving his father and all that he had, without delay was obedient unto the calling of thy Son Jesus Christ, and followed him; so we, forsaking all worldly and carnal affections, may be evermore ready to follow thy holy commandments; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*.

26th July

I Samuel 8 vv 10-18

Our rulers have the right to tax us. They use the money raised to pay for things we all want like schools and hospitals. They use the money for things some of us are less clear about wanting, like nuclear weapons and motorways. They use the money to pay themselves well, to build palaces and to ride in chauffeur driven cars. They can conscript us to fight, maybe or maybe not allowing for conscientious objectors, maybe in wars we all feel we have to win like the world wars, maybe getting involved with conflicts which some of us think are none of our business. Are there limits to power or do rulers have carte blanche to do as they think best? The limits are set by God and (in democracies) the people.

27th July

I Samuel 8 vv 19-22

There is an echo of all this in the story of our Lord's Passion. *But they cried out, Away with him, away with him, crucify him. Pilate saith unto them, Shall I crucify your King? The chief priests answered, We have no king but Caesar.* Again, the people of God reject their King. Pontius Pilate will insist on the superscription on the Cross *The King of the Jews* in three languages, but His own know Him not. This isn't a reason for us gentile Christians to feel superior to the Jews. It is a reminder to ask ourselves whether in wishing to conform to the world we are in fact rejecting our King. Remember, Satan told Jesus that He could have all the power and wealth in the world if He would only worship the devil. Jesus answered, *It is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.* At the recent Confirmation at Cliffe, Bishop Simon reminded us that there is a very strong herd instinct in humans. We want to fit in, to conform. We think it's the best way to get on in life. But God has called us as individuals by name. He has called us to be different.

28th July

I Samuel 9 vv 1-10

Samuel seems to be living quietly in semi-retirement. This little story of the missing asses gives us a small insight into what life was like in Israel getting on for 3,000 years ago. God will use this every day incident to show Saul what his path in life will be. It may well be that God speaks to us as we go about our ordinary every day lives. Sometimes we ask guidance in prayer. Sometimes He speaks to us through other people or circumstances. Sometimes He speaks to us directly. We ought always to be alert to God's Presence in everything that we do.

29th July (Collect S Peter)

I Samuel 9 vv 11-14

Samuel is functioning as a priest as well as a prophet. Most people wouldn't have eaten much meat in those days. The flocks and herds were needed for milk and wool. There was always a religious element in slaughtering an animal. The blood was poured out on the ground, as a sign of returning the life to God. Religious festivals were the main times when the whole community would come together. They would share the sacrifice in a feast. So, this was a good time in every way for

the people in this place. They are blessed by the presence of the holy man. They are preparing to worship the LORD. They'll be sharing an excellent meal together. They don't know it yet, but this time God will take the opportunity to call Saul as He will later call Peter and so many others to special roles in the service of His people.

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

30th July (Collect Trinity 2)

I Samuel 9 vv 15-24

So Samuel had been told by God to expect the man who would become the first King of Israel and Samuel had prepared to honour him and so it all came to pass. Looking ahead, although Saul started off extremely well, he would become a terrible disappointment. We depend on God's grace. Not only to begin, but also to continue in fulfilling His purposes in our lives. **O LORD**, who never failest to help and govern them who thou dost bring up in thy steadfast fear and love; Keep us, we beseech thee, under the protection of thy good providence, and make us to have a perpetual fear and love of thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

31st July

I Samuel 9 v25 – 10 v8

Saul was specially honoured at the feast and given a strong hint of his special calling. Now it is all made completely clear. He will be King of Israel. Samuel anoints Saul. Kings and priests were anointed. This is the meaning of Messiah, the anointed one. Jesus is the quintessential King and the quintessential priest. The anointing oil signifies the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit is given to Jesus *not by measure*. The Spirit abides on Him. He bestows His Spirit on all those who believe in Him and we are kings and priests, all of us Christians, not through our own merits, but by His merits alone. Saul receives bread and wine. Meant or not (probably not), I know what that reminds me of. The prophesying would be something like what is called *speaking in tongues* in the New Testament. It is a sign of the gift of the Spirit. At this point, prophesying in this manner is a blessing for Saul, but later, when he has turned against God, it will be an embarrassment and a humiliation. God has supplied Saul with the gifts he needs. Now Saul has to use them rightly.

1st August

I Samuel 10 vv 9-16

Nothing public happens yet. Saul has been prepared by God and called and signs have demonstrated to him that he is authentically chosen. This is important, that we prayerfully seek from God guidance and confirmation regarding what He wants us to do with our lives. As Christians, we also seek to discern what God is calling other people to do and to support them in their vocation. Nevertheless, the time is not yet. Sometimes we have to be patient – not something I find easy – and wait on the LORD. Having a king is controversial in Israel and it has to be done right.

Collect Trinity 3: **O LORD**, we beseech thee mercifully to hear us; and grant that we, to whom thou hast given an hearty desire to pray, may by thy mighty aid be defended and comforted in all dangers and adversities; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

2nd August

I Samuel 10 vv 17-27

Samuel reminds the massed Israelites that they have done wrong in demanding a king like all the nations. They ought to have recognised their distinctive status and trusted in God. This should give us pause for thought when we turn to business or political models of governance for the Church. As the established Church, the C of E only too easily models itself on parliament or local authorities or the civil service. Given that successful business is much more respected in our world than religion, it is also easy to see why we should be tempted to adopt business methods in the way the Church operates. Now I am not saying that we cannot learn from the world. As in politics, we have to resolve differences and make decisions responsibly. As in the civil service and business, we have to run our affairs efficiently, competently and honestly. We also have to live in the world where certain ways of doing things are required by law. Nevertheless, we must never lose sight of our identity as the people of God, our commission to do His work in the world and our confidence that He supplies all the resources we need.

Collect Trinity 4: **O GOD**, the protector of all that trust in thee, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy; Increase and multiply upon us thy mercy; that, thou being our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we finally lose not the things eternal: Grant this, O heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake our Lord. *Amen.*

3rd August

I Samuel 11 vv 1-15

Of course, Saul wasn't crowned in the Temple like Elizabeth II was crowned in Westminster Abbey. It hadn't been built yet. Neither did he move straight into a palace as soon as he became king. There was no royal palace. There was no government or parliament to lead, no courtiers, ministers, civil service or standing army to carry out his instructions. I imagine, he went home and carried on much as before immediately after the king-making ceremony at Mizpeh. It was the crisis created by the brutality of the Ammonites which gave Saul the occasion to establish his authority. Note that Saul started off humble and generous to his opponents. Had he continued like that, things would have worked out very differently for him.

4th August (Trinity 7)

I Samuel 12 vv 1-5

It was Enoch Powell who said that every political career ends in failure. That is usually because even the greatest politicians are defeated by events which they can't control or because they simply won't retire when they grow old and past their best. It is also true, however, that we are an ungrateful lot. We blame our politicians for everything that goes wrong. We seldom give them the credit when things go right. Have you noticed how quickly politicians age? There is tremendous pressure on them and on their families. I often say *A Prayer for the High Court of Parliament, to be read during their Session*.

MOST gracious God, we humbly beseech thee, as for this Kingdom in general, so especially for the High Court of Parliament, under our most religious and gracious Queen at this time assembled: That thou wouldest be pleased to direct and prosper all their consultations, to the advancement of thy glory, the good of thy Church, the safety, honour, and welfare of our Sovereign and her Dominions; that all things may be so ordered and settled by their endeavours, upon the best and surest foundations, that peace and happiness, truth and justice, religion and piety, may be established among us for all generations. These and all other necessaries, for them, for us, and thy whole Church, we humbly beg in the Name and Mediation of Jesus Christ, our most blessed Lord and Saviour. *Amen*.

It's worth reflecting on all its petitions, but what about *all other necessaries, for them*? What does that mean? Surely it refers to their personal lives and everything about them, not just their role as politicians. If we pray for their personal well-being (even the ones we don't agree with) that frames our attitude to them and the way we treat them.

5th August

I Samuel 12 vv 6-15

It's a familiar sermon that Samuel preaches. Everything the Israelites had is the gift of God. God is always faithful, but, time & again, the people of God have proved faithless and thereby brought disaster on themselves. Whenever they have returned to the LORD, however, the ever faithful God has delivered them from their self-inflicted troubles. Again, we don't read this and think how much better we are than they were. We examine ourselves as to whether we are being faithless towards God. Where we are unfaithful to Him, we too need to repent. Collect Trinity 7 **LORD** of all power and might, who art the author and giver of all good things; Graft in our hearts the love of thy Name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of thy great mercy keep us in the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

6th August

I Samuel 12 vv 16-25

This is very difficult. The people have sinned in asking for a king. Yet God has given them a king. There is a compromise here. The people of God have, to an extent, become like the nations in having a king to rule over them. They have been warned that he is likely to exploit them. They have given up some of their freedom under God for what they imagine is the security of placing themselves under the protection of a strong man. In principle, they have rejected God as their king. Yet God has acquiesced in their demand for a king and indeed has given them a king – a man whom God has chosen Himself. There is a terrible storm to demonstrate the enormity of what they have done. Yet Samuel tells them it will work out if they will only walk with the LORD and promises to continue his ministry of prayer for them. We Christians have to live in the world and find a path whereby we can do so without compromising our faith, but, where Christians do compromise with the world we have to live in, we still must keep close to God in prayer and try to keep His commandments. I'm thinking, for example, that we cannot help sometimes but to shop for goods produced by badly treated workers or as a result of cruelty to animals or environmental degradation. We may have to work for companies which don't observe the highest ethical standards. We might have to fight in wars which we cannot be sure are just. See next page for prayer.

Collect Trinity 5 **G RANT**, O Lord, we beseech thee, that the course of this world may be so peaceably ordered by thy governance, that thy Church may joyfully serve thee in all godly quietness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

7th August

I Samuel 13 vv 1-7

The Philistines were a sea people living in five cities on the western seaboard of the land we call Israel. The Israelites were basically farmers. Philistine technology was more advanced than Israelite, notably in that they had iron, whereas the Israelites were still in the Bronze Age. At this time, the Philistines dominated and considered themselves overlords. Saul was a great warrior and so was his son Jonathan. So they launched an attack on the Philistines. Then the Israelites were appalled at the magnitude of the Philistine response. What do we learn from this? To be brave and stand up for the right even against the powerful or to be cautious and careful not to bite off more than we can chew? With God on our side, we can achieve a great deal more than we might think. There's no need to be discouraged because we're small in number or not very powerful people when we are doing God's work. He doesn't, however, guarantee miracles. There is place for prudence. We have to ask Him for wisdom in order to know how to proceed.

8th August

I Samuel 13 vv 8-23

It's easy to feel sorry for Saul. He can't commence the fight back until sacrifice has been offered. He needs Samuel to do that. Kings in ancient Israel were not priests. There has to be a division of powers. One man can't hold all the cards. Kings are subject to God. Prophets are God's messengers. In the OT, priests mediate between God and man. Of course, Jesus is all three – prophet, priest and king – and Christians, as parts of His Body the Church – share His Nature, but it is only so far as we are in Christ that we can fulfil these roles as we should. Saul ought not to have offered the sacrifice and he is blameworthy because he did. The Philistines take advantage of weak and divided leadership of the people of God and ransack the land. Collect Trinity 7 **LORD** of all power and might, who art the author and giver of all good things; Graft in our hearts the love of thy Name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of thy great mercy keep us in the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

9th August

I Samuel 14 vv 1-10

Jonathan, without telling Saul, takes his armour bearer to attack the Philistines once more. Note that the people left with Saul include a priest wearing the Ephod. If you pay attention to the names, you will see that this priest was the great grandson of Eli. The priesthood was hereditary. The ephod was a garment with pockets for the urim and thummim, which were used in order to ascertain the will of God. It is not enough to be a brave and smart soldier or to rely entirely on any of our human talents; we must rely on God to be with us, to strengthen us and to guide us.

Collect for Trinity 6 **O GOD**, who hast prepared for them that love thee such good things as pass man's understanding; Pour into our hearts such love toward thee, that we, loving thee above all things, may obtain thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

10th August

I Samuel 14 vv 11-23

Jonathan was very brave. He and his armour bearer were prepared to risk their lives in the cause and they were very successful. Today is St Laurence's Day. Laurence was also a brave man. He refused to hand over the Church's treasure to the Roman emperor, giving the money to the poor and telling the Roman prefect that the poor were the Church's true treasure. For this his life was taken from him. We can respect Jonathan and Laurence. In this world of sin, we probably need men of both types, but Laurence is nearer to the values of the Kingdom of God than Jonathan. Both churches at Upper Halling have been dedicated to Laurence. From him, we learn the true worth of human beings, valuing everybody, perhaps especially the poor. We learn what riches are for, the welfare of one another. We learn to be faithful even to death.

1 Take my life and let it be
consecrated, Lord, to thee.
Take my moments and my days;
let them flow in endless praise,
let them flow in endless praise.

2 Take my hands and let them move
at the impulse of thy love.
Take my feet and let them be

swift and beautiful for thee,
swift and beautiful for thee.

3 Take my voice and let me sing
always, only, for my King.
Take my lips and let them be
filled with messages from thee,
filled with messages from thee.

4 Take my silver and my gold;
not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect and use
every power as thou shalt choose,
every power as thou shalt choose.

5 Take my will and make it thine;
it shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart it is thine own;

it shall be thy royal throne,
it shall be thy royal throne.

6 Take my love; my Lord, I pour
at thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be
ever, only, all for thee,
ever, only, all for thee.

11th August (Trinity 8)

I Samuel 14 vv 24-35

What went wrong with Saul? He started off as a very humble young man, who was generous even to his enemies. As the story advances, however, he seems to lose the ability to sustain relationships. His relationship with God becomes very rocky. He no longer trusts or treats well other people, but many of them seem to remain loyal to him. If only he could have trusted them, if only he could have trusted God, his life might have been so much happier. On this occasion, he appears to have thought it would please God if the people fasted and ordered them to do so, but, because they were fasting, they were too faint to fight the Philistines. Saul was sincere, but he got it wrong. Jonathan disobeyed his father, displaying what some would call robust common sense. Then they all started slaughtering, cooking and eating the captured Philistine livestock, but they weren't slaughtering it properly, cutting the throat and pouring out the blood to God. So Saul took over the slaughtering process.

O GOD, whose never-failing providence ordereth all things both in heaven and earth; We humbly beseech thee to put away from us all hurtful things, and to give us those things which be profitable for us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

12th August

I Samuel 14 vv 36-46

I said we'd come to some things which are hard to understand. Because, they had not all kept Saul's ill-advised vow to fast, God would not give him guidance about what to do next in fighting the Philistines. We are warned elsewhere about making rash vows to God and not keeping the vows we make. When Saul finds out that Jonathan is the culprit, he is prepared to sacrifice his own son, but the people don't allow it. Saul has become foolish and cruel and is losing his authority.

13th August

I Samuel 14 vv 47-52

This is a summary of Saul's achievements. He does manage to establish peace and prosperity. To that extent, it has been a good thing to have a king. Much of the Books of Samuel & Kings are about power and authority. We obviously need law and order. We need people to establish and enforce the law, people to take charge whether of military operations, the economy or welfare. Any human society needs leadership. But, when we entrust anyone with power, we take a big risk. It may well be that the right people don't want to exercise power and the wrong people do. The road to power might be the use of military force in a dictatorship, deceiving the voters in a democracy or simply acquiring power from a position of existing wealth and privilege. Even if good people come to power by honourable means, power itself corrupts. So how do we balance the need for authority with the danger of entrusting fallible human beings with its exercise? As I say, the Bible considers these questions at length. So did Plato and the Greeks and other ancient civilizations. We still haven't resolved these issues today. The Bible requires that those with power acknowledge that their power comes from God so that, like Him, they are just and merciful. Plato etc. call on us to exercise our human reason (though, while some of his and other philosophers' conclusions are eminently reasonable, some are horrific). In the modern world, we have recourse to democracy. Rulers are ultimately accountable to the people and therefore their power to do wrong is curbed. But where are the lines between democracy and populism and mob rule? You only have to watch film of Hitler's Nuremberg rallies to see how the majority can itself go badly wrong.

We beseech thee also to save and defend all Christian Kings, Princes, and Governours; and specially thy Servant *ELIZABETH* our Queen; that under her we may be godly and quietly governed: And grant unto her whole Council, and to all that are put in authority under her, that they may truly and impartially administer justice, to the punishment of wickedness and vice, and to the maintenance of thy true religion, and virtue.

14th August

I Samuel 15 vv 1-9

It's all down hill for Saul from here and it isn't easy for us. The Amalekites live on Israel's south-eastern border. They have been at war on and off for centuries, since the Exodus in fact. This history isn't forgotten because the conflicts continue from generation to generation. It is a very good thing that we are now friends with our neighbours in Europe who were formerly our enemies, but it isn't usual. Feuds and hatreds are more often remembered for generations of human history. God tells Saul to wipe out this enemy once and for all. Were the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki justified? Would it be justifiable to use similar weapons today if we were attacked by an overwhelmingly powerful enemy? I ask those questions because it is easy to say that Samuel must have got God wrong if he thought God wanted the Amalekites to be destroyed or even, as some people have mistakenly thought, that the God of the Old Testament isn't the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Unless we can say unequivocally that it is totally unjustifiable to use weapons capable of wiping out whole cities or even nations I don't think we have the right to write off Samuel's words to Saul as representing a stage in the development of religion inferior to our own. If we take this chapter seriously, however, it lays us open to having to question very seriously our own beliefs. If the Amalekites were constantly attacking England, would we drop an atom bomb on them?

15th August

I Samuel 15 vv 10 vv 10&11

As you know, at Evensong the OT lesson is usually followed by the Magnificat, the song of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. 15th August is the day on which many churches celebrate Mary. When we have these difficult OT lessons at Evensong, it sometimes helps me join in the words of Mary, for whom these words of Scripture were the Word of God when she carried in her womb the One Who is the Word of God made flesh. **MY** soul doth magnify the Lord : and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded : the lowliness of his handmaiden. For behold, from henceforth : all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath magnified me : and holy is his Name. And his mercy is on them that fear him : throughout all generations. He hath showed strength with his arm : he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat : and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things : and the rich he hath sent empty away. He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel : as he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed, for ever.

16th August

I Samuel 15 vv 12-23

To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams is congenial to us. We don't practise animal sacrifice. We do recognise that we ought to obey God and we're comfortable with a number of Scriptures which tell us so. But to obey in this case was to carry out a genocide of the Amalekites. Because Saul failed to kill all the animals and saved the Amalekite king alive, he is told that God has rejected him from being King of Israel. I suppose it wasn't for purely humanitarian reasons that Saul saved Agag. He had killed many other Amalekites without compunction. Was it because Agag was a fellow king that he was spared, while the commoners were killed? Did they ransom important prisoners in those days? Did Saul spare Agag initially in order to humiliate and torture him? Saving the livestock could be seen as greed, making a profit out of warfare. I can't really get comfortable with this Scripture, but neither can I presume to deny it. I can only try to read it in the Light of Christ.

17th August

I Samuel 15 vv 24-31

A leader needs credibility with those he is leading. Why do people follow a particular individual? It may be fear of punishment if they don't or hope of reward if they do, but it's more than that. It's said that we sort ourselves out into leaders and followers as teenagers and remain in those roles all our lives. Human beings do naturally operate in groups: families; teams, gangs, tribes; nations. Groups need leaders. Also, it is said, that there are some, who from their teenage years, don't fit into the hierarchy. They are the boffins, the jokers, the dissidents. We need them too. Group think needs to be questioned! Ministers of religion are leaders in their communities and they are dissidents, people who don't form part of the herd. Different ministers are more one than the other. Different situations call, on the one hand, for clear leadership or, on the other, a willingness to question the direction of travel.

Anyway, Saul's credibility as a king depends on Samuel's backing. He is not only the prophet, God's messenger, he is also the one the people respect. So Saul needs Samuel's backing. In the end he gets it because, if the government falls, there will be anarchy which is so often even worse than tyranny.

18th August (Trinity 9)

I Samuel 15 vv 32-35

One of my silly anecdotes is about when I was in a pub in Ramsgate and somebody asked me if the clergy were allowed to drink alcohol. I said that we were allowed to do everything the laity can do except bear arms. Then I noticed that I was wearing a short-sleeved shirt. Agag was a very bad man. A lot of people would say that he deserved to die. If the death sentence was just, Samuel was only carrying it out. [I'm not a believer in the death penalty in the modern world. There are all kinds of reasons for being against it: It makes us as bad as the murderer. It denies him the chance to repent and live a worthwhile life. Mistakes cannot be corrected!] I can't, however, imagine Jesus doing this. So how can it be right for a holy man to do it? And, aren't all Christians (not just the clergy) called to be holy men and women? Which is why clergy are allowed to everything that every Christian is allowed to do. Note that Samuel still mourns Saul, despite everything. Much of Saul's wrong-doing stems from his belief that nobody loves him, but he is mistaken about that. People do love him.

19th August

I Samuel 16 vv 1-13

For man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.

Instagram enables people to send photographs (including selfies) to one another very quickly. It appears that the result has been that people stage scenes for Instagram, sometimes with considerable trouble and expense, and that people despair because they and their lives don't look as good on Instagram as do other people's. Instagram is new, but the phenomenon of judging by appearance is as old as the hills, as is people worrying excessively about what they look like. One of the consequences of judging others is that we undermine our own self-confidence. How are other people judging us? How do I judge myself? Yet the wisdom to deal with this is equally ancient. We know that God doesn't judge by appearances. He's more concerned about our character than our unruly hair, wrinkles or spare tyre. What God thinks of us is what really matters. Surely, we should try to think of other people in the way that God regards them. Their true value is in their goodness of heart not in their good looks. Moreover, God loves us as we are. He is merciful towards our failings, our moral lapses as well as our cellulite. It follows that we should judge other people in the same

way, which is amazingly liberating. We don't have to impress. We are what we are.

20th August

I Samuel 16 vv 14-23

This is something else which is hard to understand. The traditional and biblical understanding of God is that He is in absolute control. So, everything which happens is in accordance with His Will. This gives rise to two difficulties. If God is in absolute control, then He is responsible for what appear to us to be bad things as well as good: famine as well as plenty; sickness as well as health; war as well as peace. God created and ultimately controls even Satan. Moreover, if God is in control of everything, how can we be said to have free will? And if we're not free to choose what we do, how can it be fair for Him or anyone else to judge our actions? Some thinkers, therefore, suggest that we should not regard God as omnipotent. They believe that God is somehow limited and therefore is not responsible for the bad things that happen because He cannot do anything about them. But, if that is so, what is the use of prayer, if God can't alter things, and how do we know that the Devil won't win in the end, if he isn't limited by the power of God? It's another one of those things which is beyond our understanding (mine anyway!) where we have to keep two seemingly incompatible ideas in tension. An example is this week's collect. We choose to pray for *the spirit to think and do always such things as be rightful*, but choosing to pray is something we can only do because God gives us *the spirit to think and do always such things as be rightful!* **GRANT** to us, Lord, we beseech thee, the spirit to think and do always such things as be rightful; that we, who cannot do any thing that is good without thee, may by thee be enabled to live according to thy will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

21st August

I Samuel 17 vv 1-19

The story of David and Goliath is one that everyone knows something about, even today. All sorts of contests are described as being like David vs Goliath, especially by those who are hoping that the apparently weaker party will win, whether in sport or politics, war or business, or any other area of human endeavour. What maybe they are missing is that David will win because his cause is right. He is on the LORD's side and the LORD is with him.

22nd August

I Samuel 17 vv 20-31

Goliath is a terrifying adversary. We probably will not be called to fight giants. There may, however, be many situations in which we feel we cannot overcome the odds against us. Maybe the difficulties in our own personal lives are overwhelming. In C21 Britain, we may feel that we cannot see how the Church can overcome the overwhelming indifference of the population and the growing hostility on the part of a powerful minority. Yet, if we are working with God and He with us, there is nothing which is impossible.

He who would valiant
be 'gainst all disaster
Let him in constancy
follow the Master
There's no
discouragement shall
make him once relent
His first avowed intent
to be a pilgrim

Who so beset him
round with dismal
stories
Do but themselves
confound - his
strength the more is
No foes shall stay his
might; though he with
giants fight
He will make good his
right to be a pilgrim

Since, Lord, Thou dost
defend us with Thy
Spirit
We know we at the
end, shall life inherit
Then fancies flee
away! I'll fear not
what men say
I'll labour night and
day to be a pilgrim

23rd August

I Samuel 17 vv 32-39

Saul immediately sees the difficulties. Isn't that often our response when somebody proposes something? I'm afraid it's often mine. We have all experienced bright ideas which have gone wrong. As clergy, we sometimes get to pick up the pieces when someone enthusiastically embarks on an initiative and it goes wrong or he loses interest. So it's easy to see why we hesitate to take up new ideas, especially in circumstances as discouraging as those which confronted Saul. When he did eventually agree to let David try, he then attempted to weigh him down with his armour. He meant well, but it was inappropriate. Saul hadn't really understood the idea which he first rejected and then reluctantly agreed to. We need to have faith in God, to trust other people, to encourage and support them, and to allow them the freedom to try out their ideas in accordance with their own vision.

24th August (S Bartholomew's Day)

I Samuel 17 vv 40-54

God was with David, but David was also using his God-given common sense. He was certainly brave. He needed to be, but he also outthought the giant. Goliath doesn't seem to have realised the potential of artillery. None of the Israelites including Saul had thought outside the box. God gave David brains as well as brawn and bravery and belief in God. God gave Bartholomew grace truly to believe and preach the Word. What gifts and talents has God given us? How ought we to be using them in His service? Loving and receiving the Word are vital aspects of discerning God's gifts in ourselves and in one another and in seeing how He intends that they should be used.

O ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who didst give to thine Apostle Bartholomew grace truly to believe and to preach thy Word; Grant, we beseech thee, unto thy Church, to love that Word which he believed, and both to preach and receive the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

25th August (Trinity 10)

I Samuel 17 v55 – 18 v4

I think it was Rev'd Sidney Smith who said that there are three sexes: men, women and clergy. The Church isn't always good at relating to men. It's partly because, when men went to work and women and children stayed at home all day, women & children were easier to reach. It's also the case, perhaps, that characteristically male sins are more spectacular than characteristically female sins and so more likely to attract ecclesiastical censure. We might also be more protective of women as the *weaker vessel*. In the modern world too, the word masculinity too often attracts the adjective toxic. Little boys are made of slugs and snails and puppy dog's tails. The effect can be to exclude and undermine men. David's masculine virtues are here celebrated as is his very masculine friendship with Jonathan. As with women and children, we ought to be celebrating what men are by God's grace, affirming them and supporting them in developing the gifts God has given them so that they may fulfil their Christian vocation.

LET thy merciful ears, O Lord, be open to the prayers of thy humble servants; and that they may obtain their petitions make them to ask such things as shall please thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

26th August

I Samuel 18 vv 5-16

I went to a very good school, which had high educational values. Learning was an end in itself, worth it for its own sake, not merely something you had to do in order to pass exams and go to university or get a job. Knowledge was something to gain whether or not it had an obvious application. Pure maths and theoretical physics are beautiful in themselves. You don't have to ask what they are for. If you are Christian, whatever you discover about anything is a reason to give glory to the Creator of everything. You can trace the history of scientific advance from Newton through Boyle, Faraday and Clerk-Maxwell as a joyous revelation of the rational mysteries of the world God made.

Also, I can remember my chemistry teacher saying that he hoped we would one day know more about chemistry than he did. And that is surprisingly hard. Saul couldn't do it. He couldn't celebrate David as a better warrior than he was. We may be prepared to train others, to delegate, but it is hard for us to admit that they are good as we are or even better. Even in the Church, it isn't easy to admit that your assistant or replacement does the job as well as you have done it.

27th August

I Samuel 18 vv 17-30

One of the rewards for slaying Goliath was supposed to be to marry Saul's daughter. It seems that David's first choice was the older girl, Merab. As we shall see, Merab's wishes don't seem to have counted for much in her father's calculations. Saul hoped that David would die fighting the Philistines for the privilege of marrying either of his daughters. Michal, the younger, really loved David. He was also very close to her brother Jonathan. So Michal and David get to marry and Saul feels even more isolated. Two of his children are on David's side and, so it appears, is God. Could Saul at any time have come to his senses, returned to God and restored his relationship with his family and the commander of his troops? Or is there a point of no return which he had passed?

28th August

I Samuel 19 vv 1-11

Michal and Jonathan, then, are on David's side. David remains loyal to Saul. Saul is, after all, still the LORD's anointed. We owe our rulers respect even if we don't like them, but my reading of the text is that David still loved Saul despite everything. Saul is ambivalent towards David. You might say that he both loves him and hates him. He both respects and fears him. Saul is a mess. What do you think could have saved him, if anything? Nowadays, we might think that Saul was mentally ill and needed treatment. Possibly, but, if so, his agency, his ability to run his own life, would be taken away from him both by the disease and the treatment. Some Christians would try to exorcise the demon. There is a very rare and limited place for exorcism (which should always be done quietly, lovingly, respectfully and away from the glare of publicity) but too often it is an excuse for showmanship, domination of vulnerable people and downright cruelty which does far more harm than good. The way the story is told in the Bible is that Saul has so rebelled against God that he has rendered his own condition hopeless. When Cain offers an unacceptable offering in Genesis 4, God warns Him, *If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.* Cain goes onto to kill Abel. One sin leads to another and Cain's banishment. And yet, surely God does make it possible so that even the *vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.* I don't think that either Saul or Judas Iscariot was beyond redemption, though I don't know if either of them was redeemed.

29th August

I Samuel 19 vv 12-17

These are good stories – worth telling as stories. They'd make good TV. Not, however, that in David and Michal's household there is an image which they can use to fool Saul's guards. They're not obeying the second commandment. We also read about adultery and murder. These people weren't perfect and ancient Israel, like modern Britain, fell far short of God's Will for His people. Sometimes we idealise the past – the good old days, the purity of the early Church. Sometimes we feel superior to the barbarism of former ages. In fact, every generation has to work out its relationship with God's eternal Law.

30th August

I Samuel 19 vv 18-24

Last time we met Saul prophesying, it was a good thing. Now, after his rejection of God, it has become a humiliation. Saul loses control of himself to the Spirit. The first time it was an experience of ecstasy. Now it is a degradation. This kind of prophecy in the OT is probably the same phenomenon as speaking in tongues and other such experiences in the NT and charismatic or Pentecostal Churches today. Personally, I don't relish the idea of letting go of control even for an ecstatic experience. I have to keep an open mind, however. St Paul says, *Quench not the spirit*. On the other hand, those who do speak in tongues cannot deny all responsibility on the basis that they are helpless when possessed by the spirit. Paul also says, *The spirits of the prophets are subject to prophets*. He teaches that all things in the Church must be done for edification and that the *more excellent way* is love or charity.

31st August

I Samuel 20 vv 1-23

David doesn't give up trying to keep in with Saul. We have this nice story about how he gets Jonathan to sound out Saul in the hope of a reconciliation or, at least to find out why Saul is so determined to kill him. It's taken for granted that there is a feast at the new moon, though nowhere is such a feast commanded in the Law. Quite often, what everybody knows doesn't get written down, which leaves puzzles for historians. It's true of church records as well. Often you can't find what was done about such and such an issue. Because everybody knew at the time, nobody minuted it.

1st September (Trinity 11)

I Samuel 20 vv 24-42

Everybody (even Saul) knows that David has been chosen by God to be the next King of Israel. Only Saul objects. Saul is so mad that he even throws a javelin at his son Jonathan. Jonathan was furious with his father. Jonathan and David really loved one another as friends. Jonathan accepts that David, not he, will succeed Saul and David undertakes to look after Jonathan's family.

O GOD, who declarest thy almighty power most chiefly in shewing mercy and pity; Mercifully grant unto us such a measure of thy grace, that we, running the way of thy commandments, may obtain thy gracious promises, and be made partakers of thy heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*.

September 2nd

I Samuel 21 vv 1-9

This incident has a greater significance because Jesus refers to it when His disciples are criticised for plucking ears of corn as they walked through the cornfields on the Sabbath. The bread in this case had been offered to the LORD as part of the daily offering and only the priests were supposed to eat it. But David and his men were hungry and the priest Ahimelech agreed that they could eat it if they had at least been pure for a period before they ate it. Ritual and ceremony shouldn't stand in the way of common sense. That was Saul's mistake when he was going to kill Jonathan for breaking the vow that all the Israelites would fast. I don't think it means, however, that we should give up on the idea that some things are holy. I wouldn't, for example, stand on the altar to change a light bulb. If one were trapped in a church, would it be OK to eat the consecrated bread of the reserved sacrament in the eucharist? I think it would, but reluctantly and reverently.

September 3rd

I Samuel 21 vv 10-15

David wasn't safe in Saul's realm. So he went and offered himself (as a mercenary I guess) to the Philistine King Achish of Gath. Achish recognised him as the great slayer of Philistines and would have killed him only he made out that he was mad. People act strangely and illogically towards the mentally ill. It would have been taboo to kill a mad person. On the other hand, they don't want him with them. They aren't going to offer to look after him. Christian love ought to be the basis on which we relate to and care for the mentally ill just as it ought to be the guiding principle of everything we do.

There is an interesting curiosity here. V13 is quite difficult to translate from the Hebrew and the Greek translation could be read to mean something like, *He held himself in his hands*. St Augustine of Hippo took this to indicate that, at His Last Supper, great David's greater Son effectively held Himself in His Hands when, *in the same night that he was betrayed, (He) took Bread; and, when he had given thanks, he brake it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, Take, eat, this is my Body which is given for you: Do this in remembrance of me*. Christ took on Himself our humanity and what we do to the least of His brethren we do to Him.

September 4th

I Samuel 22 vv 1-5

All this is often missed out in our bible reading, but David effectively became an outlaw. He attracted a band of men who themselves had fallen out with the authorities for one reason or another. He sent his parents to the court of the King of Moab for safe keeping.

September 5th

I Samuel 22 vv 6-23

Saul goes from bad to worse. He asks for loyalty, reminding the men of war that he is the one who is in a position to reward them, not David. Nevertheless, it isn't an Israelite but an Edomite who betrays the priests who have helped David. When Saul orders the massacre of the whole priestly community at Nob, again no Israelite will perform these sacrilegious murders; only Doeg the Edomite is prepared to do it. The effect is that Abiathar takes refuge with David who now has his own priest and counsellor to help him to remain safe from Saul and eventually to become King of Israel.

September 6th

I Samuel 23 vv 1-15

No doubt, David really cared about the citizens of Keilah, Israelites who had become victims of Philistine raids. It also helped him politically to be seen to be protecting the people of Israel. It's what the King of Israel should be doing! David was relatively safe in Judah. It was where he came from – Bethlehem Ephrathah, *little among the thousands of Judah, out of whom shall come the one who is to be ruler in Israel* if you remember your Christmas readings! His men thought they would all be safer in Judah, but David sought God's guidance, acted on it and saved the people of Keilah. Saul now had David trapped in a town, rather than free to escape in open country. David, however, now had Abiathar, a priest with an ephod. They asked God what would happen. The people of Keilah would hand David over to Saul, rather than see their city destroyed – not very loyal, but prudent. So David escaped into the countryside with his men.

The hosts of God encamp around the dwellings of the just;
Deliverance He affords to all who on His succour trust.

Fear Him, ye saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear;
Make you His service your delight, your wants shall be His care.

September 7th

I Samuel 23 vv 16-29

Saul is determined to catch David. Saul's family support David. So do many of the Israelites. God is on David's side. Saul's efforts then are futile. But what does it mean to have God on our side? How many of the saints are also martyrs? Serving God doesn't necessarily guarantee that you be protected from pain and death. Jesus Himself died on the cross. The devil tempted Him the wilderness with words from Psalm 91: *For he shall give his angels charge over thee : to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee in their hands : that thou hurt not thy foot against a stone.* Jesus refuses to put God to the test and, in the Garden of Gethsemane accepts God's Will that He will be crucified: *not as I will, but as thou wilt.* Being on God's side means walking with Him whatever. He does look after us, but that doesn't mean that we shall be free from adversity. Psalm 23: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil : for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me. Thou shalt prepare a table before me against them that trouble me : thou hast anointed my head with oil, and my cup shall be full. But thy loving-kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life : and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

I might note here how helpful I find it to read all the psalms as we go through the month. There are so many angles and aspects.

September 8th (Trinity 12)

I Samuel 24 vv 1-22

When I first went to the Holy Land I realised why David camped at En Gedi. It is an oasis in a barren desert near the Dead Sea. Saul was caught in a particularly embarrassing situation, but David didn't take advantage of it. Saul was still the LORD's anointed and I think that David still had a genuine affection for him. Saul still seems to have a love for David, but obviously David doesn't trust him enough to join him. This rift between friends is very sad, as are all such rifts, in the Church, in families, in the world at large.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who art always more ready to hear than we are to pray, and art wont to give more than either we desire, or deserve; Pour down upon us the abundance of thy mercy; forgiving us those things whereof our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask, but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord. *Amen.*

September 9th

I Samuel 25 vv 1-13

David's band of outlaws were having to live off the land. I'm not sure about the legality and morality of how they treated Nabal. Were they entitled to expect his support? Were they running some kind of protection racket? Did they feel entitled to help themselves from those who could afford it? Were they legitimately guarding Nabal's shepherd while they were shearing his large flocks?

September 10th

I Samuel 25 vv 14-31

Nabal's wife Abigail averts David's wrath by sending him a gift and acknowledging his rights. Was she just being prudent? She seems to have realised that David did have the right to some sort of share of Nabal's possessions. Because he had acted as guard? Because he was the anointed successor of Saul? Just because he had his own private army? Nabal is Hebrew for fool and perhaps not the name he was called to his face!

September 11th

I Samuel 25 vv 32-44

A Christian friend of mine called one of her goats Abigail. I have an idea that she was named after Nabal's wife – a beautiful and smart young woman who fell in love with David. Nabal, the fool, was so angry about what had happened that he died (of a stroke?). David and Abigail were married. This would appear to be a love match. We don't know much about the other wife, Ahinoam, but it appears that Michal, who had married David for love as well as for political reasons, has now been taken from David by Saul and given to another man, Palti. When Saul was dead and succeeded by his son Ishbosheth, David made them return her to himself. Palti was devastated but the emotions of David and Michal are not recorded.

Through all the changing scenes of life, in trouble and in joy,
The praises of my God shall still heart and tongue employ.

Oh, make but trial of His love, experience will decide
How blest they are, and only they, who in His truth confide.

Fear Him, ye saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear;
Make you His service your delight, your wants shall be His care.

September 12th

I Samuel 26 vv 1-26

David has another chance to kill the LORD's anointed and doesn't take it. The persons of kings are in some sense sacrosanct. Our own Queen was anointed at her coronation. She received a bible at the service. The coronation was part of a service of Holy Communion. An infinitely greater King than Elizabeth or any earthly monarch is the One from Whom all authority and power flow. When parliament beheaded King Charles I in 1649, it was a very shocking thing and, despite Charles' many failings, turned a lot of people against the parliamentary cause. Charles is honoured as a Christian martyr in the Church of England calendar.

Specialness attaches to the persons of other rulers who are not kings or queens. People stand when they come into the room. They have special vehicles to travel in, maybe robes to wear. There is a reluctance to target heads of state even in time of war and when they are notoriously wicked.

It's the old problem. We need the order which depends on certain people holding and exercising power, but power corrupts. So we need a means of appointing the right people. There needs to be accountability on their part, but we have to respect their authority. Democracy seems to be the best way of achieving these goals, but it is very far from perfect. It depends on fallible human beings to make it work!

September 13th

I Samuel 27 vv 1-12

David is now sure that Saul will not let him live in Israel. So he tries to establish himself with the Philistine King Achish of Gath again. This time he remains in favour because he tells Achish that he is raiding Israelite settlements (Achish's enemies), but he isn't because the Israelites are his own people. In fact, he is destroying the homes of the various pagan tribes which still live in the Holy Land. He is making sure that they are utterly destroyed and that there are none left alive to tell Achish the truth. Whatever we make of this, I don't think we should take David's conduct in this chapter as an example!

Give peace in our time, O Lord. Because there is none other that fighteth for us, but only thou, O God.

O God, make clean our hearts within us. And take not thy Holy Spirit from us.

September 14th

I Samuel 28 vv 1-6

I'm writing this the evening before the European elections. So I don't know what the result will be, but the polls are suggesting a drubbing for the two main parties, neither of which has come very well out of the Brexit controversy. Quite a lot of people are saying that our political system is broken and that it is hard to see what we can do in the future to restore good government and the respect of the general population for our leaders and for us to recover a sense of national unity.

In today's Bible passage, there is a much more serious national emergency. The Philistines are massing to attack Israel. The incumbent King Saul has lost his way. He is fearful. He cannot obtain answers even from God. Meanwhile, the man everybody expects to replace him, David, is in an impossible position. He has taken refuge with the Philistines and they expect him to fight on their side and against Israel. So where are the Israelites to turn for salvation? Put that way, there is only one answer. They need to turn to the LORD.

Surely, it is the same answer to our problems. Turn to the LORD. Now, I don't believe that there is or has been a clear divine revelation regarding whether we should be in or out of the EU or out on what terms (at least so far), but turning to the LORD would establish certain principles, foundations on which to build.

1) Pray for ourselves and pray humbly, listening out for what God is saying to us, rather than simply telling Him what we want.

2) Pray for one another, for guidance, and for courage and hope for those who are weighed down by these controversies.

3) Pray for our leaders personally because of the great strain they are under.

4) Pray that God will give them the wisdom they need.

5) Try to understand people we disagree with. Don't caricature them or unfairly impute malice or stupidity to them.

6) Love them.

7) Respect our leaders.

8) Respect legitimately taken decisions even if we don't agree with them.

O Lord, shew thy mercy upon us. And grant us thy salvation.

O Lord, save the Queen. And mercifully hear us when we call upon thee.

Endue thy Ministers with righteousness. And make thy chosen people joyful.

O Lord, save thy people. And bless thine inheritance.

September 15th (Trinity 13)

I Samuel 28 vv 7-14

This is Saul's nadir. He has failed to reach God in any other way and now he is resorting to a medium. Saul has been particularly zealous in eradicating witchcraft and magic from his kingdom. Now he is consulting a witch. What ought he to have done in his desperation? He certainly shouldn't have had recourse to something which he knew was wrong. He had pushed away his family, his friends, even his courtiers and advisers. His relationship with God was completely wrong. What should he have done? Trusted friends, family and supportive courtiers? Returned to God? Return and repent are the same concept in Hebrew. Sought out wise counsellors or spiritual advisers? Sought reconciliation with David, accepting that David was God's choice to be king after him? What should we do when we feel overwhelmed by the circumstances of our life, especially if even God seems distant? What can we do for people we care about who seem to be pursuing a path which is leading to their own destruction? I find myself praying a lot for wisdom! Christ is the power and wisdom of God. It is in living in Him, following His example, receiving His grace, that we discover the strait gate and the narrow way which leads to life.

ALMIGHTY and merciful God, of whose only gift it cometh that thy faithful people do unto thee true and laudable service; Grant, we beseech thee, that we may so faithfully serve thee in this life, that we fail not finally to attain thy heavenly promises; through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

September 16th

I Samuel 28 vv 15-20

Among other things, I take from this passage that it is possible to communicate with dead via a medium, but that it is wrong to do so. We ought not to disturb their rest. We ought to have faith in God, to trust Him for this life and the next, and to rely on Him for guidance and strength as we live out our lives on earth.

Samuel can only give Saul the facts. He is not right with God. The battle will go against him. I wouldn't like to say that there was no possibility of repentance on Saul's part, but it doesn't happen. He is a vicious circle of degradation.

September 17th

I Samuel 28 vv 21-25

Here is the tragedy of Saul. Even the witch wants to help him and he rejects her. Common sense ought to be sufficient to tell him that he should eat before a battle, but he tries refuse even that until the kindly witch and his loyal servants manage to prevail against his obstinacy. Do we ever feel alone and rejected while failing to recognise that people do really care for us? Do we stubbornly reject good advice and kind counsellors and act in ways which harm both us and those in our care?

September 18th

I Samuel 29 vv 1-11

Where do our loyalties lie? Norman Tebbit famously asked which cricket team to commonwealth immigrants cheer for when country of their birth or of their parents' birth is playing England? That's not really an issue which bothers me. But what about in time of war? Do you round up (as we did in the world wars) enemy aliens, people who have come from the countries we are fighting? On the one hand, their loyalty to the places they come from may be greater than their loyalty to us, their adopted country. They might acts as spies or saboteurs against us. On the other hand, they may have given their loyalty to us & be ready to fight on our side. In World War II some of the enemy aliens rounded up & interred were people who had fled from Hitler's Germany to find sanctuary in England. How do you tell whom you can trust? Where do people's loyalties lie? Loyalties may be mixed. I might go & live in, say, Russia & come to love the country & its people without ceasing to love England & the English. I should be very sorry if there were then a war between Russia & England, but which side would I take? It could well be that neither side would trust me. Apart from race, culture & nationality, there is also the question of religion. Some British people think that Muslims might put their obedience to Allah & their loyalty to Muslims in other countries before their loyalty to the British state. This may or may not be so. If it were so, we might resent the fact that people who live in this country love us less than their co-religionists overseas & put the laws of their religion before UK law. But let's consider us Christians. Wouldn't we obey God rather than our human rulers if UK law conflicted with Christian teaching? Might our loyalty to our fellow Christians in other countries be greater than our loyalty to fellow Britains who are not members of Christ?

September 19th

I Samuel 30 vv 1-20

The Amalakites again! They were a continual thorn in the flesh to Israel. While David was with the Philistines, the Amalakites took advantage and attacked the place he had made his base, Ziklag.

Obviously, the men were exhausted with all this travelling around and fighting if 200 of them were unable even to join in the pursuit of the Amalakites. This chapter, in all sorts of ways, gives a flavour of the toughness of the times. I'm horrified by the violence in these stories, perpetrated by the heroes as well as the villains. I certainly don't take it as an example of how Christians and Christian nations ought to behave. On the other hand, I don't want to be too quick to condemn. How would we behave if we were as hard pressed as David and his men? Within living memory, we carried out a policy of total war. We believed that the need to defeat totally an evil regime required us to be ruthless in prosecuting the battle. How do you compare wiping out the Amalakites with the saturation bombing of German cities? Is one justified and the other not? Are they both justified or are they both unjustifiable. *Judge not that ye be not judged.*

Cynically, one might say that this conflict with the Amalakites got David out of having to fight for or against the Philistines, his people's enemy with whom he had taken refuge. While on the subject of divided loyalties, in the Crimean War when we fought the Battle of Balaclava against the Russians in alliance with the Turks, there were some people in Britain who questioned why we were allied with Muslim Turkey against what was then Christian Russia?

September 20th

I Samuel 30 vv 21-31

David was a natural leader. He inspired loyalty and the love of his followers. Read the stories closely and it isn't hard to understand why he was a popular man: good-looking, a courageous and successful warrior, a musician, a tactician, smart, warm in his relationships with men and women, warm in his relationships with God. His behaviour here, his generosity to the 200 who were too exhausted to join the battle and to the places in Judah which had helped him was he was an outlaw from Saul, obviously won people's affection. There is a tremendous contrast with Saul who seems to have been loved in spite of his faults.

September 21st (S Matthew)

I Samuel 31 vv 1-13

The inevitable disaster comes to pass. Israel is roundly defeated. Saul and three of his sons, including David's friend Jonathan, are killed. There is disgrace in the mistreatment of the body and it is to the credit of the men of Jabesh Gilead that they do what they do. It is utter disaster, reminding us perhaps of the first Battle of Ebenezer at the beginning of the Book (Cap 4). *The glory has departed*. The king of whom so much was hoped has completely failed. The people who survived are ashamed, afraid and in despair. Where may they find salvation?

O ALMIGHTY God, who by thy 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 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 22nd (Trinity 14)

II Samuel 1 vv 1-16

These Amalekites. It is an Amalekite who brings David news of the disaster. Moreover, he claims to have killed Saul, which is not what happened according to the previous chapter. Saul took his own life rather than fall into the hands of the enemy. Probably, the Amalekite expected some reward for telling David that Saul was defeated and that he had had a hand in Saul's death. He fatally misread the situation. David was far from pleased that Saul's army had been vanquished. He had never desired the death of the LORD's anointed. If he died at the hands of an Amalekite, that would have been the worst possible death for him. I'm sure David is genuine in all this, but it is important politically that this is how he behaves. If he wants to be king, he must not appear to be a traitor. If kingship is sacred, he cannot approve of regicide. He would undermine his own future status.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, give unto us the increase of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain that which thou dost promise, make us to love that which thou dost command; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*.

September 23rd

II Samuel 1 vv 17-27

David's lament over Saul and Jonathan is a real piece of poetry. It really is a mistake to read this in an English version that fails to reflect the poetic character of the original. Get out that dusty King James Bible! David's sorrow for Saul and Jonathan is evidently sincere and heartfelt – especially for Jonathan. It is not something to shout about in the Philistine cities of Gath and Askelon, a reproach to Israel. David recognises the father / son bond between Saul and Jonathan – despite everything. Young men and their fathers do argue, but it doesn't mean that they don't love and respect one another, that they are not proud of each other. David speaks of the love he shared with David as *passing the love of women*. Some people have taken this as evidence that they were gay. This isn't likely. Such a relationship would have been scandalous in ancient Israel and probably resulted in their being stoned or at least banished. Moreover, they were both fathers many times over and not without female company. There is a love which is not sexual which can exist between people, a very deep friendship. I think sometimes we're in danger of forgetting that in a society in which sex is both dominant and casual. Instead of being something special reserved for life-long totally committed marriage with the ultimate aim the procreation of children, sex has become something people are relaxed about having in much less committed relationships and something which they are not expected to deny themselves. Sex both dominates relationships and is degraded by ceasing to be unique to one special relationship. The possibility of other kinds of close relationship is then overlooked. This should be of concern to Christians who are called to love one another as brothers.

Through the night	hand of brother,	journey,
of doubt and sorrow	Stepping fearless	One the faith which
Onward goes the	through the night.	never tires,
pilgrim band,		One the earnest
Singing songs of	One the light of	looking forward,
expectation,	God's own presence,	One the hope our God
Marching to the	O'er His ransomed	Inspires.
promised land.	people shed,	One the strain
Clear before us	Chasing far the gloom	that lips of thousands
through the darkness	and terror,	Lift as from the heart
Gleams and burns the	Brightening all the	of one;
guiding light:	path we tread:	One the conflict, one
Brother clasps the	One the object of our	the peril

One the march in God
begun:

One the gladness of
rejoicing
On the far eternal
shore,
Where the one
almighty Father
Reigns in love for

evermore.
Onward, therefore,
pilgrim brothers,
Onward, with the
cross our aid!
Bear its shame, and
fight its battle,
Till we rest beneath its
shade.

Soon shall come
the great awaking,
Soon the rending of
the tomb;
Then the scattering of
all shadows,
And the end of toil
and gloom.

September 24th

II Samuel 2 vv 1-11

David became king, but only over one tribe – Judah. Judah always seems to have been a bit distinct from the other tribes. Judah was the tribe David came from and, of course, Jesus. By honouring the men of Jabesh Gilead for looking after Saul’s body, David is not only expressing his own respect for Saul but making it clear to the people that he did not desire his predecessor’s death – despite everything. Saul’s C in C makes Ishbosheth king of the rest of Israel. Ishbosheth was probably not his actual name. It means “man of shame”. He was probably called (as he is in I Chronicles 8³³) Eshbaal – “man of Baal”. Baal is of course one of the false gods the gentiles worshipped, but the word “baal” can also mean lord or husband. Many people may well have thought that Baal was another name for the LORD or that Baal and the LORD were the same God, perhaps as the Romans called their supreme god Jupiter and the Greeks called him Zeus. What seems to have happened is that in time it was realised that it was necessary to make clear that the LORD is utterly different from the god of the pagans and any confusion had to be eradicated. So, when the Books of Samuel took their present form, Baal was edited out of names and replaced by Bosheth – shame. So, when Saul named his son, did he fail to distinguish between Baal & the LORD or did he have pagan tendencies? There is no evidence of the latter. I think that he and many others just weren’t clear thinking about the issue. Much later God gives the prophet Hosea (2^{16&17}) these words: And it shall be at that day, saith the LORD, *that* thou shalt call me Ishi; and shalt call me no more ⁱBaali. For I will take away the names of Baalim out of her mouth, and they shall no more be remembered by their name. Ishi means my husband. God is Israel’s husband as the Church is the Bride of Christ. He is not to be confused with the gods of the heathen who are nothing and do nothing but whose cult is iniquitous.

September 25th

II Samuel 2 vv 12-32

The relationship between Judah under David and Israel under Ishbosheth was tense and wary. Two bands of troops meet and decide, it seems, to stage a mock battle or sporting contest. It goes wrong and there is serious bloodshed. Most significantly Ishbosheth's commander Abner (who is really the power behind the weak and foolish Ishbosheth's throne) is forced to kill Asahel with the result that Asahel's two brothers – Abishai and Joab (who is the head of David's forces) – vow vengeance. Joab, Abishai and Asahel are described as the sons of Zeruah. Zeruah was David's sister. So these three young men were his nephews. Their father is not mentioned at all. Zeruah must have been a remarkable woman. The support of her sons was extremely important to David. Without them, he might well have been unable to reign. However, they were headstrong violent men and David was unable to control them on occasion. So he depended on the support of people who were quite capable of undermining his position by going against all that he was attempting to stand for. Leadership seems to be impossible without a willingness to compromise one's principles, but, if one has to compromise important principles, what is the point of being leader? To deny the leadership role to someone worse than you? No wonder S Paul tells us to pray for kings and for all that are in authority!

September 26th

II Samuel 3 vv 1-11

So there is conflict between Israel and Judah as there is so often conflict in the Middle East. Hebron is the place where Abraham is buried and there are still outbreaks of violence between Jews and Arabs at his tomb. Both claim descent from him. It is a shame they don't remember that Ishmael and Isaac came together to bury their father. I despair sometimes that even in the Holy Land itself where so many wonderful things happened, where Jesus Himself walked, human beings continue to harden their hearts against God's Word. David's sons will fall out as we shall see. Abner gives up on the hapless Ishbosheth and recognises that the whole of Israel must unite under David. The incident with the concubine is the last straw as perhaps it was meant to be. In that culture, to take a man's women was to assert one's dominance.

September 27th

II Samuel 3 vv 12-16

David wanted Michal back, Saul's daughter, his prize for slaying Goliath. Her new husband was devastated. As so often, we're not told what the woman thought of the way she was manipulated by the men. God made men and women equally in His image. Men and women are redeemed just the same by the Blood of Christ. It follows that men and women are equally deserving of respect.

September 28th

II Samuel 3 vv 17-21

Abner was loyal to Saul and brought about the situation in which his son, Ishbosheth, became king, but Abner knew all along that David was both God's choice and the choice of many of the people. With Ishbosheth's abject failure, Abner sets out to engineer things so that David becomes King of the whole of Israel.

I'm writing these notes on the day that Mrs May is expected to resign as leader of the Conservative Party, with the consequence that shortly she will almost certainly cease to be prime minister. Things may have been resolved by the time you read these notes. Then again, they may not. But we've had months of rumours and plotting and all kinds of skulduggery behind the scenes and out in the open. The pressure on those involved must have been tremendous. I often wonder why people are even willing to put themselves up for leadership positions. A sense of vocation? Personal ambition? The desire to serve? The hope of prestige? I guess that most people's motives are mixed, but it seems to me that they get very little credit for their successes and all the blame when things go wrong even if it isn't their fault! They need our prayers both personally and for the way in which they discharge their public duties.

MOST gracious God, we humbly beseech thee, as for this Kingdom in general, so especially for the High Court of Parliament, under our most religious and gracious Queen at this time assembled: That thou wouldest be pleased to direct and prosper all their consultations, to the advancement of thy glory, the good of thy Church, the safety, honour, and welfare of our Sovereign and her Dominions; that all things may be so ordered and settled by their endeavours, upon the best and surest foundations, that peace and happiness, truth and justice, religion and piety, may be established among us for all generations. These and all other necessities, for them, for us, and thy whole Church, we humbly beg in the Name and Mediation of Jesus Christ, our most blessed Lord and Saviour. *Amen.*

September 29th (Michaelmas)

II Samuel 3 vv 22-39

Joab wanted revenge on Abner for killing his brother Asahel. He probably also feared for his own position. Most likely Abner would have replaced Joab as David's number two if things had gone according to plan. Abner is clearly respected as an honourable man. David firmly distances himself from Abner's murder. *And all the people took notice of it, and it pleased them: as whatsoever the king did pleased all the people.* David leaves Joab to God's justice as even the king is impotent in the face of such a powerful and ruthless deputy.

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

September 30th

II Samuel 4 vv 1-12

So we come to a rather bloody end of our quarter's studies. Two young men think that they will gain David's favour by killing Ishbosheth. They've totally misread David and earn only their own execution.

Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, is mentioned here because he would be another possible contender for the throne as Saul's grandson. He was really called Meribbaal, changed probably for the same reason as his uncle's name was changed from Eshbaal. Mephibosheth, however, was lame. In the future, David would treat him with kindness as he had promised Jonathan that he would. Later still, however, Mephibosheth came under suspicion when there was a rebellion against David.

To be continued!

Collect Trinity 15

KEEP, we beseech thee, O Lord, thy Church with thy perpetual mercy: and, because the frailty of man without thee cannot but fall, keep us ever by thy help from all things hurtful, and lead us to all things profitable to our salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

ⁱ Baali means my Baal – ie my lord, my husband or my god Baal. Ishi means my husband. Baalim is simply the plural of Baal like seraphim is the plural of seraph.